THE CURRENT SITUATION AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

From democratising wave to autocratising tsunami

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A banner against Spain's gag law at a demonstration in Barcelona on 20 December 2014. Photo: Jordi Borràs

The challenge for democracies in the 20th century: the quantity and quality of electoral competition

Fifty years ago, the world's third wave of democratisation started with the Carnation Revolution. The first wave, between 1828 and 1926, brought universal suffrage to some thirty countries in Europe and America. And the second wave, after the Allied victory in the Second World War, expanded democracy to countries where there had been totalitarian regimes or which had been occupied by such regimes. From Japan to Germany, political freedom began to be conjugated in many different languages.

But the really big wave was the one that began half a century ago in the Iberian Peninsula. From the Portuguese Revolution of 1974 to the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989, a tidal wave of freedom swept across the world, and was particularly felt in Latin America. A large number of Latin American countries went from having dictatorial regimes by default, with episodic democratic interludes, to having democracy as the basic political system, albeit sliding down the dictatorial slope at times. But even the most intransigent authoritarianisms, like Russia, try to look like democracies and hold (rigged) elections every so often. The planet's political liturgy is democratic. But is it also its practice? According to

The Economist Intelligence Unit, only 8% of the world's population lives in a "full democracy"; that is, a political system that fulfils two functions: on the one hand, it protects citizens' civil and political rights and, on the other, it maintains a competitive system of elections in which the ruling party does not have an unfair advantage.

In this article, we will address three points. The first is the health of democracy in the world; that is, the struggle between free and autocratic regimes. According to many observers, we are witnessing a dangerous retreat of freedom in the world. [1] The third wave of democracy is now being followed by a third wave of autocracy. Even within the European Union, which has some of the world's strongest democracies, there are examples of flawed democracies, such as Hungary or Poland. According to other authors, the retreat of democracy is temporary and humanity's structural trend towards higher levels of freedom has not stopped. Thus, the world would continue to move towards what Francis Fukuyama defined, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as the "end of history". [2]

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The second point we will explore is the prognosis for democracy in our continent in general and Spain in particular. And the third point will not address democracy's quantity but its quality and nature. Because, over a period of several decades, a silent revolution has taken place in the world's most stable democracies: we can no longer talk only of a competition between forces on the left and forces on the right; there are other players, such as the populisms, that have gained weight. And, together with the populisms, the traditional representation assigned to left-wing and right-wing parties has changed.

The health of democracy

According to the V-DEM Institute, [3] which is perhaps the most cited and most influential institute for critical assessment of the state of democracy in the world, 72% of the world's population currently lives in an autocracy. This is tiny compared to 1789, when 100% of the planet was in the hands of despots, enlightened or otherwise. But if we look back only a decade, the rise of dictatorial regimes is spectacular. In 2012, only 46% of the world's population was governed by tyrants. Since the upheavals of the Great Recession, a sinister shadow has moved across the globe, curtailing individual freedoms and undermining electoral competition in favour of the rulers.

In fact, this is the usual way in which "democracies die". [4] While in the second half of the 20th century, it was typical for democracies to collapse under coups d'état, with the military leaving the barracks to occupy the Congress and the Presidential Palace, now the norm is the so-called *self-coup* by which democratically elected rulers perpetuate

themselves in power through gradual – although sometimes abrupt – control of all State apparatuses. From Nicaragua and Venezuela to Russia or India, this is the usual procedure by which presidents accumulate excessive power. Sometimes, this autocratisation process does not come to fruition and, at a certain point, power is transferred to the opposition. We have just seen this in Poland. And, at a less developed stage, this is what happened with Biden's victory over Trump. Despite the erosion of the world's oldest democracy during Trump's presidency, and the undoubtedly worrying assault on Capitol Hill, it managed to survive the rule of a decidedly populist president. At least, it withstood the first encounter. If Trump can run in November and wins another term, then the situation may be different. However, for the moment, American democracy is not dead.

However, the overall picture is not so rosy. The level of democracy for the average citizen around the world has fallen to levels comparable with those of 1986. The erosion of democracy has been particularly severe in certain regions, such as Asia-Pacific, where it has receded to 1978 levels. In fact, the decline of democracy is picking up speed in all parts of the world. Since 1994, experts have documented a substantial reduction in the civil liberties and political rights of one third of the planet's population. [5]

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Some authors say that we cannot yet speak of an autocratising wave [6] and the very concept of wave is debatable, since autocratisation, as a general term, provides an umbrella for very different phenomena. [7] Putin's repression of the opposition is different from Duterte's violation of human rights in the Philippines, Bolsonaro's abuses in Brazil or Modi's in India, or Orbán's actions in Hungary or the loss of democratic quality in the United States under Trump.

In all these countries, the pendulum has swung towards a reduction of freedoms. However, while in some cases we can talk of harsh autocracies, in others, such as the USA, what has deteriorated is the media environment and public debate.

If we look at the state of democratic deterioration in the world in detail, we can see some worrying trends. First, government repression of civil society organisations has been increasing during these years, and now affects 37 countries. Since the NGOs play a crucial role in fostering public engagement and defending human rights, their repression has a two-fold negative impact on the health of democracy: it erodes the options of both today's and tomorrow's democratic opposition and discourages new generations from connecting with the values of free regimes.

Second, another basic pillar of democracy, freedom of expression, is losing ground in 35 countries. This again represents a significant increase compared with a decade ago, when

this phenomenon was only seen in 7 countries. This decline is important because it undermines an essential aspect of democracies: societies' ability to openly and freely discuss the issues that concern them. It is interesting to see the difference between the decline of democracy in the 1930s and today. While then what was endangered was freedom of association, with the banning of political parties, today's democracies suffer more from the loss of freedom of expression.

Marine Le Pen, cheered by the public gathered in Le Dôme hall at a Front National rally. Marseille, France, April 19, 2017. Photo: Jordi Borràs

This is compounded by the third aspect: the increased government censorship of the media. In the last 10 years, experts warn that this aspect has worsened in no fewer than 47 countries. Limiting the independence of the media, and their ability to report impartially, inevitably erodes democratic regimes. As has also been pointed out on several occasions, one of the variables that correlates most with the absence of political corruption in a country is freedom of the press, understood as independence from the pressure exerted by governments (or other organised groups). Truth is the first victim in the war against democracy.

The overall result is worrying. The fact that 72% of the world's population, that is, 5.7 billion people, lived in autocracies in 2022 is a shocking statistic. For the first time in more than two decades, we have more countries in the most sinister category of political regimes (the so-called *closed autocracies*) than in the most agreeable category (the liberal democracies). This raises crucial questions about the balance of power in the long run in the world. The pessimists are quick to draw parallels with the inter-war period in the 20th

century, as we have now reached a record that has not been seen since then: the fact that the closed autocracies control approximately one third of world GDP. To put it another way: the dictatorships' economic power is not as strong as that of the powers that made up the German-Japanese-Italian axis, and its satellites such as Franco's Spain. The optimists counter, perhaps with more faith and hope than data and theories, that today's dictatorships, in spite of their economic power, are unable to project an alternative model for living that could appeal to young people, intellectuals and other members of the social "avant-garde".

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Unlike what happened in the 1930s, when hordes of enthusiasts joined fascist or communist movements, or even in the 1960s and 1970s, when many were also drawn into subversive guerrilla movements, today's dictatorships have been unable to recreate a similar utopia. There are no great opinion leaders or great artists or great schools of thought that are successfully advocating, in Western societies, the development model of Russia, Saudi Arabia or China.

The future of democracy

However, it may be only a matter of time. Although it is still the subject of fierce debate, political scientists point to a "democratic disconnect" among the new generations in Europe and North America. [8] In particular, millennials have become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system and are more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives, especially if the community's welfare is in danger. One example would be the docility with which the citizens of the world's most advanced democracies accepted the curtailments of freedoms during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is also a contrary view. [9] The fact that the millennials are slightly more sympathetic towards non-democratic forms of government in their countries could be an age effect rather than a cohort effect. That is, because they are young and not because that they are young at this particular time. Generally speaking, millennials do not differ much in their views of political systems from the young people of the mid-1990s and, if we analyse the trust in actual democratic institutions, the pattern that emerges is exactly the opposite: in the United States, more people from older generations have lost faith in the Congress and the executive than the millennials. In Western Europe, the data are not so categorical but one conclusion is starting to emerge from the heated academic debate: citizens' levels of trust in democratic institutions varies considerably from one year to the next.

One recent study has debunked the myth that higher levels of democracy should have a strong positive effect on public support for democracy as a political system in a country. [10] This study shows what could be termed a *thermostatic effect*, according to which changes in the objective levels of democracy in a country are associated with opposite

public reactions: increases in democracy weaken, not strengthen, the population's democratic sentiment, while decreases in the levels of democracy strengthen citizens' democratic sentiment. And, crucially, it is democracy's counterweights (such as a strong judiciary and greater protection of individual rights against power) that have most impact on the population's democratic spirit. While improvements in democracy's electoral aspects (such as greater efficiency in counting election results) have virtually no effect on public sentiment, increases in judicial safeguards against public powers significantly undermine public support for democracy. In general, the image of the democratic citizen that emerges from this study is that of a more fickle and intolerant person than has traditionally been suggested in the literature.

Let us now turn to Spain. According to a recent study, [11] there is reason for particular concern in the case of Spain. As is well known, the trust that a country's citizens have in their political representatives increases in good (economic and political) times and decreases in times of crisis. Naturally, if the country is experiencing a recession, people start to distrust the government and parliament but when the economy recovers, citizens regain confidence in democracy's core institutions. With this idea in mind, the study's authors measured the difference between the level of trust we should expect based on the current situation and the actual level of trust observed in over a dozen Western European countries. And they found that, effectively, this difference tended toward zero in almost all countries.

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But they found two notable exceptions: France and Spain. In both countries, the fall in citizens' trust in their democratic institutions was much greater than the already sharp drop that could be expected after the devastating economic and political crisis they had suffered. In other words, trust in democracy's core institutions suffers from a structural problem in both France and Spain. To put it another way, there is what we could call a *structural frustration*, a public disenchantment that is not just caused by the ups and downs of the economic situation, as happens in other countries, but seems to be permanent.

The mutation of democracies

If we focus not on the quantity of democracy, but on its quality or nature, we also find a significant change during the 21st century. Since the post-war period, there has been a silent revolution in the world's most advanced democracies. Look, for example, at the last French presidential elections, with Macron on one side and Le Pen on the other. Neither represented the two main political families that have dominated democracies for decades:

social democracy (or centre-left) and conservatism (or centre-right). The race for the Elysée was between a candidate from the political and economic “élite” (Macron) and a “popular” or populist candidate (Le Pen).

The traditional battle between left and right has evolved significantly in recent years. Instead of a strict division between these ideologies, now we see a growing contest between establishment and populist politicians in many democracies. One clear example is Latin America, where far-left candidates, such as Lula or Boric, vie with far-right candidates, such as Bolsonaro or Kast. This polarisation has brought greater volatility to election results and challenged the region’s political stability.

Moreover, in the democracies where the battle between left and right continues to dominate, a different dynamic has emerged. In the 20th century, the contest used to pit representatives of less educated and lower-income voters (left-wing parties) against representatives of more educated and higher-income voters (right-wing parties). However, this dynamic has changed radically in most Western democracies. Now, the left-wing parties often attract more highly educated voters while the right-wing parties tend to represent the wealthier population.

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The clearest example is in the United States, where Biden’s (or Clinton’s) voters were much better educated than Trump’s voters. Not only that; the political confrontation seemed to reflect a confrontation between lifestyles: on the one hand, university graduates who live on the coasts, drive an electric Toyota Prius, ride bicycles, are atheists, eat sushi and drink cappuccinos, and on the other, people who haven’t been to university, live in “Real America”, drive a pick-up, attend church religiously on Sundays, eat hamburgers and drink filter coffee. This hasn’t come to Europe. Yet. But we are starting to see signs of a polarisation of lifestyles. And, in general, throughout the world, the struggle between left and right has become a battle between culture and money, which raises fundamental questions about political representation and power dynamics in modern democracies.

Conclusions

To summarise, democracy in the world is at a crossroads. We are suffering an autocratisation that can be attributed to multiple factors: political, such as the rise of populist leaders and the weakening of control mechanisms on executive power; economic, such as growing inequality and slowing economic growth; and cultural, such as the progressive use of social media, which are polarising by nature, as primary sources of

information for many citizens.

However, whatever its causes, the effects of autocratisation – be it a wave or a tsunami – require close attention. If we want to preserve and strengthen democracy around the world, we must address its problems proactively, starting with what is within our power: to press for mainstream media that are free from interference and vote for political alternatives that do not challenge individual rights and the checks and balances of political power. If democracies have shown anything since their modern re-emergence at the end of the 18th century, it is that they are always in danger, but they can also have great resilience. It will all depend on the will and effort of the political parties and, above all, of the people who represent them.

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