

Demokratiets krise og de nye autokratier

The consensus today seems to be that democracy is worn-down and weary, if not on the verge of collapse. Thinkers such as the political scientists David Runciman and Jan Zielonka claim that modern democracy is in deep crisis, and that new autocratic and populist trends are threatening the foundation of our political system.¹ In one of Runciman's metaphors, our democracies seem to be going through a midlife crisis, having lost their sense of direction and appearing ready to crumble.

In Europe, we have seen signs of a serious crisis of democracy in connection with the Brexit discussions in the United Kingdom, the new right-wing nationalist movements in Germany and Italy, and the rise of highly conservative parties in Poland and Hungary. On the international scene, populist slogans and outspoken nationalism have been promulgated by political leaders in the United States and Russia, while autocratic tendencies are growing stronger in Turkey, the Middle East and elsewhere. Examples from other continents are Brazil, Burundi and the Philippines.

Is it meaningful, on the basis of these trends, to talk about a wave of autocratic political development? In a recent issue of the journal *Democratization*, the political scientists Anna Lührmann, from Germany, and Staffan I. Lindberg, from Sweden, claim that the decay of democratic governments seen over the last decade must be perceived as a global political challenge.² This development has given rise to numerous studies of the concept of "autocratisation", which, in somewhat simplified terms, can be regarded as the opposite of "democratisation". Autocratisation can occur rapidly, typically in connection with an attempted or successful political coup. It can also result from processes that gradually erode and may even end an existing and perhaps well-functioning democracy.

Gainsaying the American writer and political scientist Francis Fukuyama's analysis that "the end of history" has been reached, now that liberal democracy has prevailed, Lührmann and Lindberg have done a quantitative study in which they argue that decidedly autocratic features have clearly developed in more countries than ever before. They do, however, conclude that just as it was premature in 1992 to declare the end of history, it is currently too early to proclaim the demise of democracy.³

The chapters in this book focus on the crisis of democracy in its various national manifestations. Each chapter can be read on its own, but when read together they provide a diagnosis of the current state of democracy, the different challenges it faces and models for resolving them. The authors of the chapters pursue the book's general theme in the relevant specific national contexts and based on their own academic approaches to the material. They therefore do not build on any unambiguous, fixed or predefined model, and the definitions of some concepts can differ slightly. However, all authors take their cue, in different ways, from recent decades' still ongoing discussion of the gradual backsliding of democracy – a discussion that continues to unfold in the academic world, international media, political dialogues and/or parliamentary confrontations around the world, international organisations and think tanks. Similarly, this book does not seek to promote any particular political stance, although in the interest of disclosure it is relevant to mention at the outset that all of the authors regard liberal, representative democracy as their more or less explicitly expressed ideal, and as the normative basis of their assessments.

The book consists of three parts, the first of which contains this editors' preface, the introduction and a thematic chapter that discusses neoliberal democracy theory. The second part contains several chapters that discuss the crisis of democracy, populism and autocracy, taking their outset in European countries. The chapters in the third part analyse examples of democratic regression and increasing autocratic tendencies in countries outside Europe.

The current state of democracy

In a report from 2019 entitled *Democracy in Retreat*, the American think tank Freedom House notes that from 1988 to 2005 the proportion of countries that could be described as "Not Free", using Freedom House's own well-known definition, fell from 37% to 23%, while the proportion of countries termed "Free"

rose from 36% to 46%. By comparison, in the period 2005–2018, the proportion of “Not Free” countries rose to 26%, while “Free” countries fell to 44%. Freedom House emphasises that this development has taken place even as the power traditionally gathered in Western industrial centres has been challenged by new economic superpowers, particularly China. The report also mentions a notable feature in a new phase of globalisation: extreme wealth concentrated in the hands of very few players, including certain tech giants, whereas low- and medium-income wage earners around the world have experienced no significant improvement, if any at all. In many places around the globe, these phenomena have boosted support for radical political parties on the right and left wings. Freedom House particularly notes the emergence and growth of strong right-wing parties which, partly animated by the ongoing migration crisis, have gained substantial support.¹⁰

This book was written and compiled during a time when a global pandemic, caused by what soon became known as “coronavirus”, went from possible scenario to actual reality. During the spring of 2020 the disease it causes, “COVID-19”, spread to every country in the world, challenging governments and populations. Everywhere, the pandemic became a frightening fact of life, and preventive and remedial national strategies were implemented which, to some degree, reflect the nature of the countries obliged to combat the repercussions of the disease. At the same time it is obvious that a phenomenon as dramatic and all-encompassing as COVID-19 can be used to score political points and consolidate power. China demonstrated the weaknesses and strengths of having a non-democratic regime. The country’s reaction was guarded and slow in coming, but then forceful and potent when it finally took action. Autocratic regimes, such as those in Hungary and Middle Eastern countries, took government-sanctioned initiatives meant to fight the pandemic and, at the same time, suppress political opposition. The necessity of control measures was used to legitimise widespread surveillance and state-of-emergency legislation that is unlikely to be repealed. For instance, opposition groups and parties in countries like Algeria, Iran and Iraq, which have tried to organise demonstrations and protests against their governments, will probably find it harder to revive a protest movement after the “disease-prevention lockdown” in their society has ended – a situation that tends to further reinforce the non-democratic nature of such regimes.¹¹ Other autocracies, such as Russia and Brazil, had difficulty reacting to the crisis, while yet others, including Belarus and Turkmenistan, chose to categorically deny the existence of the virus in their countries.

In several countries, parties and politicians fought harder than usual to present the most convincing arguments for fighting the disease. The rhetoric and metaphors used during the COVID-19 crisis can help us understand the conditions for democracy and development in the countries examined in this book. The Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, was remarkable for his use of a populist two-pronged strategy, the aims of which apparently were to ignore the severity of the pandemic and to consolidate the president’s own power. He pursued these aims, firstly, by making such claims that his background as a trained soldier and athlete would mean he would experience only moderate repercussions if he contracted the disease. Secondly, Bolsonaro alleged that medical science and certain local governors in Brazil, who went against his recommendations and introduced restrictions based on public-health concerns, were conspiring with the country’s political opposition against the Brazilian government.¹² In the United States, the president, Donald Trump, initially denied the pandemic, then placed the blame on China, the Democratic Party, state governors and his own experts, and subsequently supported armed protesters who demonstrated against the recommendations set out by his own government and the US health authorities. He stated both that he bore no responsibility for the many COVID-19 deaths *and* that he was best at fighting the pandemic, while at the same time promoting multiple harmful cures. Bolsonaro and Trump are examples of autocratic leaders who came to power by declaring war on “the system”, and who have continued their battle even after becoming leaders of the system itself.

Even liberal democracies have shown a tendency towards more strongly differing views between the incumbent governments and the political opposition – revolving around the politics of dealing with COVID-19. Spain, one of the countries hit hardest by the pandemic, has been the scene of some fiery political debate, in which three right-wing parties faced the reigning government coalition consisting of the social-democratic party PSOE and the left-wing party Podemos. In one instance, the right wing ran an

extensive media campaign prominently featuring personal attacks on the vice-president, Pablo Iglesias of Podemos, in an attempt to destabilise the Spanish government and, more broadly, to undermine the political unity in a crisis situation.¹³

Put simply, it seems probable that in terms of health, politics and economics, the COVID-19 crisis will have a deep and lasting effect in the years to come. As exemplified above, it is far from certain that a reality now changed in numerous ways will lead to political consensus; perhaps quite the opposite. In cases where the authors of a chapter have found it relevant and meaningful, they have included coronavirus issues in their contribution as yet another significant point in the discussion about the crisis of democracy and new autocracies. One highly probable topic of debate in the coming years is which types of regimes – democratic or non-democratic – are best at handling crises of this nature.

The intention of this book is to give a global snapshot of the current state of democracy – bearing in mind that “democracy” is not only a general form of government with a certain appeal worldwide. It also comes in numerous local variants, each conditioned by a country’s own history and geopolitical location, economy and culture, institutional choices and supranational collaboration, and many other factors. The book does not try to definitively determine whether democracy is in crisis and, if so, which sort of crisis: temporary, or life-threatening? Our interest is, rather, to shed light on the many simultaneous and diverse developments currently going on with democracy worldwide. We may once have thought that there was one model of liberal, representative democracy based on parliaments and parties bound together by an administration governed by the rule of law, a civil society and a capitalist system. However, what we see today is a plurality of democracies. It is that observation that makes this book necessary. It gives a global overview and robust analyses of where we are at present, democracy-wise, and offers near-term perspectives of where current developments will take us in the next few years.

Note 1: The two best-known contributions to the current discussion about the crisis of democracy/new populism or autocratisation may well be David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (London: Profile Books, 2018) and Jan Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution. Liberal Europe in Retreat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Note 2: See Anna Lührmann & Staffan I. Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?” *Democratization* 26 (7) (2019), 1095. Other research contributions with a specific focus include: on economics, David Altman & Anibal Pérez-Liñán, “Explaining the Erosion of Democracy”, *V-Dem Working Paper* 42 (2017); and on institutional aspects, Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”, *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1) (2016). Contributions on the decline of democracy from a general political/political-science perspective include: Anna Lührmann et al., “State of the World 2018: Democracy Facing Global Challenges”, *Democratization* 26 (6) (2019); Michael Coppedge, “Eroding Regimes: What, Where, and When?”, *V-Dem Working Paper*, no. 57 (2017); Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (London: Penguin, 2018); and David Waldner & Ellen Lust, “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding”, *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018).

Note 3: Lührmann & Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?”, 1107–08.

Note 10: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2019. Democracy in Retreat* (Washington D.C.: Freedom House, 2019).

Note 11: Marc Lynch, “The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa”, *POMEPS Studies* 39, April 2020, 4, https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/POMEPS_Studies_39_Web.pdf.

Note 12: Thomas Milz, “Coronavirus: Brazil headed for catastrophe”, *Deutsche Welle*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-brazil-headed-for-catastrophe/a-53502907>.

Note 13: Eleanor Rosenbach, “Coronavirus, fake news, and the future of the Spanish left”, *Open Democracy*, 21 April 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/coronavirus-fake-news-and-future-spanish-left/>.