DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 08.11.2021 | Sheri Berman

Stopping democratic backsliding

After a democratic upswing at the end of the 20th century, we are now seeing an age of autocratisation. But with the right strategy, it can be stopped

In recent years democracy has been under siege: since 2015 the number of countries experiencing democratic backsliding has outstripped the number democratising. Varieties of Democracy, an organisation which tracks the global development of democracy, describes this as 'an age of autocratisation'.

While this trend should sadden, from an historical perspective it should probably not surprise. The backstory to contemporary backsliding is the 'third wave of democracy' at the end of the 20th century — a wave which left in its wake more democracies than ever previously existed. Waves are characterised by their power and sweep when ascendant but also by the inevitable undertow coming after. As anyone knows who has studied the previous waves of democratisation, for example, those which swept over Europe in 1848 and at the end of the first world war, these undertows can indeed be formidable.

Yet as the well-known aphorism often attributed to Mark Twain goes, 'History doesn't repeat itself but it often rhymes.' That an undertow has followed the third wave of democracy indeed repeats the historical pattern, but that does not mean it is a mere facsimile of its predecessors.

Unlike in previous undertows, during the past years democracies have not died — as one influential treatment puts it — quickly or violently 'at the hand of men with guns'. Rather, they have been eroded gradually, at the 'hands of elected leaders' who have used their power to undermine democracy over time.

All against one

Another, related difference is in the type of authoritarian regime left behind. During much of the 20th century, the collapse of democracy most often gave way to closed, repressive dictatorships, such as those in

interwar Europe or the military regimes established in Asia and Latin America during the 1960s and 70s. In contrast, the most common authoritarian product of the third wave's undertow has been 'electoral autocracy'.

Viktor Orbán's Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey and Narendra Modi's India fall into this category. These regimes are less authoritarian than their predecessors, allowing flawed elections and some space for civil society. They thereby provide potential opportunities for oppositions to mobilise and peacefully transform their societies. But because the system is rigged in electoral autocracies — such as by gerrymandering, control of the press and corruption — oppositions must be unified to take advantage of potential opportunities available to them, prioritising the defeat of incumbent leaders over their own disparate goals.

The recent elections in the Czech Republic, where coalitions of various parties joined forces in a 'democratic bloc' to defeat the populist oligarch Andrej Babiš, are an example of this dynamic. So was the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election, where Ekrem Imamoğlu united voters across religious, class, and ethnic divides and rallied Islamist, nationalist, and Kurdish parties behind a call to fight for Turkish democracy. But the most direct and consequential test of whether oppositions can use the limited opportunities available to defeat a populist autocrat will come with the April 2022 elections in Hungary.

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After his election in 2010, Orbán gradually undermined Hungarian democracy, creating an electoral autocracy which he has subsequently peddled as a model to populists and would-be autocrats worldwide. His ability to do so was the result of many factors but the inability of opposition groups to unite against him facilitated the process. Finally recognising how dearly their divisions have cost them and their country, Orbán's opponents have at last put aside their differences and formed a coalition dedicated to defeating him.

In mid-October Orbán's opponents held a primary to pick a single candidate for prime minister to oppose him in the upcoming elections. This was won by Péter Márki-Zay, a conservative practising Catholic who won a mayoral contest in the *Fidesz* stronghold of Hódmezővásárhely in 2018, showing that with the right candidate Orbán's party could be defeated.

Recognising that someone with Márki-Zay's profile had the best chance of winning votes outside of relatively liberal Budapest, and blunting Orbán's fear-mongering about 'out of touch elites' and 'traitorous liberals', even left-wing groups united behind Márki-Zay's candidacy. Klára Dobrev, defeated candidate of the Democratic Coalition, called on her voters to support him: 'We only have to be concerned about one thing.' Defeating Orbán, she said, was 'the common responsibility and task of all of us'.

Gergely Karácsony, mayor of Budapest, had withdrawn from the primary after the first round and urged his liberal supporters to back Márki-Zay: 'We have to accept political reality. It is not liberals or greens who can beat right-wing populists … [T]he important thing is to pick a candidate who can win against Orbán.' He said that nationalist populism was most successful in small towns and rural areas where people were afraid. 'Márki-Zay is a mayor in one of these places and understands the fears and problems of these people.'

Whether Márki-Zay will be able to triumph on the extremely uneven playing-field created by over a decade of rule by Orbán is unclear. But for those trying to work out how to fight democratic backsliding, the Hungarian as well as the Czech, Turkish and other cases offer important lessons.

The Achilles heel of autocracy

Since contemporary backsliding is gradual rather than sudden, oppositions often have opportunities to stop this process in its tracks. Divided oppositions whose individual components put the achievement of their own particular goals over the preservation of democracy make it easier for would-be autocrats to succeed. If the autocrats do prevail, oppositions find themselves facing immense disadvantages but, even then, all is not lost.

Electoral autocracies do allow some space for oppositions to manoeuvre. And these regimes are prone to sclerosis and inefficiency: Babiš, Erdoğan, and Orbán have all been weakened by corruption scandals. Taking advantage of the opportunities offered by even flawed elections and the missteps of autocrats requires united oppositions focused on restoring democracy above all else.

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It is very easy to take democracy and the freedoms and opportunities it affords for granted. During good times, democracy's fragility is readily forgotten. During difficult

opportunities it affords for granted.

times, such as the ones we are facing, democrats must remind themselves that democracy's survival — and so the ability someday to realise whatever their discrete goals may be — depends on their choices and behaviour.

For democracy to thrive, democrats must recognise how dangerous it is to compromise its norms and institutions for partisan gain. When confronted with those intent on destroying it, those committed to democracy must put aside their differences and policy preferences and do what is necessary to protect it — and remind their fellow citizens that their country's fate depends on their doing the same.

This is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal.



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