CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Democracy without Illusions (1997)

From Revolution to Retrenchment

THOUGH OFTEN OVERSOLD, the trend toward democratic government that began in southern Europe in the mid-1970s, swept through Latin America in the 1980s, and spread to many parts of Asia, the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s has been an important phenomenon. Together with the demise of Soviet-sponsored communism and the globalization of the international economic system, it propelled the world from the postwar period into a new era. The spread of democracy has by no means eradicated political repression or conflict, but it has tremendously increased the number of people who enjoy at least some freedom and fostered hope that the next century might be less fraught with political rivalry and destruction than the present one.

In the last several years, however, what enthusiasts at the start of the decade were calling "the worldwide democratic revolution" has cooled considerably. The headlines announcing that country after country was shrugging off dictatorial rule and embarking on a democratic path have given way to an intermittent but rising stream of troubling reports: a coup in Gambia, civil strife in the Central African Republic, flawed elections in Albania, a deposed government in Pakistan, returning authoritarianism in Zambia, the shedding of democratic forms in Kazakhstan, sabotaged elections in Armenia, eroding human rights in Cambodia. There is still sometimes good news on the democracy front, such as

Boris Yeltsin's defeat of the Russian communists last summer, but a countermovement of stagnation and retrenchment is evident.

Given the relevance of democracy's fortunes to the state of international relations, the new countermovement raises significant questions, starting with the basic one of whether it is only a scattering of predictable cases of backsliding or instead presages a major reverse trend. Furthermore, the rise of retrenchment prompts inquiry into where it is taking countries in which it is occurring, whether it signals the emergence of a new contender to the liberal democratic model, and what it says about when and why democracy succeeds.

Retrenchment also poses serious questions for U.S. policy. As democratization advanced around the globe in the 1980s and early 1990s, successive U.S. administrations increasingly emphasized support for democracy as a foreign policy goal. The tendency reached its zenith—rhetorically, at least—when the Clinton administration proclaimed the promotion of democracy "the successor to a doctrine of containment." It is thus imperative to ask whether retrenchment signals a failure of U.S. policies on democracy promotion and what it may mean for U.S. foreign policy in the years ahead.

Retrenchment's Reach

Democratic stagnation and retrenchment have been most pronounced in the former Soviet Union, Africa, and the Middle East. Several former Soviet republics have made genuine democratic progress since the USSR's dissolution in 1991, but in the rest of the fifteen, pluralism was stillborn or is losing ground. The 1996 Russian presidential elections were a milestone, yet political life in Russia is still only very partially democratic and not especially stable. The dominant ideology is a form of state nationalism in which elements of pluralism mix uneasily with authoritarian structures and impulses carried over from the communist era. The Baltic states have established working democratic systems, and Ukraine and Moldova are at least holding on to a certain degree of pluralism and openness in politics.

Elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, Belarus has quietly sunk into dictatorship. The Central Asian states are a dispiriting collection of politically retrograde entities. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan are under absolutist rule, with Tajikistan still wracked by civil strife. President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan has punctured his promises of democracy with a march toward strongman rule over the last two years, capped by his replacement of presidential elections with a referendum on his continued rule. Even President Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan, the darling of Western donors for his initial reforming path, is showing incipient authoritarian tendencies, evident in the problematic

parliamentary and presidential elections of 1995. Hopes for democracy in the Transcaucasus have faded, with both Armenia and Azerbaijan holding seriously flawed elections in the last two years. Pluralism is surviving in Georgia, but political stability seems to depend almost exclusively on one man, Eduard Shevardnadze.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the surge away from one-party regimes toward democracy has fragmented. Democratization is still advancing, or at least has not been reversed, in some nations, including not only South Africa but Mali, Malawi, Namibia, and Benin. At the same time, many of the more than 30 countries that experienced political openings early in the decade have gone seriously off course. Some have descended into civil conflict, and in Rwanda and Burundi, the violence has been horrifying. Coups have halted liberalization in Nigeria, Gambia, and Niger. Elsewhere, in Cameroon, Gabon, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Togo, entrenched strongmen have manipulated or co-opted supposedly transitional elections so as to reconsolidate their power. Fraud, severe administrative disorder, or a lack of permitted opposition parties have marred many elections, as in Côte d'Ivoire, Tanzania, and Kenya. Even where legitimate balloting has taken place, some of the newly elected leaders have disappointed, like President Frederick Chiluba of Zambia, who has returned to the authoritarian habits of his predecessors. On the whole, sub-Saharan Africa is more pluralistic today than it was ten years ago, and democracy may well take root in a number of African countries. The hopes for a continentwide shift to democracy, however, have not been fulfilled.

The Middle East, the world's least democratic region, felt a liberalizing breeze in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Various governments undertook cautious, gradual political openings in response both to popular discontent generated by worsening economic woes and to democratic change worldwide. In Morocco and Jordan, the openings have slowly advanced and a certain space for pluralism has been created, although in both countries constitutional monarchs retain the bulk of power. Other states have suffered serious setbacks or stagnation. The transition to democracy in Algeria, once held out as a model for Arab countries, was abruptly derailed in 1992 by a military takeover after Islamist victories in national elections and has since degenerated into a vicious civil war. Yemen's surprising experiment with democratization in the early 1990s, undertaken as part of the unification of the previously separate states of North and South Yemen, collapsed in 1994 when the south tried to secede and civil war flared. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak has resisted rising internal pressure for political reform and left many wondering if he can navigate the country through increasingly polarized waters. Around the region, deeply entrenched conservative elites fearful of Islamic fundamentalists have largely choked off nascent liberalization.

In Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia, the democratic trend has fared better but the picture is still very mixed. Democracy has advanced considerably in Central and Eastern Europe. Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, in particular, have taken huge strides. Romania has also made progress, including the surprising opposition sweep in the November national elections, although its slower and more uneven change reflects its relatively more oppressive rule before 1989. Bulgaria, Albania, and Slovakia enjoy some openness and pluralism, but their political paths are tortuous. Bulgaria has suffered from political and economic ineptitude in all its major factions. Albanian President Sali Berisha and Slovakian Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar have only limited tolerance for opposition and flirt with autocracy. "Retrenchment" is an inadequate word for the political and human horrors that have ravaged the former Yugoslavia since 1991. Dictatorial regimes in Serbia and Croatia dominate the area, and the prospects for peaceful pluralism in Bosnia remain extremely shaky in spite of internationally supervised national elections in September.

To the surprise of many observers, Latin America has experienced few outright reversals among the more than a dozen transitions to elected, civilian government that occurred in the 1980s. Haiti suffered a coup in 1991, but U.S. military intervention overturned the regime and reinstalled the elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Peru experienced a setback in 1992 with President Alberto Fujimori's temporary suspension of democratic rule in an *autogolpe*, and the country remains in a gray area between dictatorship and democracy. Guatemala, Venezuela, and Paraguay have all had close brushes in recent years with military coups, but elected governments are still in place.

The question for Latin America is not whether democracy can be maintained in form but whether it can be achieved in substance. In a few countries, primarily ones with some democratic tradition, such as Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay, it is possible to speak of the consolidation of democracy. In most of the region, however, severe deficiencies mark political life—weak capacity and performance of government institutions, widespread corruption, irregular and often arbitrary rule of law, poorly developed patterns of representation and participation, and large numbers of marginalized citizens.

The recent progress of Asia's far from all-encompassing but nonetheless notable democratic trend has been as various as the trend's original causes and manifestations. Taiwan and South Korea remain examples of relatively successful democratic transitions following from successful economic transformations. Democratization in the Philippines, Thailand, and Mongolia is holding steady or even advancing on some counts, in spite of serious corruption in the former two countries and the burdensome legacy of Soviet rule in the latter.

Asia's other recent experiments with political liberalization or democratization are question marks. Political life in Cambodia has deteriorated sharply since the United Nations–sponsored 1993 elections, with widespread human rights abuses and large-scale government corruption. Political tensions are high in Pakistan following the ouster of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in November amid charges of corruption and abuse of power. Bangladesh seemed headed for a return to military rule early last year but held legitimate elections in June and for the time being continues with an elected government. Casting its shadow over democracy's prospects throughout Asia is China, the first Asian case of backtracking from the liberalization of the late 1980s.

Strongmen in New Clothing

Democratization's stall is serious but not fatal. It is significant enough that pessimists can claim it proves the fragility of democracy, the rise of political chaos, and the imperfectibility of humanity. However, it is sufficiently limited that optimists can say it is merely an expected "market correction" that does not undermine the longer-term global movement toward democracy. Democratic stagnation and retrenchment are likely to continue in many countries but without broadening to such a degree as to settle the debate between pessimists and optimists—a debate, in any case, rooted as much in clashing political faiths as empirical realities.

Although the new countermovement away from democracy is still emerging, its impact clearly varies by region. Stagnation and retrenchment have been only moderate in regions with relatively strong historical sociopolitical ties to the Western industrialized democracies—Latin America, Central Europe, and the Baltic states—and in East Asia, the one region of the developing world that has enjoyed sustained economic growth. But the toll has been heavy elsewhere—the former Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and southeastern Europe. What appeared to many enthusiasts a few years back to be a grand unifying movement may, at least over the next several decades, heighten the political divide between the Western world (including Latin America, Eastern Europe, and parts of the former Soviet Union) and the non-Western one. This is not a prophecy of a clash of civilizations but a warning against facile universalism.

Despite the diversity of the countries in which democracy has stagnated or been rolled back, most have ended up in a similar state—not with full-fledged dictatorships but with a particular style of semi-authoritarian regime. Their leaders act on authoritarian instincts and habits, usually developed during a lifetime under dictatorship. Yet in recent years they have been exposed to the heady

international side of democratic transitions—the visits of senior officials from powerful countries and prestigious multilateral organizations, the expanded flows of aid and investment, and the favorable stories in the Western press. They come to crave the attention, approval, and money that they know democracy attracts from the Western international community. As a result, their rule becomes a balancing act in which they impose enough repression to keep their opponents weak and maintain their own power while adhering to enough democratic formalities that they might just pass themselves off as democrats.

In this ambiguous climate, opposition groups have some latitude but little real strength, newspapers and radio offer independent voices but television is state-dominated, trade unions are permitted but the government co-opts them, elections are plausible but preceded by campaigns in which incumbents enjoy huge advantages of resources and media time, the legislature contains heterogeneous forces but possesses minimal authority, and the judiciary operates with some independence at the local level but is politically controlled at the top. The many new semi-authoritarian regimes are often highly personalistic, although the leaders draw their power from entrenched economic and political structures. The regimes usually depend on their militaries or internal security forces to ensure political stability but are not military regimes per se. The leaders rarely articulate much in the way of conservative or liberal ideology, relying on opportunistic nationalism and populism to sway the people.

In some countries, particularly in Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, strongmen have given up the pretense of presenting themselves to the world as democrats and claim to be practicing Asian-style "soft authoritarianism" a la Singapore or Malaysia. A strong hand is necessary for national development, they insist, and democracy can come only after development. This line is often popular, at least at first, in countries where flailing pluralistic governments and the increased crime, corruption, and poverty that frequently follow political openings have left citizens disillusioned. The Singapore model also has appeal among Western advisers and observers, many of whom wonder whether developing countries are "ready for democracy" and believe, without admitting to it, that a strong hand is just what is needed.

Few if any of the many newly established or reestablished semi-authoritarian regimes, however, bear much resemblance to the soft authoritarian governments of Asia. Rather than building up meritocratic civil services, the new semi-authoritarians usually indulge in rampant patronage. Rather than investing heavily in education and trying to minimize inequality, they fritter away scarce revenues on pet projects of dubious value and allow elites to increase their already disproportionate share of the national wealth. In place of discipline and seriousness of national purpose they offer disguised improvisation and pompous

rhetoric. In the end, arguments for development before democracy are little more than attempted cover for the dictatorial ambitions of autocrats like Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan and Henri Konan-Bédié of Côte d'Ivoire.

The emptiness of their pretensions underlines the fact that no positive alternative to democracy has yet emerged in the post–Cold War world. Soft authoritarianism is still practiced in only a handful of states. Democratic retrenchment is not the consequence of the spreading allure of Asian-style authoritarianism or of any newer competitor to democracy; it offers only variations on old, unproductive patterns of authoritarianism.

Boom and Bust

With its startling pace and unexpected breadth, the democratic trend of the 1980s and early 1990s seemed to sweep away decades of research on how democracy develops. Democratic transitions popped up in the most unexpected places, apparently depending on remarkably little—not the political history or culture of a country, literacy levels, the existence of a middle class, or the level or distribution of wealth. So long as the elites in a country embraced the democratic ideal—something elites everywhere seemed to be doing—democracy would spring into being. In the space of a few years, democracy appeared to go from the political equivalent of an arcane religious faith, attainable only after laborious study, to a pop religion spread through televangelism and mass baptisms.

At the enthusiasm's height, Western observers proclaimed every country attempting a political opening, no matter how partial, "in transition to democracy." Stagnation and retrenchment have brought them back to earth. Above all, the backsliding makes clear how difficult democracy is to achieve. The leading cause in many instances is as straightforward as it is inescapable: Elites are able to reconsolidate their rule after a political opening because of the political and economic resources they command and the weakness of fledgling opposition forces.

In some societies, especially in Central Europe and South America, openings involved real shifts in the basic configuration of power following delegitimation of old structures or mass popular mobilization. Yet in many cases the openings were highly controlled and top-down, reflecting ruling elites' desire to relieve rising pressure for change or to impress Western governments rather than a commitment to cede significant authority. Breaking down the entrenched antidemocratic power structures common around the world and preventing new leaders from falling into bad old habits have proved perplexing tasks.

Recent events highlight the folly of ignoring the broad set of social, political, and economic factors bearing on democratization. There is certainly no list

of absolute preconditions for democracy. Yet neither are all countries equally likely to manage to establish a pluralistic, open political life in the next several decades. Per capita income at least in the middle range helps. So does past experience with multiparty politics and other democratic practices. Finally, being part of a region that looks to the Western industrialized countries for social and political models or that seeks integration with the West aids countries embarked on a democratic experiment. No country's culture, history, or economic circumstances bar it from democracy. Poor nations far from Western influence and with no history of political pluralism or openness may well succeed in making themselves democratic. But relatively affluent countries that have had some experience with political liberalization and that identify closely with the West will have a much better chance.

The political strains that market reform has created are a factor that one might expect to provoke democratic stagnation and retrenchment. When in the late 1980s and early 1990s many countries began to implement economic and political liberalization programs simultaneously, a large group of observers, particularly critics of the "Washington consensus" on market reform, questioned the feasibility of the undertaking. They pointed to the numerous short-term pressures that economic liberalization programs typically generate—heightened unemployment, rising prices for basic foodstuffs and other previously subsidized goods, and increases in poverty and inequality—and asked whether fragile newly elected governments would be able to cope.

Such strains are apparent in almost every society that has implemented market reforms, and they will unquestionably make the consolidation of democracy that much more complicated. They do not, however, appear to have been a major cause of the political backtracking of the last several years. Backsliding has not been concentrated in countries undergoing economic liberalization. If anything, serious market reform programs are more common in regions where democratization is generally not retreating—Central Europe, the Baltic states, South America, and East Asia—than in ones where it is. Moreover, in countries in which retrenchment has coincided with attempted market transitions, like Zambia, Albania, and Slovakia, it has been mainly a matter of rulers indulging their authoritarian tendencies, not of rising popular pressures overwhelming weak democratic institutions.

Modest Contributions

During the first Clinton administration, the president and his top foreign policy aides held out democratic "enlargement" as a guiding principle of their foreign policy. The experience of those years with respect to democracy around the world, however, was as much contraction as enlargement. This uncomfortable

fact was absent from administration talk about foreign policy. Officials repeatedly hailed a few prominent examples of democratic progress—Haiti, Russia, and South Africa—and all but ignored the many cases of stagnation and retrenchment.

Some, seeing the political backsliding as a yardstick of failure, may be tempted to blame the Clinton administration for democracy's problems abroad. Such a view, however, relies on the same flawed assumption that has underlain Clinton dogma—that U.S. policy is significantly responsible for democracy's advance or retreat in the world. In fact, only in a very limited number of cases is the United States able to mobilize sufficient economic and political resources to have a major impact on the political course of other countries. The Clinton administration, like the Bush administration before it, has played a reasonably active supporting role for the cause of democracy beyond U.S. borders. In many countries, Washington's diplomatic encouragement and material aid to democratic reformers have made a modest contribution to democratic progress. In a few countries, the United States' role has even been quite significant. American support for Boris Yeltsin since 1991 has helped him survive politically and thus helped Russia keep to the path of reform, although the Clinton administration let Yeltsin off too easy on Moscow's war in Chechnya. U.S. diplomatic and economic support for reformers in Ukraine has bolstered that country's shaky efforts to achieve democracy and capitalism. Although triggered more by politics at home than a desire to promote democracy abroad, the U.S. intervention in Haiti made pluralism possible there. Clinton administration opposition to attempted military coups in Latin America, such as those in Guatemala and Paraguay, has helped discourage democratic reversals in that region.

At the same time, the U.S. government could have done more for democracy in some countries without sacrificing countervailing interests. In Bosnia last year, the administration failed to enforce the provisions of the 1995 Dayton agreement strongly enough to ensure free and fair elections. U.S. policy toward Croatia and Serbia has not sufficiently emphasized the importance of pluralism for long-term peace in the Balkans. It appears the administration will allow President Levon Ter-Petrosian of Armenia to get away with his sabotage of the recent presidential elections and continue reaping the political benefits of being a leading recipient of U.S. aid. In Kazakhstan, the U.S. government talked a great deal in the early 1990s about promoting democracy but raised few protests when President Nazarbayev began dispensing with democratic niceties. And in Albania, the administration failed to anticipate and was slow to react to President Sali Berisha's undermining of parliamentary elections last May.

Clinton's critics, with some cause, long for greater muscularity and decisiveness in foreign policy. But even if renewed along those lines, U.S. policy

will not change the basic course of events in Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Chad, Uzbekistan, or most of the other countries in which political openings or transitions have been troubled or truncated. Moreover, the pattern of much of the recent democratic slippage makes a productive response more difficult. In most cases there has been no sharp, highly visible break, such as a military coup, to attract outsiders' attention and spur interested countries to action. Instead, there have been intermittent negative signals of varying severity and clarity: a problematic but not openly fraudulent election, sporadic harassment of outspoken journalists, increasing reports of government corruption and arbitrary behavior, the dismissal of moderate reformers from the cabinet.

Countries where such patterns are unfolding make poor targets for campaigns of foreign pressure based on economic sanctions or the withholding of foreign aid. Western donors have difficulty agreeing on such campaigns even in drastic circumstances; they are highly unlikely to do so in response to partial political backsliding. Nor does the specter of greater economic hardship for the masses move most budding authoritarians faced with relinquishing any of their power; they and their biggest supporters are usually the last to suffer. Aid conditionality has worked best when focused on a single major goal, as when donors in 1992 pressured then-President H. Kamuzu Banda to hold a national referendum on Malawi's future political structure. Such goals are hard to pinpoint in the gradual slide that has characterized recent retrenchments.

Assistance programs specifically designed to strengthen democratic processes and institutions have also proved to be a problematic response to retrenchment. Democracy-related assistance, which has become a valuable component of the foreign aid of the United States and many other Western democracies over the last ten years, can help countries that are moving toward democracy make more rapid, effective transitions. But when the host government is not genuinely committed to reform, such aid is undermined. It may keep besieged opposition groups and civic organizations alive but cannot be expected to change the overall direction of politics. In many retrenching countries, the United States and other Western donors have closed down most of their democracy-related programs because of legitimate concerns about wasting funds, legitimating the illegitimate, or being associated with a failure.

Revisiting Interests

Rising democratic stagnation and retrenchment forces the U.S. government to reexamine questions not only of how much the United States can actually

foster democracy abroad but of how strong its interests in the matter actually are. The Clinton administration implies that America has a blanket interest in the promotion of democracy abroad, but such a policy line runs up against increasingly harsh realities these days.

During the Cold War, Washington frequently subordinated its interest in democracy and human rights abroad to the dominant goal of opposing communism. As the Cold War ended, the attractive idea gained ground in the policy community that U.S. moral and pragmatic interests abroad were fusing; thus the promotion of democracy would now complement rather than conflict with national economic and security interests. Washington still had relationships with so-called friendly tyrants, as in the Persian Gulf states, but these seemed to be a holdover and generally on the decline. In some regions, a convergence of U.S. policy interests is indeed occurring. With regard to Latin America, for example, nearly all arms of the U.S. government, with the possible exception of unreconstructed elements in the intelligence agencies, now accept that democratic governments are more favorable than repressive military leaders for U.S. economic, security, and political interests alike.

Yet the rise in retrenchment makes clear that tradeoffs between U.S. ideals and interests abroad are not fading away and may even be multiplying. Since the 1993 coup in Nigeria, the Clinton administration has shied away from pushing democracy there, mindful that Nigeria is a major supplier of oil to the United States and that a unilateral U.S. embargo on Nigerian oil would end up benefiting European oil companies and causing little economic harm to Nigeria. The muted response to Kazakhstan's move toward authoritarianism reflects recognition of President Nazarbayev's cooperation in making his country nuclear-weapons-free and his support for enormous private American investments in the Kazakh oilfields. In Croatia, the administration raises little fuss about President Franjo Tudjman's repressive ways, at least in part because he has backed U.S. policy on Bosnia. In some countries, moreover, U.S. policy makers fear that pushing for democracy entails unacceptable risks for the inhabitants. The violence in Rwanda and Burundi shows how catastrophically wrong political openings can go in ethnically driven societies.

In some cases, and especially with the last group, subordinating the desire for democracy is a reasonable decision given the nature of the other interests at stake. In other cases, however, such as in the Balkans and parts of the former Soviet Union, the U.S. government shows signs of slipping back into favoring friendly tyrants for the wrong reasons—because they appear to be men of action, because they are willing to do its bidding, and because they are good at flattering high-level visitors.

Down to Earth

Recent events do not negate the fact that in this century the world has experienced a broad trend toward democracy, of which the upswing of the last twenty years is a crucial part. The current retrenchment is not a widespread reversal of the overall democratic trend, nor does it announce some rising contender to the liberal democratic model. Nonetheless, the reality of retrenchment is stripping away the illusions that have surrounded the pro-democratic enterprise of recent years. It has exposed the chimera of instantaneous democracy, revealing the difficulties and the significant chance of failure in democratic transitions. Similarly, although there is no fixed set of preconditions and democracy is certainly not an exclusively Western province, the pattern of retrenchment shows that factors such as the level of affluence, experience with pluralism, and the degree of Western sociopolitical influence are relevant to democracy's prospects in a particular society. Finally, retrenchment has undermined the seductive idea that the spread of democracy will rapidly efface basic political differences between established Western democracies and governments in non-Western regions. Democratization will not be an end-of-the-century global deliverance from the strife, repression, and venality that afflict political life in so many parts of the world.

The new political tide does not mean that democracy promotion will cease to be an important part of a post–Cold War U.S. foreign policy. U.S. ideals and interests abroad often converge around democracy, and the United States is a much more credible advocate for democracy now that it is not engaged in the superpower rivalry. Yet retrenchment is a sobering tonic for U.S. policy makers and pundits who made overreaching claims for America's influence on the political direction of other countries. The shedding of illusions is painful but potentially beneficial. It may help the second Clinton administration bring its rhetoric into line with reality on this front and drop the unproductive quest to unify U.S. foreign policy around a single sweeping idea. The debates of recent years over a new organizing concept that can fill the void left by containment's demise must give way to the recognition that only a course marked by steady presidential engagement, serious strategic focus, and substantial resource commitments can produce a foreign policy that commands Americans' support and the world's respect.

Note

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