

The Tasks of the World Democracy Movement

Carl Gershman

One of the defining characteristics of our age—perhaps the defining characteristic—is the emergence of democracy as both a universal value and a system of self-government that all people can realistically aspire to achieve. The worldwide rise of democracy is still a relatively new development traceable to events that occurred during the final quarter of the last century. Before that time—in fact, throughout most of the twentieth century—democracy was politically embattled and even seemed at times to be in retreat. But in the mid-1970s two authoritarian countries on the Iberian peninsula—Portugal and Spain—began a process of democratic transition that, by the next decade, had spread to every part of the world.

The phenomenon came to be called the "third wave" of democratization, suggesting that it was not the first such wave and might not be the last. It has surely been the most powerful one, however, exceeding in scope and magnitude the first democratic wave that began with the American Revolution

and spread to Europe during the late 18th and 19th centuries, as well as the second wave that followed the Allied victory in World War II. All told, there are now some 120 countries, almost two-thirds of the world's total, that can reasonably be described as democracies, though the strength and performance of democratic institutions in many of these countries are far from satisfactory.

The rise of democracy can also be traced to two other developments: the end of the Cold War and the globalization of trade and technology. In one sense, the end of the Cold War can be understood as the manifestation of the third wave of democratic expansion in Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. The collapse of communism in these regions had a special significance, since its disappearance removed the only remaining ideological challenge to democracy as the optimal way to govern society and satisfy human aspirations. The communist system, of course, has survived in a number of countries, above all in China, but its death as a compelling idea has left democracy, alone, holding the mantle of legitimacy in the contemporary world.

If the end of the Cold War removed the most important barrier to the international acceptance of



democracy as the appropriate form of government, globalization has had the effect of stimulating and accelerating the process of democratization. Globalization remains a controversial phenomenon that has affected the lives of people throughout the world in profound and varied ways. It has shaken authoritarian systems and disrupted traditional social patterns; increased global wealth and, it is charged, also sharpened economic inequalities. While a debate rages over the impact of globalization and how to adjust to it, there is no question that the increased speed and access to information have transformed the world politically, raising human consciousness and aspirations, bringing previously marginalized people into the main-

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stream of historical development, and setting in motion the emergence of a single political community governed by universal norms—all this in a world of undiminished and, some would argue, ever more contentious cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.

The rise of democracy as a universal value and system of government is not invalidated by the persistence today of authoritarian governments of many stripes, or by the difficulties encountered by many of the countries that have tried to consolidate new democratic systems. A brief survey of the problems democracy is facing today in different parts of the world—from the former Soviet Union to the Balkans, from the Middle East to Africa, from China and Pakistan to parts of the Western hemisphere—is sufficient to guard against an attitude of democratic triumphalism. As we take note of democracy's travails and recognize that our own country is not without its share of them, it is important to bear in mind that even the detractors of democracy today concede its pre-eminent position. They speak from a standpoint of opposition to a generally accepted norm, challenging democracy's merits or disputing its claim to universalism, while advocating no alternative norm or vision that could supplant it.

The contemporary critiques of democracy fall into three categories—the political, the economic and the cultural. The political critique focuses on illiberal democracy—the danger that intolerant racial or ethnic majorities and corrupt special interests will be empowered if elections are held in countries that lack the preconditions for liberal democracy, such as a high level of economic development, the rule of law and a culture of tolerance. According to this view, it is better to follow the Western model, where the development of liberal institutions

and limited party contests preceded the introduction of full political participation.

If this sequencing was possible in the 18th and 19th centuries, it is hardly a viable option in the present era of instant global communications, wider educational opportunities, rising political expectations and internationally recognized democratic norms such as the right to vote. It is not surprising that no liberal autocracies exist today, since the effort to restrict political participation in the name of modernization and eventual liberalization inevitably requires restraining, not expanding, liberty.

At the same time, increasing political participation through elections generally enhances freedom. If they are to be conducted in a reasonably free and fair manner, elections require respect for certain basic freedoms, among them the freedoms of speech, association and press. Moreover, the political space that exists by virtue of such elections allows political and civic groups to organize and fight for more space and accountability. This can be a critical asset in working to overcome problems that often afflict electoral democracies, such as unchecked executive power, a venal judiciary and widespread violence and corruption. Thus, while so-called illiberal or electoral democracy falls well short of liberal democracy, even this imperfect democracy is far preferable to dictatorship, and offers the opportunity to deepen democratic freedoms and institutions.

The economic critique of democracy rests on two basic arguments. The first is that democracy is a luxury of the rich, whereas the poor require food and other basic necessities. The second argument is that a strong authoritarian state can promote economic development more effectively than a messy democracy. The first argument

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There is a worldwide community of people and organizations fostering democracy.

overlooks the preference of the poor, who have always favored democracy when given a choice. I note, for example, polls taken in India on the country's fiftieth anniversary that showed greater support for democracy among the lower than among the privileged classes. Democracy offers the poor the chance to highlight their plight and use their numbers to increase their power and redress their grievances. "People in economic need also need a political voice," the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has written. "Democracy is not a luxury that can await the arrival of general prosperity." Its protective role, Sen notes, is especially critical in averting famines, which have never occurred in an independent and democratic country with a free press. Famines have occurred in closed societies—the Soviet Union in the 1930s, China in the 1950s, and North Korea today—where incompetent and ruthless governments don't have to fear the scrutiny of the media or the wrath of the people.

The second argument, regarding the greater economic efficacy of au-

thoritarianism, rests on the view that democracy is prone to bouts of inflationary economic populism, whereas authoritarian governments are better able to make the hard choices and consistently follow a disciplined, growth-oriented policy. For one thing, the empirical literature establishes no connection between good economic policies and restrictive political systems. Moreover, a recent study of Latin America by Jorge Dominguez that was published in our *Journal of Democracy* demonstrates that the democratic process offers the best way to consolidate a market economy. "Only a democratic polity," he writes, "can embody the compromises and commitments that are needed freely to bind government and opposition to a consensus on a market-oriented framework."

Authoritarian systems lack the ability or even the inclination to establish consensus, and they are more prone than open democracies to debilitating corruption and financial mismanagement. Until the recent financial crisis, East Asia was the principal reference point in the economic defense

of authoritarianism. It has since become the most compelling example used to demonstrate the need for the kind of transparency and accountability that only democracy makes possible.

The cultural critique maintains that democracy is a product of the West, where individual liberty is valued, and is unsuited to non-Western cultures that place more emphasis on authority and have a less developed concept of citizenship. This argument assumes that culture is immutable when, in fact, it has shown itself to be highly adaptable to changing historical and economic circumstances. It was not so long ago, we should recall, that Catholicism was seen to be incompatible with democracy. Yet the third wave surged in Catholic countries such as Spain, Poland and Chile, and the Catholic Church itself was an active force in these transitions. During the last decade certain Asian leaders of an authoritarian bent advanced the view that Asian values are antithetical to democracy. However, Asia is a vast and varied region with many cultures, and the endurance of democracy in India with its nearly one billion people, its more recent flowering in the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, not to mention the transition now under way in the large and predominantly Islamic country of Indonesia, suggests that democracy may have a brighter future there than does authoritarianism.

While the various critiques of democracy don't invalidate its claim to universalism, they nonetheless show that democracy faces many formidable challenges. The political critique, for example, focuses attention on the yawning gap between post-authoritarian electoral democracies and fully consolidated liberal democracies. The economic critique highlights the problems of poverty and massive in-

equality that continue after democracy is established and can threaten democracy's survival if they are not urgently and effectively addressed. Finally, the cultural critique reminds us that democracy will have to adapt to diverse cultural environments, just as different cultures will have to accommodate to the procedures, expectations and norms of democracy. All three critiques tell us that the process of democratization is inevitably long and arduous, that it is likely to encounter setbacks and crises along the way, and that those who seek to aid democracy's advance will need patience and perseverance to overcome these setbacks.

On the positive side, a community of people and organizations now exists throughout the world whose central purpose is to foster democracy by addressing the many challenges it faces in different political, economic and cultural settings. Such people can be found working in thousands of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in post-communist and developing countries, in groups that are functioning both within and in exile from countries that remain autocratic, and in the growing number of organizations in the established democracies that seek to aid democracy abroad by providing financial and technical assistance.

One can also find in emerging democracies, especially in Central Europe, groups that only recently battled repression in their own countries and now provide cross-border aid to democrats in neighboring dictatorships. Taken together, these individuals and groups constitute a kind of world democratic movement that is bound together by common values and purposes and committed to carrying out the many tasks that need to be performed to advance democracy.

Without presuming to offer an exhaustive list of these tasks, I

would group them under the following seven categories:

(1) Assisting the consolidation of new democracies. The challenge here is making democracy work in transitional countries. The starting point is holding periodic elections that are genuinely free and fair, in which the incumbent does not enjoy undue advantage, and in which all parties are able to compete on a level playing field. As we've already noted, democracy also involves much more than elections. It requires a state that is strong enough to guarantee the freedom and security of its citizens under the rule of law, but not so strong that it curbs that freedom or holds itself above the law and is unaccountable for its actions. It requires an independent judiciary, a free media (both of which are essential for fighting corruption), and a vigorous civil society, including both independent trade unions and business associations. It requires the decentralization of economic power through a market economy, and of political power through effective local government. In countries that have emerged from harsh repression, it also requires some means to secure both transitional justice and reconciliation.

(2) Aiding democracy in semi-authoritarian or back-sliding countries. The above agenda for consolidation is formidable, and its implementation can only be meaningfully attempted in countries where the government is genuinely committed to broadening and deepening democracy. Most of the new democracies in Central Europe, the southern cone of Latin America, East Asia, and southern Africa would fall into this category.

In many other countries, however, transitions have become stalled or were never really attempted in the first place. We find such semi-authoritarian or back-sliding countries today in the Andean region of

Latin America; in the former Soviet Union; and in parts of South Asia, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa. In such countries the political environment is constrained and change is blocked for a variety of reasons, but independent civil-society groups are still able to function, even though they are often subject to great pressure. Such groups need the international community to provide both assistance and protection as they work to defend human rights, enlarge political space and fight for democratic reforms. It is generally less productive to work with official institutions in such countries than to do so in the countries seriously attempting democratic consolidation.

(3) Liberalizing authoritarian systems. Countries where democracy does not exist include the remaining communist countries such as China, Cuba and North Korea, and other authoritarian countries in East and Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The important thing to note about the countries in this category is that they vary considerably in terms of how closed they are, the level of repression, and the political space that activists and reformers have been able to secure for their work. Burma, for example, is ruled by a very harsh dictatorship, but it is actually somewhat more open and less repressive than North Korea, which is arguably the most oppressive country in the world. China is definitely an authoritarian country that systematically abuses human rights. Nevertheless, it is well ahead of Vietnam and Laos in terms of government-sponsored reforms to loosen government control of industry and other institutions, and also in terms of the development of a pro-democracy movement and liberal thinking among intellectuals and other groups both within and outside the Communist party.

We also need to track changes

within each country that can be built upon to press for further reforms. China, as I have suggested, is a very different country today than it was under Mao or in the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen Square crackdown. Perhaps less perceptible are the changes under way in Cuba, where dissent has spread from a small number of Havana-based intellectuals to actions of civic resistance all over the island by farmers, workers, truck drivers, and many other groups. These changes, which are signs of the gradual breakdown of authoritarian systems, create new opportunities to support democracy efforts within these countries, though not to the exclusion of aiding human rights and other pro-democracy groups that have been forced to operate from exile.

(4) Taking advantage of electoral openings. I have already noted the importance of elections in the process of democratic consolidation; elections also offer critical opportunities for democratic breakthroughs. Such a breakthrough occurred in Croatia in January 2000, when a democratic opposition ousted a semi-authoritarian party from power. Following a pattern established earlier in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, broad coalitions of NGOs were formed to arouse citizen interest and involvement in the campaign, mobilize voter turnout, lobby for a fair electoral law, and monitor the actual voting to deter fraud.

It should be remembered that such openings need to be created and exploited, since many citizens might initially prefer to boycott what they think will be a rigged process. Indeed, in situations where governments of dubious democratic commitment announce elections, the first and most important decision democratic NGOs and parties must make is whether there is sufficient opportunity for a

breakthrough to participate in the process.

The next and most difficult challenge of this kind may come in Serbia where—assuming the opposition participates and there is a massive voter turnout—an attempt by Milosevic to steal the election might conceivably precipitate the confrontation that will bring about his downfall. In such situations, international support for free and fair elections is critical. So is the need to isolate regimes that have annulled democratic elections. In that regard, May 27 marks the tenth anniversary of the annulled election in Burma that was won overwhelmingly by Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD), which the Burmese dictatorship is trying to decimate. The occasion should be marked by demonstrations of solidarity with Suu Kyi and the NLD, and clear expressions by world leaders that the mandate of the people is not subject to a statute of limitations.

(5) Supporting minority rights. Since the end of the Cold War, the problem of religious, ethnic and racial conflict has become the most explosive and controversial issue facing the international community. All I can do here is briefly suggest how democratic academics and practitioners are trying to address this question. It is important to remember that there are many multinational—and ethnically and linguistically diverse—countries in the world that have been able to remain stable, relatively cohesive democracies. I think of our own country, for example, as well as of India, Spain, Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland. All of these countries have federal systems of government. Ideally, federalism is the answer for many countries that face ethnic or regional conflicts, but it is not the only answer. There are examples, such as the “velvet di-

vorce” in Czechoslovakia, where countries have broken up peacefully along national lines, and other examples where central governments repress national minorities and violently resist their efforts to achieve greater autonomy or to secede altogether.

As a general rule, the more a multinational state tries to resist federal solutions that protect minority rights, language, culture, and religion, the more it stokes the fires of ethnic conflict and strengthens those who want secession. In this context, democrats can take a number of actions. They can press for consideration of federal solutions that respect diversity, as some groups are doing today in Nigeria in advocating a national conference to deal with the problem of ethnic conflict. They can defend the human rights of members of persecuted minorities. They can foster conflict resolution, which is a growing field of NGO activity. Finally, they can promote tolerance through education.

I am struck, for example, by the number of grassroots groups in some of the most conflict-riven countries that are doing creative work in this last area. I am thinking of Media pour la Paix, which is promoting ethnic tolerance in the Congo; Rural Human Rights Activists, which is fostering religious tolerance in Liberia; the Kwoto popular theater group in Sudan, which is maintaining southern cultural pride while advocating non-violence in the camps around Khartoum; and the Peace and Human Rights Network in Somalia, which is overcoming clan divisions to isolate warlords and help return the country to stable government. The work of these groups goes largely unnoticed by the international community, but it is genuinely inspiring.

(6) Avoiding the pitfalls while realizing the benefits of globaliza-

tion. How do we achieve what *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman calls “sustainable globalization?” This is another way of saying that we need to work out the trade-offs between promoting a dynamic global economy, which has the potential of multiplying the wealth of the world, and protecting the rights of workers and the social and economic well-being of the poor. The contradiction here is not as sharp as it might appear in the aftermath of the protests in Seattle.

Economists are increasingly coming to realize, as Dani Rodrik has observed, that free markets can only perform well if they are supported by non-market institutions. He is talking not only about regulatory mechanisms, laws and courts, but also about democratic institutions that can elicit and aggregate “local knowledge” about economic impact and need, and can encourage participation, negotiation and compromise in managing overall economic policy. This thinking echoes the thoughts of Amartya Sen and offers a basis for the different sides of the Seattle debate to find a common ground in fostering democratic institutions and political freedoms.

(7) Strengthening democratic values through education for democracy. Democracy is not just a matter of rights, institutions and procedures; it also concerns values. Many of the groups that have fought for democracy over the last two decades have turned their attention during the phase of democratic transition to programs that try to deepen the understanding of democratic values and strengthen the commitment of young people and others to the rule of law, individual

rights, freedom of religion, free and open debate, majority rule, and the protection of minority rights. Such education can take place in both the schools and in the wider society. In Poland, for example, many of the people associated in the 1980s with the underground Committees for Education, Culture and Research (OKNO) subsequently created the Education for Democracy Citizenship Program that has produced democracy curricula with accompanying textbooks, resource guides and student workbooks that are being used today in over 800 Polish schools. These educator-activists have also extended their work to countries further to the east where democracy education has been less developed.

Elsewhere, the new civilian government in Nigeria is considering making human rights a part of the official school curriculum, a plan that NGOs are also helping to implement in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Another NGO in the Sudan has introduced a curriculum for children in the Nuba mountains that promotes tolerance and human rights with illustrations from the community’s legendary heroes. Education for democracy can also take place through participation in the electoral process, as well as through radio and other media. For example, surveys in Liberia suggest that the average citizen has a remarkably high understanding of human rights and democracy, largely as a result of radio programs.

The approach of the people who are carrying out these and other democracy programs is based on the view that the development of democracy in a country, like the

education of an individual, must inevitably proceed gradually, one step at a time. Democracy is not a system that comes into being all at once after certain preconditions—be they political, economic or cultural—have been established. It is a slow, step-by-step process that takes place by pressing the boundaries of what is politically possible and building upon what political scientist Larry Diamond has called the “democratic fragments” that exist in pre-liberal polities. Such fragments can be found even in the most oppressive countries, and they can become stepping stones for progress that eventually generate breakthroughs to higher levels of democratic possibility.

Understanding democratic development as a gradual process of struggle and growth offers a perspective that is at once more dynamic, more realistic, more inclusive, and more hopeful than the idea that “we have to wait for all the preconditions to be right.” From such a perspective, liberal democracy may be a distant goal in many countries, but the path forward is clear, since it begins where one is and not where one would like to be, and it is accessible even to those who have the longest way to travel. It is in this sense that democracy may be understood as possible for everybody—not necessarily immediately and in its final form, but as a feasible objective that can be approached through incremental gains and small victories. That’s how our own democracy developed over more than 200 years, and we now have the chance—and, I think, the moral obligation—to help make it happen for others as well. 🌍