

Can democracy still deliver in a restless world?



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📷 A profound crisis of free market capitalism, which has been channeled by angry rightist populists like US President Donald Trump, is hence central to the worsening image of democracy. (Photo: AP)

This year, the International Day of Democracy came and went on Saturday, September 15, with barely a whimper.

It was a sign of the times. The most enlightened form of government is endangered and losing appeal. Democracy's moral and practical desirability are under question and scepticism about it is rising to unprecedented levels since the end of the Cold War.

The mood was exactly the opposite during the 1990s. Then, the belief that multi-party democracy and free markets had no credible rivals and that democratic capitalist regimes would be the "only game in town" was commonplace. Flush with the victory over the Soviet Union and the freeing up of former Communist bloc countries, liberal scholars like Francis Fukuyama hailed the "universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government".

But nearly 30 years since Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis, the teleological liberal vision of a relentless global march to the golden endpoint of democracy and capitalism is facing a dead end. As per Freedom House's latest ranking, just 39 per cent of the world's total population (88 out of 195 countries) live in fully "free" polities.

The year-on-year "consecutive decline in global freedom" since 2006, which Freedom House is lamenting, can be explained at both macro and micro levels. Among the big systemic shifts, disillusionment with capitalist globalisation and its iniquitous distribution of wealth, income and power is a major factor in loss of public faith in Western-style free market democracies.

The decade-long global economic crisis which wreaked havoc in advanced capitalist democracies from 2008, and the manner in which elected governments in these countries bailed out "fat cat" bankers while transferring the burden of austerity and welfare state cuts to the middle and working classes, left a bad taste in ordinary people's mouths.

Extreme economic inequality and insecurity for the have-nots have compounded the anger against the unaccountable "democratic" order. The association of unjust globalisation with democracy is automatic because the theoretical and practical assumption of liberalism is that democracy is the necessary political counterpart of capitalism.

Joseph Schumpeter wrote in 1942 that "modern democracy rose along with capitalism, and in casual connection with it". Robert Dahl reaffirmed at the turn of this century that democracy "cannot endure in a country with a predominantly non-market economy". A profound crisis of free market capitalism, which has been channeled by angry rightist populists like US President Donald Trump, is hence central to the worsening image of democracy.

Another key factor causing backsliding, "frozen transitions" and reversals in democratisation is the relative decline of Western powers vis-a-vis non-Western ones. The triumphalism of liberals in the 1990s derived from supreme self-confidence about the unipolar world order lasting for long. American preponderance was the foundation for the liberal optimism about democracy.

By its existence as a rapidly growing and unchallenged hegemon, the United States was in that period an exemplar of a robust democracy that others wished to follow. With democracy promotion a controversial and integral part of American foreign policy, there were all the more reasons for the liberal juggernaut to be seen as an unstoppable phenomenon.

Fast forward to 2018. China is already the largest economy on the planet by one method of calculating national income. It is demonstrating an alternative pathway to power and prosperity

via authoritarian state capitalism. American influence on the developing world, particularly in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, where the bulk of dictatorial regimes persist resiliently, is on the wane.

American retrenchment from global governance under the populist President Donald Trump, contrasted with the foreign policy alacrity and strategic acumen that undemocratic non-Western powers like China and Russia are demonstrating, add to perceptions that Western democracies are spent forces which cannot inspire or compel poor nations to democratise.

As to prominent emerging powers like Brazil, India, Indonesia and South Africa, they are democratic but lack the will and capacity to transform other developing countries into their mirror images. Canada, France and Germany remain committed to liberal democracy, but they cannot individually do the heavy lifting when the US under President Trump has withdrawn from the democratisation arena.

Apart from systemic factors like the passing of unipolarity and the souring of globalisation, there are local and region-specific trends hindering the expansion of democracy.

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 promised to usher in a possible “fourth wave” of democratisation following Samuel Huntington’s thesis of “three waves” since the 19th century. But barring Tunisia, the democratic revolts in the Middle East have been crushed by a combination of war and terrorist violence unleashed by authoritarian regimes within the region and their foreign backers.

Turkey, which was the one rare democracy among the Muslim-majority nations of that region, has regressed dramatically under the sultanistic despotism of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. It is now a classic “elected dictatorship” that is a member of Nato but blatantly flouts the Western military alliance’s core tenet of liberal democratic governance.

In Africa, strongmen and one-party states are being buttressed by dubious elections while the African Union is struggling to enforce democracy as an inviolable norm. In Latin America, the degeneration of Leftist democracies into corruption-plagued dysfunctional regimes and outright dictatorships like Venezuela and Nicaragua is occurring amid regional organisations which are paralysed and unable to act in unison to preserve democracy.

In the sub-regions of Asia, military dictatorships, one-man rule and single-party autocracies are flourishing thanks to their mix of economic dynamism, repressive crackdowns on dissent and regional stasis in favour of the authoritarian status quo. Not even the European Union is succeeding in preventing rightist populists in Hungary, Poland and Italy from openly trampling upon liberal democratic values and institutions.

Today, the reaffirmation of national sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs of states and antagonism toward supranational and multilateral organisations that we are observing is directly connected to the failure of globalisation and it is playing out to the detriment of democracy.

Given these headwinds, can democracy bounce back as a viable universal project? Winston Churchill had quipped that “democracy is the worst form of government, except all the others that have been tried”. If illiberal anti-democratic populists enter the portals of power and exhaust themselves through misgovernment, they may also be rejected in electoral cycles to come. If a new balance is found between markets and society by better regulating transnational business conglomerates, democracies may win back their shrinking flock of adherents. And if leading developing nations like India, Indonesia, Brazil and South Africa turn into democratic

“norm entrepreneurs”, the swagger of having democratic champion states may also return to motivate activists and human rights defenders in poor countries who feel abandoned and helpless against oppressive regimes.

Ultimately, democracy can be attained and sustained only when there is a demand for it and it is seen to be delivering the goods for the people in whose name it functions. Almost three decades after the Cold War, the case for democracy has to be revisited and it needs reinvention to become fit for purpose in a world that is polarised, dissatisfied and restless for change.

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