

Is Democracy Growing or Dying? Transformations Over the Past Half a Century

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Author Bio

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Abstract

The issue of whether democracy continues to grow is a contentious matter that deserves considerable attention to unearth the facts. The existing literature reveals how various components have fostered democracy levels over the past fifty years. Specifically, the United Nations (UN) regulations, which have a global effect, serve crucial functions in bolstering democracy. In Arabic countries, the Arab Spring offered a chance to express dissatisfaction with an authoritative approach to political leadership. However, evidence suggests that democracy growth remains relatively constant, and the rate of advancement does not reflect current needs and problems. There are concerns that the number of countries embracing authoritative approaches is increasing, a transformation that could thwart the steps achieved over the past fifty years. Existing global constraints, encompassing health crises and political wars, are major threats to democracy, and their effects are already evident in some countries. Adopting robust interventions would ensure that democracy prevails and nations enjoy its benefits.

Keywords: United Nations; democracy; human rights; political; countries; citizens; governance; Arab Spring; century.

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Democracy generally refers to the rule by the people. The system allows people to choose their leaders in free and fair elections (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2022). Other descriptions transcend this meaning. For instance, some thinkers perceive democracy as citizens having added individual rights and freedoms and receiving state protection (Herre et al., 2023). Often, democracy offers citizens the power to make impactful choices over their lives and permits them to hold their leaders answerable (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2022). This approach to governance has other gains too, including democratic nations tending to enjoy better governance than those that use autocratic forms, seeming to grow rapidly, and encouraging peaceful relations between and within them (Herre et al., 2023). Today, many nations, comprising leaders and citizens, acknowledge the significance of a democratic approach.

They are fast adopting measures and structures that permit them to align with the ideology. Besides, countries have progressively adopted international frameworks calling for democracy, a transformation that continues to bolster democratic thoughts and practices. However, that does not imply that all countries ascribe to this ideology, considering that some territories continue to deploy alternative political administrative frameworks. Besides, actions in recent years threaten progress achieved over the past five decades and raise questions as to whether global democracy will continue to improve or experience evident challenges. While democracy has become more rampant over the past half a century, trends over the past decade point to a decreasing pattern, which calls for effective intervention considering the gains associated with this political approach on socioeconomic aspects.

Background Information

Many more nations have become democracies over the past two centuries. Evidence by Regimes of the World (RoW) shows how, throughout the 18th century, no country identified fully as a democracy (Herre et al., 2023). For RoW, nearly all nations during

this period were closed autocracies in which people lacked the right to elect political leaders via elections (Herre et al., 2023). In the 19th century, elections became rampant but often experienced considerable challenges. Many nations during this time turned into electoral autocracies, in which political leaders ascended to power through elections. Nonetheless, citizens had little influence in making these polls impartial and free of bias (Herre et al., 2023). Only a few nations during the nineteenth century conducted credible elections that qualified them as democratic nations. Fewer countries granted their citizens additional minority and personal liberties, qualifying them as liberal democracies. Liberal and electoral democracy spread to more countries in the twentieth century (Herre et al., 2023). It became a rampant political structure globally by the end of this period and was applicable across all world regions. Today, the world nearly evenly falls between democracies and autocracies (Herre et al., 2023). A substantial portion of non-democracies have transformed into electoral autocracies. At least a third of all democracies provide citizens additional minority and individual rights and allow courts to make rulings independently, which are vital features of liberal democracies. Nevertheless, a thorough view of how democracy has evolved over the past half a century requires an in-depth analysis of various critical influential factors.

Advancements over the Past Half a Century

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, more nations and people attained democratic political rights. In the late 1960s and 70s, nearly 230 million people – largely in Western Europe – experienced liberal democracies in their countries (Herre, 2021). About 239 million people lived in electoral democracies in North America and Western European countries (Herre, 2021). This number steadily increased over the years that followed, and by the end of the 1990s, approximately three billion people worldwide were living in liberal and electoral democracies (Herre, 2021). The broadening of constitutional rights accelerated at the turn of the twenty-first century. Data by Herre (2021) shows that the expansion of democratic political rights became increasingly evident during the initial years of the 21st century. By 2016, Herre (2021) informs that more than 2.7 billion people resided in nations that identify as electoral democracies worldwide. The majority of individuals originate from densely populated countries like Nigeria, Indonesia, and India (Herre, 2021). Another one billion individuals lived in entirely liberal

democracies in 2016, including Kenya, the United States, and South Korea. Nevertheless, only one nation, the People's Republic of China, with more than 1.7 billion nationals, still adheres to closed autocracy (Herre, 2021). The overview suggests that democracy has progressed over the past half a century, depicting this political system's strengths compared to autocratic forms.

Further indications reaffirm that democracy is growing, and nations and their people increasingly accept this political governance as inclusive and non-discriminative. Despite existing constraints, Africa remains unshaken in the face of uncertainty. Nations such as Zambia, Niger, and Gambia continue to make steady strides in fostering democracy (Sawaneh, 2023; The Global, 2022). Addressing problems emanating from constrained civic space, interventions in various countries provide opportunities to restructure social contracts, although outcomes differ based on countries (The Global, 2022). In West Asia, more than 12 years after a series of uprisings across the region, protests, and movements continue to emerge because of government failures to provide necessary services and bolster economic opportunities (Ashwarya & Alam, 2019). As a reaction, disappointed and disillusioned citizens, especially the youth, mobilize resources to advocate for their rights, address their political awareness, and essential function as promoters of change and enhanced leadership (The Global, 2022). These indications portray how much democracy is growing and suggest that the trend might persist if leaders and their followers embrace practices and attitudes that support this form of governance.

Contributions by the UN

A series of events and interventions have bolstered democracy expansion across the globe. Adopting a system of human rights promotion and protection provided by the UN's dual structure served vital roles in bolstering democracy over the past five decades. These include the UN Charter established in 1945 and a series of conventions ultimately adopted by UN affiliates (United Nations, 2023). All 192 UN members follow the Charter-based structure, while only those affiliates that have accepted or ratified certain treaties must follow that segment of the conventional system to which they explicitly accept (Viljoen, 2019). Article 68 of the UN Charter

prompted the formation of the Commission on Human Rights by the UN Economic and Social Council. The Commission's greatest achievement was the formation of three guidelines that shaped human rights protection and democracy internationally. These included the Declaration of Human Rights, which became influential in 1948, ICESCR, and the ICCPR, both introduced in 1966 (United Nations, 2023). During adopting the guidelines ratified in 1966, it became evident that the initial intention of adjusting the Universal Declaration into one unifying tool was unsuccessful, chiefly due to an absence of concurrence on the justiciability of socioeconomic rights and freedoms. The formation of the 1235 and 1503 guidelines for reporting violations of democratic procedures and individual rights in 1959 and 1970, respectively, improved the country's compliance with stipulated guidelines (Viljoen, 2019). Both provisions only addressed matters of adverse human rights violations. As a component of its treaty-based structure, the UN promoted the ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1965, which, along with the ICESCR and the ICCPR, elevated its emphasis on safeguarding minority groups (Viljoen 2019). Such interventions by the UN served vital functions in bolstering democracy throughout the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and at the start of the 21st century (Viljoen, 2019). Therefore, relentless calls by the UN to embrace democracy have served integral roles in promoting growth over the years.

The UN has played several other roles in fostering democracy in the past fifty years through its regulations and interventions that have a global effect. The United Nations fosters democratic governance by advancing human rights, safety, prosperity, and tranquillity (Democracy, 2023). In the more than half a century since the ratification of the UN Charter, the organization has done more to advance and improve democratic governance than any other global body. The establishment encourages sound and appropriate administration, supervises voting, boosts civil society to strengthen transparency and the operations of democratic authorities, assists in the creation of constitutions following conflicts, and supports autonomy in liberated states (Democracy, 2023). The international organization has initiated various programs and institutions to facilitate and exemplify its agenda for democracy. These include the United Nations Democracy Fund and the Office of the High

Commissioner for Human Rights, which promotes civil society initiatives globally to safeguard human rights and democratic processes and champions for and counter violations of such rights, respectively (Texts, 2024). Since 1988, the UN General Assembly has continuously adopted at least a yearly resolution highlighting certain components of democracy (Democracy, 2023). In 2015, heads of state reiterated their commitment to accomplishing the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which pushes for an international community where respect for the rule of law, supportive administrations, good governance, and democratic systems all play a role in a sustainable future. In 2012, the UN Human Rights Council accepted the Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law decision, which emphasized that basic liberties, reverence for human rights, and freedom are complementary and interdependent (Democracy, 2023). This illustration highlights how the UN has played instrumental roles in advancing democracy over the past half a century.

Further analysis of the UN's contribution to democratic growth and stability reveals how the international organization serves instrumental purposes in this particular aspect. The body fulfills this role by identifying threats to democracy and suggesting how to address them. Specifically, the UN points out significant concerns such as poor governance, weak institutions, and democracy deficits that it considers some of the major impediments (Democracy, 2023). Identifying such issues makes it possible for countries to exercise caution and deploy interventions that would create a chance to meet targeted desires. Moreover, this information enables nations that intend to foster and safeguard their levels of democracy to enact adequate measures to prevent such complications from making it difficult to head in the right direction (Democracy, 2023). To counter these issues, the body has assigned the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) power to alleviate the situation. In nations emerging from war and transitional democracies, OHCHR helps foster a solid and autonomous judiciary structure, human rights institutions, robust and independent civil societies, and parliaments (Democracy, 2023). UNDP, on its part, assists governments in bolstering their public institutions, improving the capacity to suppress graft, and encouraging inclusive indulgence to ensure that no one remains behind (Democracy, 2023). Each year, UNDP commits, on average, \$650 million to promote

inclusive development and governance locally (Democracy, 2023). This illustration emphasizes the fundamental roles the UN serves in cementing democracy globally.

However, the UN faces specific challenges that limit its ability to reinforce democracy in certain parts of the world. A key issue is that the international body lacks a mandate over certain countries, thereby creating room to indulge in acts that counter democracy without disapproval. For instance, the global organization does not have control over Taiwan, Western Sahara countries, and Kosovo (Countries Not, 2024), which seem democratic based on existing constitutions but sometimes experience instances that contravene democratic principles. Another challenge that threatens ability to respond to situations involving conflict is the lack of its own military or police force (Does the, n.d.). The UN initially planned to include a military unit in the Security Council, but this goal remains on paper until now. This forces it to rely on Member States to contribute police and military personnel needed for every operation. When a breach of democracy through violence exists, and the UN has to play a peacekeeping role, security forces wear their countries' uniforms and are only identifiable by a blue UN beret or helmet and a badge (Does the, n.d.). The UN must overcome such impediments if it aspires to have a more significant effect on building democracy.

Attempts to build democracy would face a significant setback in the absence of the UN or if it were not in existence. It would be difficult to achieve sustained peace without the international organization that promotes and safeguards human rights (Can You, 2022). Besides, democracy would dwindle immensely, inequality would prevail, and people would lack an opportunity to express their views and opinions freely (Can You, 2022). Therefore, the UN's existence is a solid pillar to enhancing democracy, and its absence would be a significant disadvantage to efforts to promote freedom and liberty, which are likely to experience considerable threats. The essential roles the UN plays in supporting democracy should compel Member States to help this international organization achieve its mission and vision.

The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring that started in Tunisia was critical in fostering democracy, especially in the Arab world. This consisted of a wave of rebellions against the government, marches, and insurrections that swept across several Arabic-speaking nations in the 2010s. The upheaval commenced in Tunisia due to economic stagnation and corrupt state practices. The revolts and rebellions moved from North Africa to other states, including Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen (Al-Tamimi & Venkatesha, 2020). Several leaders who appeared dictatorial in their approach lost their seats, including Muammar Gaddafi, Zine Ben Ali, and Hosni Mubarak of Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt, respectively, who all lost their presidencies in 2011 following escalated revolts (Al Shammari et al., 2023). For Ali Saleh of Yemen, aggravating protests led him to evacuate his seat in 2012. Major social violence and uprisings emerged in Sudan, Morocco, Jordan, Oman, and Iraq, encompassing insurgencies and civil unrest (Al-Tamimi & Venkatesha, 2020). Nations such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, and Djibouti experienced minor upheavals (Al Shammari et al., 2023). Hence, a revolt that began in Tunisia with an urge to topple a regime that many perceived as undemocratic became an influential push for change across the entire Arab world.

The first surge of protests and revolutions subdued by mid-2012 following a harsh response to demonstrations by authorities. Militaries, counterdemonstrators, and pro-government agencies were active groups in suppressing revolts (Al Shammari et al., 2023). In some instances, protesting groups responded violently, which prompted escalated conflicts. For instance, in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant emerged during this time and caused much havoc and unrest ((Al-Tamimi & Venkatesha, 2020). Countries such as Syria and Yemen experienced civil wars following a series of social and economic crises that occurred during that time (Al Shammari et al., 2023). The countries most affected during this period experienced regime change, including those that lacked well-established hereditary succession structures and adequate oil reserves.

Some scholars refer to the subsequent and continuing turmoil as the Arab Winter. Only pleas for democracy and the abolition of other unlawful

acts in Tunisia brought about a legitimate democratic government in 2018 (Salisbury, 2024). Recent chaos in Algeria and Sudan demonstrates that the backdrops that triggered the Arab Spring have not subsided, and political opposition to exploitation and dictatorship is still underway (Al Shammari et al., 2023). Beginning at the end of 2018, several marches and rebellions have occurred in Egypt and Sudan, which appear to be the long-term consequences of the Arab Spring. Numerous conflicts persisted as of 2021, which had evident connections with the Arab Spring (Salisbury, 2024). A particular place that continues to feel the effects of the opposition against bad political leadership that commenced in Tunisia is Yemen, where civil unrest continues to influence the country negatively. The scenario is similar in Lebanon, in which a financial meltdown jeopardizes both the country's and its neighbors' economies, particularly Syria's (Salisbury, 2024). The description reaffirms that while the Arab Spring emerged more than a decade ago its effects are still evident.

Recent Trends

While democracy has become rampant and increasingly influential over the past half a century, indications suggest that this political governance is losing prominence. Indication reveals that by the time 2022 ended, the world was stuck due to pressures from old and emerging problems (Matlosa, 2023). Furthermore, indications point to myriad causes of economic and political challenges, encompassing the increasing prices of energy and food, impeding recessions, and escalating inflation (Matlosa, 2023). These occurrences happen in the wavering context of persistent climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian attack on Ukraine, relentless unaddressed imbalance, and dropping living standards (The Global, 2022). Today, inter-state conflicts have heightened, encompassing the threat of nuclear attacks, and assumptions that countries have held for many years regarding democracy are dwindling. In addition, emerging post-truth accounts continue to affect the credibility of electoral procedures. Consequently, the number of those who feel that democracy is the solution to some of the identified issues is fast depreciating (Matlosa, 2023). Based on findings by the Global State of Democracy, democracy is declining and nearly stagnating around the globe. A close examination of existing data suggests that while a

significant measure of democracies have the resources and legal guidelines necessary to promote democratic agencies, imbalanced reach to such establishments is a daunting and persistent concern (Matlosa, 2023). Hence, there is a need to pay considerable attention to existing threats to democracy; otherwise, this form of governance will collapse.

Additional proof indicate that democracy levels are depreciating very fast, and the situation could get out of hand soon if nothing happens to salvage the situation. Indications suggest that the number of nations upholding democracy has shrunk, and there has been a sluggish adoption of institutional innovation (Matlosa, 2023). At the same time, nearly half of democracies worldwide are retreating. Further indications suggest that at least 49% of non-democracies are increasingly repressive, reflecting about one in five nations (The Global, 2022). Another indication pointing to depreciating democracy levels is that over the past decade, the number of nations embracing authoritarianism has nearly doubled the measure of states embracing democracy. Some of the worst affected countries, including Nicaragua, Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Belarus, have significantly dropped across numerous Global State of Democracy Indices (The Global, 2022). Many deteriorating states experience considerable challenges conducting credible elections and constituting trustworthy and independent parliaments (Matlosa, 2023). The revelations adequately confirm that democracy is under threat, and not taking measures to safeguard this approach to governance that safeguards the rights and freedoms of citizens could have far-reaching implications.

Further analysis of available data reaffirms that democracy faces imminent threats that could become unbearable if concerned parties do not take immediate and effective interventions. Indications suggest that democracy is not changing to reflect fast-evolving aspirations and desires (Matlosa, 2023). There is insignificant advancement even in democracies that perform moderately or at high levels (Matlosa, 2023). The international estimates of Representative Government, Fundamental Rights, and Checks on Government show little change from what was read nearly two decades ago (The Global, 2022). Most countries operate at the mid-range level. In addition, participation by civil societies and the impartiality of administrative organs have remained

unchanged since 2001 (The Global, 2022). These concerns imply that democracy is experiencing considerable strain, especially in the last few years.

Effects on Socioeconomics

Depreciating democracy levels has implications on both social and economic aspects. In his paper, Matlosa (2023) describes how constrained democracy weakens social cohesion and strains social contract. Prioritizing citizens based on their race, educational level, economic status, and religion, which are some factors that deter democratic governance, might deteriorate how people from diverse backgrounds relate. In some instances, Matlosa (2023) explains, undemocratic practices augment illiteracy, inequality, hunger, poverty, and unemployment. Such alienations, and to some extent the authoritarian approach associated with undemocratic states, cause adverse effects on subjects, encompassing health and behavioral problems. It is imperative to promote democratic practices because disregarding the leadership style could cause profound economic implications. Trinugroho et al. (2023) support this claim by asserting that democracy is an important component in nation-level administration to protect human rights and achieve indiscriminate dissemination of wealth among nationals, contributing to rapid economic advancement. The authors who empirically examined the effects of democracy on income inequality and economic growth at the regional level by focusing on Indonesia-based provinces learned that the lack and existence of democratic practices have mixed effects on the economy (Trinugroho et al., 2023). The scholars discovered that while democracy can bolster economic advancement, it could also be detrimental to growth because sustaining a higher level of this form of governance requires immense financial commitment (Trinugroho et al., 2023). However, their research showed that democracy is indispensable in alleviating regional imbalances. It may create avenues to access better education for marginalized populations, directly influencing their income. Conducting additional studies on the implications of democracy on socioeconomic aspects would shed more light on this topic.

Possible Interventions

Democratic entities are particularly essential in times of fear and disaster. They encourage unobstructed avenues for engagement and awareness that governments and citizens require to conduct their operations effectively and responsively (The Global, 2022). To rekindle and reenergize these organs and to rebuild confidence between state authorities and citizens, it is imperative to form novel and creative social contracts that adequately mirror the global environment that is changing rapidly and which foster equal reach to the structures of indulgence. Social contracts refer to well-structured pacts on what governments issue their people while expecting public legitimacy in return (A New, 2023). They represent an awareness of how citizens mitigate shared challenges, handle risks and threats, and utilize resources collectively to provide opportunities and amenities that benefit the public (A New, 2023). The form of the social contract that underscored the immense portion of the expansion following the Cold War is now under evident threat, and the government, in conjunction with citizens, must review the factors fostering their relationships. Consequently, concerned parties must devise evidence-based structures and implement them successfully to form successful social contracts that benefit citizens and encourage them to declare their legitimacy to the government.

People's requirements and aspirations have transformed, and primary social and economic security is still necessary, but emerging constraints have triggered a need for dissimilar forms of guarantees from the government. For example, career development structures, welfare programs, and schooling must adapt to new demands arising from evolving work techniques, different kinds of jobs, and novel technological innovations, as well as recognize the importance of the care economy and various facets of wealth disparity (The Global, 2022). In an interconnected global setting, a social contract has to prioritize the integration of defense systems against potential future dangers (The Global, 2022). Furthermore, it is critical to make sure that equity prevails in rekindled social contracts (A New, 2023). It is not sufficient for government agencies to provide opportunities and stop at that; otherwise, its effects on people, especially those who lack resources and opportunities to uplift themselves, might be insignificant. It is increasingly becoming essential to form structures that enhance reach

to existing opportunities in a manner that places traditionally marginalized communities at the center of attention while at the same time ensuring that adequate protection measures exist to counter the formation of newly alienated populations (A New, 2023). In addition, developed social contracts must form structures that counter adverse polarization within communities and societies and distrust between governments and their subjects by offering the needed institutions and mechanisms to form and uphold shared citizenship (The Global, 2022). Effective deployment of this particular intervention would improve democracy and offer a chance to counter existing impediments.

Conclusion

Many countries have adopted democracy as the primary form of political governance. Still, evidence shows how various aspects continue to derail this form of administration that safeguards individuals' rights and freedoms and engages citizens actively in decision-making. This task explores the effects of UN regulations that promote democracy. The international agency develops multiple regulations that encourage the protection of every citizen's rights as part of upholding democracy. Besides, it is behind the establishment of various treaties that are internationally binding. Member states must abide by such regulations. Another event that had a global effect in terms of bolstering democracy was the Arab Spring, which mostly influenced Arab countries. The series of political unrests that began in Tunisia spread to other Islamic countries rapidly with a resounding message being the need for change from an authoritarian to a democratic system. At the same time, not all countries that witnessed such unrest became completely liberal - unrest that called for new leadership sensitized leaders on the significance of democracy. Nevertheless, there are concerns that democracy is fast losing its prominence due to several factors. Authoritative regimes are becoming rampant, and the rate of growth in democracy levels does not reflect current needs and changes. A suitable way to restore democracy is to form social contracts, which entail adopting interventions that adjust to changing circumstances. Social contracts are clear agreements in which authorities benefit their citizens in exchange for public trustworthiness. They symbolize an understanding of how nationals address prevalent difficulties, manage hazards and dangers, and collaborate to offer services that are helpful to everyone.

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