



Lisboans celebrate the end of a half century of dictatorship in 1974. Portugal's Carnation Revolution, occurring at a time when there were only 39 democracies in the world, marked the start of the Third Wave of global democratization.

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WHY WAIT FOR DEMOCRACY?

One after another, arguments that non-Western countries are not “ready” for democracy have been upended by experience.

BY LARRY DIAMOND

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WHEN ARAB SOCIETIES ROSE UP AND toppled four dictators during 2011—in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya—people around the world joined in the celebration. Yet soon after the autocrats’ fall, a wave of apprehension washed over many in the policy and intellectual elite in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East itself. The warnings and reservations were variations on a theme: Arabs are not ready for democracy. They have no experience with it and don’t know how to make it work. Islam is inclined toward violence, intolerance, and authoritarian values. People will vote radical and Islamist parties into power, and the regimes that ultimately emerge will be theocracies or autocracies, not democracies.

The cultural argument has often morphed into a second set of concerns. This is not the right time to be pushing for democracy in the region, the complaint goes. Democratization in the Arab world could endanger the fragile peace between Israel and Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan. Or it could threaten American security partnerships in the war on terror. What restive Arab countries should be focusing on, and what the West should be encouraging, are political

stability and economic development. Maybe someday, when they have a much larger middle class, democracy will be a safer, more viable option.

These doubts about the suitability of democracy for other peoples are far from new. From the era of Western colonial domination well into what became known as “the Third Wave” of global democratization (which began with the Portuguese Revolution in 1974), writers and policymakers questioned whether democracy could travel beyond the West. They not only questioned whether other cultures (and religions) could sustain democracy, but also whether it was in the West’s interest to have these other countries governed on the basis of elections that might mobilize the passions of the uneducated and poorly informed “masses.” Moreover, there was an empirical basis for this skepticism. Although democracy had emerged during the post–World War II era in a few developing countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Costa Rica, and Botswana, most of the newly decolonized states had fairly quickly settled into authoritarian patterns of governance. During the Cold War, many countries were, in effect, forced to choose between becoming

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م	اسم المرشح وشهرته	الرمز	الصورة	إبداء الرأي
١	أبو العز حسن على الحريري وشهرته أبو العز الحريري			
٢	محمد عبد الفتاح محمد فوزي عيسى وشهرته دكتور محمد فوزي عيسى			
٣	أحمد حسام كمال حامد خير الله وشهرته حسام خير الله			
٤	عمرو محمود أبو زيد موسى وشهرته عمرو موسى			
٥	عبد المنعم أبو الفتوح عبد الهادي أبو سعد وشهرته أبو الفتوح			
٦	هشام محمد عثمان البسطويسى وشهرته هشام البسطويسى			
٧	محمود حسام الدين محمود جلال وشهرته محمود حسام			
٨	د. محمد سليم العوا وشهرته محمد سليم العوا			
٩	د. أحمد محمد شفيق زكي وشهرته أحمد شفيق			
١٠	حمدين عبد العاطي عبد المقصود صباحي وشهرته حمدين صباحي			
١١	د. عبد الله حسن على الأشعل وشهرته عبد الله الأشعل			
١٢	خالد على عمر على المحلاوي وشهرته خالد على			
١٣	د. محمد محمد مرسى عيسى العياط وشهرته د. محمد مرسى			

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Illustrated ballots helped the illiterate in the first round of Egypt's historic presidential election last May. Mohammed Morsi, running under the banner of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (bottom), prevailed in the June runoff with 52 percent of the vote.

a right-wing, often military autocracy backed by the West or a socialist one-party state, frequently born of violent revolution, backed by the Soviet Union and China.

The cultural arguments against the prospects for democracy in developing nations were the most tenacious, and they came both from the West and from political and intellectual leaders in the developing world. Latin America came into focus first because of its many Marxist insurgencies, left-wing populist movements, and military coups in the 1960s and '70s. During most of the Cold War, many conservative scholars and writers in the United States dismissed the idea of establishing democracy in the region as infeasible (or at least contrary to American interests, since it would mean sacrificing U.S. ties to friendly anticommunist autocrats). Because of their long histories of centralized, absolutist rule deriving from their experience of Spanish or Portuguese imperial rule and the hierarchical and authoritarian traditions of the Catholic Church, the Latin American countries were said to lack the emphasis on individual freedom, the willingness among their citizens to question authority, and the appreciation of pluralism and equality necessary to

sustain democracy. Similar arguments were made about Asia and the Middle East. “Asian values” and Islamic culture were seen to value order over freedom, consensus over competition, and the community over the individual. They not only lacked the intrinsic suspicion of authority that buoyed democracy in the West, it was said, but practiced a deference to authority that answered “deep psychological cravings for the security of dependency,” in the words of Lucian Pye, one of the most respected scholars of Asian political cultures. Elie Kedourie, a famous British historian of the Middle East, dismissed “the political traditions of the Arab world—which are the political traditions of Islam,” as completely lacking any understanding of “the organizing ideas of constitutional and representative government.”

In his influential 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations*, the American political scientist Samuel Huntington warned more generally of “fundamental [civilizational] divides.” He stressed the cultural distinctiveness of the West, “most notably its Christianity, pluralism, individualism, and the rule of law,” adding that “Western civilization,” in its commitment to liberal democratic values, “is valuable not because it is universal but because it is unique.”

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Though they were not intended for this purpose, such cultural arguments served well the purposes of autocrats looking to justify their rule. If democracy was unsuitable for their countries, why should these leaders be expected to introduce it? If a strong hand were needed to deliver order and development, they would provide it. And in Asia, some of them did. Authoritarian rulers such as Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan (r. 1950–75), Park Chung Hee in South Korea (r. 1961–79), and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore (r. 1959–90) delivered rapid development. Under Mahathir bin Mohamad, Malaysia followed this path for more than two decades beginning in 1981, as did Indonesia for most of Suharto’s three decades in power after 1967. Lee was the most outspoken in promoting the “Asian values” of order, family, authority, and community over what he saw as the indiscipline and

loose morals of the West, asserting both that Asians had different values and that they were not ready for democracy.

LEE'S ARGUMENTS CARRIED GREAT weight globally and within Singapore because he delivered for his people. More broadly, the success of the East Asian "miracle" states led many scholars during the 1960s and '70s to sing the praises of these regimes' remarkably quick economic growth. The lack of popular sovereignty and political accountability, the abuses of human rights and the rule of law—these were prices that perhaps had to be paid in order to achieve development. Looking at the chronic political instability and relatively poor economic performance of countries such as the Philippines and Argentina that tried to make democracy work during the 1960s, many commentators concluded that autocracies were the better bet for development, and that political repression was a necessary evil that had to be endured along the way. Often, from the late 1950s through the '80s, the comparison between China and India was cited. While India was growing at the "Hindu rate of growth," China was making dramatic progress in improving education and health care. (The fact that China had suffered famines under

Mao Zedong, who was responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of innocent Chinese, while famine never gripped democratic India, was glossed over.) But there were other unfavorable comparisons. After Brazil's generals seized power in 1964 following a chaotic period of multiparty competition, the country's unfolding "economic miracle" and the comparison with the turbulent and polarized politics of Chile and Argentina (until their militaries intervened in 1973 and 1976, respectively) also seemed to underscore the authoritarian advantage.

Two schools of thought in the social sciences fed into this debate. Those in the modernization school, led by thinkers such as Seymour Martin Lipset, argued theoretically and showed statistically that poor countries were unlikely to sustain democracy; if they would first acquire the facilitating conditions—widespread education, a large middle class, an independent civil society, and liberal democratic values—then democracy would be more viable. The implication—at least as it was drawn out by some politicians and intellectuals in the West and elsewhere, even though it was never Lipset's argument—was that there was a necessary, if unfortunate, sequence to development: First, countries had to grow rich under authoritarian rule; then they would be able to sustain democracy.

The second intellectual tradition was dependency theory, which insisted that Third World countries were poor because the West had trapped them in a structural condition of economic dependence and servitude (a modern form of imperialism). To break out, argued theorists such as Andre Gunder Frank, Walter Rodney, and Immanuel Wallerstein (who spawned a related body of “world systems theory”), peripheral countries needed to concentrate power, assert control over their natural resources, seize and redistribute land, expel multinational corporations or expropriate their holdings, renegotiate unfair terms of trade, and sideline a domestic business class that was doing the bidding of foreign governments and business interests. While (socialist) dictatorship was not necessarily the political prescription of this school, its critical analysis tended to reinforce the narratives and legitimize the claims of Marxist revolutionary movements and one-party dictatorships.

WHEN THE THIRD WAVE OF DEMOCRACY began in the mid-1970s, democracy seemed to be where the world had been or where the West had settled, but not where the rest of the world was going. In a pair of widely noted

works, two of the most eminent political scientists of the time, Robert Dahl and Samuel Huntington, dismissed the prospects for significant democratic expansion. Given chronic poverty, Cold War competition, and “the unreceptivity to democracy of several major cultural traditions,” Huntington speculated in a 1984 *Political Science Quarterly* article, “the limits of democratic development in the world may well have been reached.”

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The developments of the last four decades, however, have proved the skeptics wrong. Even as Huntington was writing the words quoted above, a wave of democratic expansion was gathering momentum, which Huntington himself would document and analyze definitively

just seven years later in his influential book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. In the decade following his 1984 article, the world witnessed the greatest expansion of democracy in history, as political freedom spread from southern Europe and Latin America to Asia, then central and eastern Europe, then Africa. By the mid-1990s, three of every five states in the world were democracies—a proportion that persists more or less to this day.

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While it remains true that democracy is more sustainable at higher levels of development, an unprecedented number of poor countries adopted democratic forms of government during the 1980s and '90s, and many of them have sustained democracy for well over a decade.

These include several African countries, such as Ghana, Benin, and Senegal, and one of the poorest Asian countries, Bangladesh. Other very poor countries, such as East Timor, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, are now using the political institutions of democracy as they rebuild their economies and states after civil war. Although the world has been in a mild democratic recession since about 2006, with reversals concentrated disproportionately in low-income and lower-middle-income states, a significant number of democracies in these income categories continue to function.

The lower- and middle-income democracies that did come through the last two decades intact have shown that authoritarianism confers no intrinsic developmental advantage. For every Singapore-style authoritarian economic “miracle,” there have been many more instances of implosion or stagnation—as in Zaire, Zimbabwe, North Korea, and (until recently) Burma—resulting from predatory authoritarian rule. Numerous studies have shown that democracies do a better job of reducing infant mortality and protecting the environment, and recent evidence from sub-Saharan Africa (see, for example, economist Steven Radelet’s 2010 book *Emerging Africa: How Seventeen Countries are Leading the Way*)

shows that the highest rates of economic growth in Africa since the mid-1990s have generally occurred in the democratic states. Once they achieved democracy, South Korea and Taiwan continued to record brisk economic growth. When the G-20 was formed at the end of the '90s out of the old G-8 organization of the world's major economies, eight of the 10 emerging-market countries that joined were democracies, including India, Indonesia, Brazil, Turkey, and South Korea.

Further refuting the skeptics, democracy has taken root or at least been embraced by every major cultural group, not just the societies of the West with their Protestant traditions. Most Catholic countries are now democracies, and very stable ones at that. Democracy has thrived in a Hindu state, Buddhist states, and a Jewish state. And many predominantly Muslim countries, such as Turkey, Bangladesh, Senegal, and Indonesia, have by now had significant and mainly positive experience with democracy.

Finally, the claim that democracy was unsuitable for these other cultures—that their peoples did not value democracy as those in the West did—has been invalidated, both by experience and by a profusion of public opinion survey data showing that the desire for democracy

is very much a global phenomenon. Although there is wide variation across countries and regions, with low levels of trust in parties and politicians in the wealthier democracies of Asia, Latin America, and postcommunist Europe, people virtually everywhere say they prefer democracy to authoritarianism. What people want is not a retreat to dictatorship but a more accountable and deeper democracy.

Despite the persistence of authoritarianism under Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and the authoritarian tendencies of left-wing populist presidents in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, the bigger story in Latin America has been democratic resilience and deepening. Chile and Uruguay have become stable liberal democracies, Brazil has made dramatic democratic and economic progress, and even once chronically unstable Peru has seen three successive democratically elected presidents deliver brisk economic growth with declining poverty rates. In fact, Latin America is the only region of the world where income inequality has decreased in the last decade.

The new popular embrace of democracy is particularly striking in sub-Saharan Africa, where five rounds of the Afrobarometer opinion surveys have uncovered a surprisingly robust public

commitment to democracy. In 2008, an average of 70 percent of Africans surveyed across 19 countries expressed support for democracy as always the best form of government. But only 59 percent perceived that they had in their country a full or almost full democracy, and only 49 percent were satisfied with how democracy was working in their country. This finding simply does not fit with the image of a passive and deferential populace ready to exchange freedom for bread. In Africa, people have learned through bitter experience that without democracy they will have neither freedom nor bread.

Throughout most of the non-Western world, majorities of the public have come to see that the right to choose and replace their leaders in competitive, free, and fair elections is fundamental to the achievement and defense of all other rights. This is strikingly the case now in the Arab world, where the Arab Barometer surveys show that upward of 80 percent of the citizens of most countries name democracy as the best form of government, even if they do not define democracy in fully liberal and secular terms.

It is much too early to know the fate of the popular movements for freedom in the Arab world, and we should not minimize the continuing assault on movements for democracy and accountability in countries as diverse as Venezuela, Russia, and Iran. Over the last decade there has been a slowly rising tide of democratic breakdowns, and more reversals could follow due to corruption and abuse of power by elected rulers. But the data show that popular attitudes and values are not the principal problem, and there is little evidence to support the claim that postponing democracy in favor of strongman rule will make things better. The people of Burma have made that point repeatedly at the polls and on the streets, and finally their rulers seem to be listening to them. The best way to democracy is *through* democracy. ■

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