

New Democracy Movements: The World, 1977 to the Present

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One of the most striking developments in world history has been the recent rise in the number of democracies and the increasing consensus that democracy was desirable and achievable. Before 1945, democracy was limited to a few Western countries, many of which ruled colonial empires like despots. The end of World War II brought an end to those colonial empires. But the newly created independent states of Asia and Africa did not always opt for democracy. India, which became independent in 1947, did create what is still called today “the world’s largest democracy,” but elsewhere many newly independent regimes established single-party dictatorships to replace colonial rule.

In some ways the Cold War made things worse. The United States and the Soviet Union demanded loyalty above all from their client states. For the Soviet Union that meant domination of puppet Communist Parties in Eastern Europe. For the United States, the desired loyalty was to vigorous anticommunism at home and abroad. Dictators delivered better than democrats, who were often too sympathetic to popular forces, communists and socialists included. Consequently the Cold War superpowers extinguished budding national democracies and democratic movements. At least for the duration of the conflict, nondemocratic regimes in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and even much of Africa were rewarded with financial and military assistance that enabled them to continue old feuds, social conflicts, or civil wars, as long as they remained loyal to their patron.

As the Cold War came to an end in the late 1980s, the exhausted and indebted former enemies cared less about who governed in Poland, South Africa, or Argentina, thus allowing new democratic movements to rise and rule. After the Soviet Union was replaced by the Russian Federation in 1991, independent states mushroomed throughout the Baltic region and Eastern Europe. Similarly, in Latin America, military dictatorships were replaced by democratic governments, some of which even called themselves “socialists.” Before 1991, it was inconceivable that Russian or American governments would ever have allowed such a change.

In a perverse way, the Cold War had undermined the popular legitimacy of democratic movements. Since both the United States and the Soviet Union claimed to be democratic, while subverting democratic movements abroad, nationalist leaders, especially in Africa, derided democracy as an imperialist ideology. But since 1991, it has become easier to see democracy and human rights as universal goals.

From 1945 to the present, just how democratic movements developed in the context of the Cold War varied globally, with many cases revealing both the success and appeal of democracy. During the last decade of the Cold War, demands for democracy were voiced against the clients of the Soviet Union and the United States, as the protests of the “Mother of the Plaza de Mayo” in Argentina, and by the leaders of those superpowers, as revealed by Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of Perestroika. After the Cold War, countries like East Germany or South Africa were freed by their patrons to pursue their own destinies, as demonstrated by Nelson Mandela’s Nobel Peace Prize Address in 1993.

In recent years, democracy movements have continued to develop in Eastern Europe and Latin America, but the newest breakthroughs have been in the Middle East. These began in Tunisia in December 2010, when a young street vendor set himself on fire after his goods had been taken and he had been denied a hearing by government authorities. Massive street protests followed, bringing down the ruler of the country, forcing him, his family, and aides into exile. The example of Tunisia sparked popular protests in Egypt against President Mubarak in January 2011, resulting in his resignation by February. As similar movements for popular governments broke out in Bahrain, Yemen, and Libya, these and other Arab countries were swept up in what was called an “Arab Spring.” This is perhaps most remarkable because the Middle East has been for so long dominated by oil-rich autocratic sheiks, super-privileged royal families, and, as a consequence of the Cold War and the creation of Israel, United States-supplied military regimes: Iran and Iraq at various times and Egypt throughout.

Whether the Arab spring turns into a truly democratic summer is complicated by continued high unemployment, remaining members of the old ruling class, sectarian conflicts, and global politics, but the hunger for popular representation and responsive government, once tasted, is unlikely to disappear. A powerful model, the Arab Spring has raised democratic aspirations from China to Chile.

While one can argue that democracy is new and spreading, especially in recent years and decades. But any argument has to bear the burden of a counterargument.

Any claim for recent years or decades is always subject to the near-sightedness of the present. Recent events and movements that seem important now may well disappear from the longer view a hundred or five hundred years from now. A century from now, will the six years of Gorbachev’s reform become a blip, possibly like the Russian Revolution of 1905 or even that of 1917, in a long history of

continued Czarism from Saint Vladimir I's rule during the tenth century through Putin VI's rule in the twenty-second century? Will the Arab Spring seem like the seasonal change the term implies rather than the beginning of a new age? Has Egypt seen its last pharaoh or was Mubarak only the most recent?

This line of questioning rests too much on a belief that the past is far more continuous than it is. Many other fifty-year periods of the past experienced as many protests as our own age. Many other historical periods produced protests as our own age. Many other historical periods produced protests of the have-nots against the haves. But the ideas and vocabulary of democracy are certainly new at least to recent centuries. No peasant uprising of the ancient or medieval world called for elected representatives, universal suffrage, equality before the law, the people as source of the law, freedom of expression, belief, and religion, universal education, social justice, and human rights. These are all principles and practices that have evolved and developed over the last couple of centuries. They all have earlier roots, but taken together they form a set of hopes, expectations, and experiences that are distinctly modern. Times do change.

A second line of criticism might run like this. Even if democracy is a modern idea and experience, how can we certify a flowering in a couple of protests, many of which have been thwarted or defeated? Gorbachev's democratization, after all, occurred twenty-five years ago and even Russians do not remember it fondly. Some of the democratic gains that were won by Gorbachev by 1991 receded in the following years under Boris Yeltsin, first President of the Russian Federation (1991-1999), and Vladimir Putin (president and prime minister since 1999). To take one indicator of glasnost – press freedom- since 1993 over 200 Russian journalists have been murdered, making Russia the third most dangerous country in the world for a free press. Gorbachev today calls for a new wave of democratic protests in Russia: something like the Arab Spring? Only a year after 2011 the optimism of the Arab Spring has soured for many Egyptians – Christian and Muslim – as the Muslim Brotherhood Party's struggle against the unyielding military squeezing out secular democrats. In more secular Tunisia, the achievement of democratic revolution, one Tunisian recently quipped, is that now "everyone is above the law." In Libya, the revolution that deposed Gaddafi reverted to tribal war, the uprising in Syria led to sectarian conflict and civil war, and those of Bahrain and Yemen were crushed (with some U.S. support).

To this argument, the Arab revolution is definitely a work in progress. It occurs in a part of the world where democracy was least expected. The same might be said of the former Soviet Union. Gorbachev started a process that unleashed democratic and national independence movements throughout the former Soviet

dominions. Some of these continue to be controlled by single parties or strong men, but not all. Czechoslovakia managed a peaceful Velvet Revolution and then a peaceful divorce between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Poland and Hungary have become viable democracies. The Baltic states – Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia – are independent republics. Many of the former Soviet states like Ukraine, Belarus, and “the stans” are independence. And, perhaps most remarkably of all, the former East Germany became independent, then part of a unified German state, one of the most democratic in Europe. One can carp about backsliding in Russia and the rise of supernationalists in Hungary, but there is no way to dismiss the numbers of peoples or countries who now govern themselves. Their example and the example of even temporarily successful democratic revolutions from the Philippines to Paraguay have buttressed the expectation that self-government in a free society is the right of all.

Democracy is not a light turned on, or off. It is a process that advances, or recedes. Still the advances are more contagious and longer lasting, at least in the mind. Few want to return to the conditions of dictatorship. But the process is rarely smooth. There are those in any society who lose privilege or power in a democratic revolution. And they are, by definition, the privileged and powerful.

Latin Americas celebrate democratic and independence movements that go back hundreds of years, but that have still not been fully realized. Indeed, in the Americas and the rest of the world the goalposts have moved since the days when democratic states accepted enslaved Africans, invisible Indians, and colonial subjects. Recent claims for human rights, freedom from sexual or gender discrimination, international jurisdiction over war crimes and genocide are all extensions of our democratic expectations. Failure or retrenchment can be seen as the setting of the next battle rather than a sign that democracy failed, or worse, that it doesn't work.

Democratic demands in the twenty-first century reach further than ever before. Likewise, the conditions for achieving democracy have also expanded. A democracy that was limited to white men of the propertied class could function with an educational system that ignored everyone else. A mass democracy requires a mass citizenry educated to think and participate intelligently. It requires what Franklin D. Roosevelt called “freedom from want” to allow all citizens the time and resources to participate. And it requires the level playing field, unencumbered by special interests with private agendas. The early years of modern liberal democracy heard the call for the separation of church and state. Today we hear the call for separation of corporations and the state. The effort to create the public space where citizens can create their common world continues.