



## Democracy on the Brink: A Reflection from the Point of View of International Relations

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Democracy—whether formal or substantive, representative or participative, procedural or material—is not living its best moment. Democratization, understood as a process of expanding rights, does not constitute a homogeneous and inexorable path. Contingent forces, factors and phenomena may generate obstacles and even produce regressions. We are perhaps facing a conjuncture in which the prolonged cycle of democratic growth and extension is finding its limits. Democratization is, essentially, a social and historical process and, as such, its evolution is not pre-determined. Regression is a possibility. In this context, it might be useful to recall that in the 1970s, based on events and transformations which had taken place in the previous decade, in particular, an idea promoted mainly by the Trilateral Commission – currently remembered only by a few –became entrenched. It postulated that the core countries in the international system were experiencing an “excess” of democracy which must be moderated and even curtailed by means of different policies oriented, among other, at deactivating critical manifestations, obstructing systemic questionings, reducing participation, limiting political democracy, and generating social apathy. The effect of this reasoning in the periphery was devastating: in the name of an alleged stability, in order to contain political change, and as a result of mistaking reformism for extremism, despotic regimes that shattered any democratic attempt or vestige were tolerated and promoted.

At the same time, and more emphatically during the final phase of the Cold War, many sectors and actors in the international community sought to promote the protection of human rights and restrict the arbitrariness of non-democratic governments. It was a question of denouncing, and also sanctioning, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes for their violations of fundamental rights. Even in cases in which these regimes faced the challenge of armed movements, the world—especially several governments of developed countries—postulated that they should be confronted under the rule of law. Authoritarian and totalitarian governments were scrutinized to prevent them from applying illegitimate and violent policies.

The events of September 11, 2001 mark a turning-point through the inducement of an atmosphere that tends to allow democracies huge discretionary power to limit individual freedom and rights, and apply restrictive and punitive policies. In the delicate balance between freedom and security, several democracies have opted for sacrificing socially-achieved fundamental rights for the sake of an alleged enhanced protection. This approach has distinctive regional expressions and variations that depend on the historical experiences of different countries. In some cases, the retraction of democracy originates in the “war on terrorism” (the United States, for instance); in others, in the difficulty



to “discipline” globalization (for example, Europe); and in some other cases, in the concatenation of factors that led, at a given time, to the implosion of the State and to the incidence of autocratic methods (Russia, for instance). On the other hand, some of the models currently encouraged as worthy of imitation from a socio-economic point of view—for example, China—are based on opaque, arbitrary and anti-liberal pillars and practices. Growing inequity and the infringement of the rule of law—which adopts multiple forms in the center and the periphery, respectively—reflect and reinforce the rising weakness of democracy.

There is no doubt that democracies can and must defend themselves in a legitimate and lawful way. What they can not and must not do is to protect themselves in an illegitimate or unlawful way. Let us observe some democracies with different levels of maturity and substantiveness, situated in diverse geopolitical frameworks. At present, the United States may increase restrictions to the freedom of its citizens in the name of greater security, while at the same time it may announce preventive attacks (which shatter the Charter of the United Nations) against several target countries under the framework of “war on terrorism”: evidence and imminence became irrelevant. Israel may apply virulent policies against the Palestinians in the name of “war against terror”, invoking the democratic nature of the Israeli regime. Russia, for instance, has exerted lethal force against the Chechens in defense of a shady democracy harassed by “international terrorism”. The Philippines agrees to the presence in its territory of United States Special Forces to support the fragile Philippine democracy in its struggle against the Abu Sayyaf group, legitimizing the intromission of foreign troops to combat “fundamentalist terrorism”. And in Colombia, a “*mano dura*” policy is propitiated in matters of public order in the name of defending the so called “democratic security” and for the sake of combating local “terrorism”, presumably linked to transnational terrorism.

In every case we are in the presence of a variegated ensemble of democratic regimes. In each of them, a significant part of the public opinion supports these measures, while an eloquent international silence is the response to these—and many other—examples. However, fundamental issues arise regarding the limits these democracies have or accept in their fight against terrorism; before whom, how and when do they explain their increasingly repressive forceful actions; and when will it be possible to say that these democracies feel safe and that they will revitalize full public liberties.

An embryonic authoritarianism—or what is relatively the same thing, the specter of a democratic regression—seems to be pervading the international system. This might, without a doubt, seriously undermine democracies in the center and the periphery, the oldest and the youngest ones, the presumably consolidated and the very fragile ones.

However, this relative retraction of the democratizing dynamics has not entailed the end of the impulses in favor of greater democratization. New practices in the articulation of international civil society and new ways of amalgamating



the efforts of emerging countries reflect a movement that strives for more and better democracy. These democratizing claims may—as has occurred in other historical moments—be channeled or constrained. The spaces to advance along these lines seem to be narrower than they were at the beginning of the Post-Cold War period, and the viability of their materialization seems to demand prudence and creativity. The democratizing flame has extended to the whole planet, but its full and profound expression confronts today great obstacles and a considerable number of enemies. Instead of a new ‘coalition of the willing’ organized to attack another country in the periphery, there is a need of a coalition of the vulnerable between peoples in both the central nations and the peripheral areas: this is, in all of its dramatic dimension, the scope of the current challenge for democracy to survive and extend.

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