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Is global democracy in crisis?

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There is a widespread consensus that democracy is struggling across the world and increasingly suffering a dramatic and even existential crisis. Several organizations measure global democracy and all record significant declines in democratic quality in the last half decade, and especially in the last year. In the last two years, dozens of books and articles have appeared based around the theme of democracy being in a state of acute crisis, collapse, deconsolidation, de-legitimization – and many similar notions. Democratic gloom seems increasingly to be part of the zeitgeist.

The trends are undoubtedly serious and unsettling. But is democracy really suffering a ‘crisis’ of this magnitude?

The level of global democracy is still high compared to any other period in history. While the growth in the number of democracies seen over the last two or three decades has flattened off, to some extent this is hardly surprising as the number of ‘still-to-democratize’ states has decreased and one might suppose that it is the ‘hardest cases’ that remain undemocratic. The overarching global trend line now shows a modest downward shift, but not a dramatic collapse of global democracy.

Political trajectories vary, rather than adhering to any single, entirely uniform trend. While the media focuses on the cases of dramatic backsliding and the mercurial politics of Trump, Putin, Erdogan and other high-profile illiberal leaders, many countries have quietly been recording democratic gains: Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Tunisia, Gabon, Gambia, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Guatemala, Colombia, Nepal, to name only a few.

What we can say is that levels of democracy appear increasingly changeable. Many of the newer democracies show a tendency to shift back and forth; they constantly advance and fall back, rather than making smooth, uni-linear progress toward perfect democratic consolidation. Despite the democratic pessimism that abounds, the current era is one where democratic gains are frequently made. The worry is not that democratic breakthroughs are off the agenda, but rather that once made they seem to be so hard to hold on to and so easily reversed.

In this vein, many commentators are so negative about democracy’s fortunes today because they compare current events with the far more positive and promising years of the 1990s and early 2000s. While it is certainly true that the immediate years after the Cold War were a time of far greater liberal idealism, there is a danger of overly-idealising the 1990s. Even then resistance to democratization was fierce in many countries around the world; transitions

were bumpy and often incomplete; and many analysts were fretting about rising illiberalism. Forgetting the problems of this supposedly halcyon moment of ‘peak liberalism’ unduly accentuates democracy’s current predicaments. The 1990s were not so ideal; the 2010s are not so one-dimensionally bad.

We must be precise and careful when dissecting what is actually ‘in crisis’ with democracy. One issue is intensified authoritarian repression - autocratic regimes are certainly getting cleverer in how they resist pressure for political change. Another question is whether citizens still want democracy. Here the data are less than clear-cut. Many recent protests across the world show that in most countries and regions people do still want democratic reform – in fact, it is in Europe where the trends in public opinion are most negative. Many surveys show that support for democracy is rising not falling in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Analysts often, and correctly, point out that democracy is not delivering on its promises; but in these regions authoritarian regimes are not doing any better, showing that there is a loss of trust in governments in general not just in democratic regimes.

This means that poll data needs to be interpreted with some care. Where people do not live in a democracy, it seems that they want it strongly – indeed, as strongly as in any previous period. Where they do live in a democracy they appear to be somewhat jaded about democratic performance. In these countries, citizens’ frustration tends to be correlated with whether or not they are happy with the current government – those who say they are unhappy with the party in power are those that say they are unhappy with democracy. It is difficult to untangle hostility towards a particular government from frustration with democracy as a system.

These nuances also have a broader ramification. Perhaps the most significant change over previous periods is that today’s ‘democracy problems’ are no longer solely about non-Western regions, but now affect the supposedly consolidated democracies. Democracy’s crisis is in this sense no longer about dramatic military coups or the absolute end of democratic rule, but about the insidious and surreptitious narrowing of civic liberties and democratic quality. Liberalism is under greater threat than democracy per se.

In sum: if there is undoubtedly a global malaise surrounding democratic ideals, we might say democracy is going through a crotchety and irascible mid-life crisis rather than teetering on the edge of oblivion.