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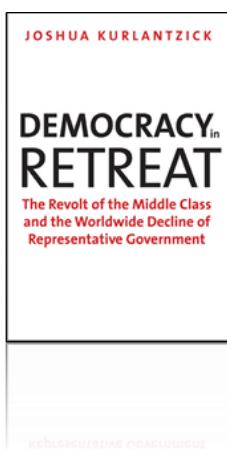
*ESADEgeo, under the supervision of Professor Javier Solana
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Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government

Kurlantzick, Joshua, (2013), Yale University Press, New Haven & London.



"If policy makers do not recognize [the] decline, and understand the complex reasons for democracy current weakness in many developing nations, they will fail to reverse the trend"

"If the middle class can no longer be taken for granted as a force for democratic change, it will mark an enormous shift that will challenge the accepted wisdom about democratization".

"The one-size-fits-all democratization strategy rarely takes into account local cultural and economic conditions. Western powers, including the United States, too often do not look at either the quality of the elections, the strength of other institutions besides elections and the level of public support in that nation for democratization."

Summary

The deep-rooted faith among many political and economic theorists on the correlation between democracy and economic growth has been shaken over the last two decades as democracy has ebbed worldwide. In his book, Joshua Kurlantzick analyses the reasons for waning democracy and possible ways of reversing the world trend to greater autocracy. The middle class (once the force driving democratisation) is losing its enthusiasm for this political system, given the miserable results of a new generation of leaders.

This explains a certain nostalgia for 'the good old days' of dictatorship, which many citizens perceive as safer and more stable than today's new democracies. This trend in leading regional powers — such as Nigeria, Kenya or Russia — is alarmingly spreading to their neighbours. In addition, the West's economic crisis has led China to promote its political and economic model as an alternative to democracy and various nations have begun to show an interest in its system.

The number of elected autocrats in the world is rising, revealing the failings of democracy as a system, as well as the simplistic, short-term methods pursued by the West in general and the US in particular to foster the system of democracy since the



end of the Cold War. Kurlantzick's key recommendations for combatting growing autocracy include: (1) fostering greater contact with non-governmental activists in autocratic nations; (2) recognising that the same model of democracy cannot be applied across the board.

The author

Joshua Kurlantzick is an American journalist, analyst and researcher for the Council on Foreign Relations, where he focuses on South-East Asia, democratisation processes and a global vision of human rights and democracy. Kurlantzick is author of the book *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* and frequently works with publications such as *Time*, *The New Republic*, *The American Prospect* and *Mother Jones*.

Key ideas and opinion

Joshua Kurlantzick's book reveals **the miserable state of democracy and its ebb in much of the world**. Many countries that led the fourth wave of democratisation in the late 90s and the beginning of the new millennium are now sliding back into autocracy. Their leaders may be democratically elected but they are increasingly acting like dictators. These modern 'strong men' base their claims to political legitimacy on the votes cast for them yet they fail to meet other basic requirements for democracy such as respect for human rights and the rule of law.

In the first part of his book, Kurlantzick pragmatically bases his analysis on **a depiction of the present state of the world, with examples failure and success in democratisation (with the former outnumbering the latter) over the last two decades**. He pays particular attention to South-East Asia, his geographic area of expertise. Kurlantzick refers to Thailand on various occasions — a country which has traditionally fallen within the American sphere of influence but which is turning towards China, currently the more stable option. Unfortunately, cases such as Thailand's are common and the author cites many studies to support his argument.

Freedom House, for example, states that **in 2010 world levels of freedom fell for the fifth consecutive year**, the longest decline in forty years. **The number of electoral democracies also fell in 2010, reaching numbers last seen in 1995**. In 2011, Freedom House highlighted Russia and China as the most authoritarian nations on Earth. The Bertelsmann Foundation notes the erosion of democracy, with 53 of the 128 countries analysed being categorised as "flawed democracies". This skepticism is spreading worldwide and both the popularity of democracy and respect for this political system seem to be waning with each passing day. Examples such as the Arab Spring in Egypt



and its evolution today reveal democracy's fragility and just how hard it is to make a democratic system flourish and reveal its long-term advantages.

Kurlantzick highlights reasons for the disillusion with democracy and nostalgia for dictatorship in these young democracies. Here, change came too fast in nations lacking both strong institutions and a sound economy. **Democracy, contrary to what many theorists have trumpeted since the end of the Cold War, is not linked to economic growth** (or at least not in its early stages, when many new voices clamour to be heard and it is hard to reach agreement).

In this respect, one should note that the author adds the **concept of democratic political culture** to the classic definition of democracy employed by the Economist Intelligence Unit ("Government based on majority rule and the consent of the governed, the existence of free and fair elections, the protection of minorities and respect for basic human rights. Democracy presupposes equality before the law, due process and political pluralism"). Among other things, this concept includes: (1) respect for the opposition; (2) support for political institutions; and (3) interest in and access to political participation. Kurlantzick stresses that today many 'democratic' leaders fail to meet these criteria. The only 'democratic' feature they show are that there were voted into office. Examples of these new 'elected autocrats' are Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Vladimir Putin in Russia.

The purpose of the book is thus to show that democracy is at its lowest ebb for almost two decades and that Western leaders should be paying more attention than they have hitherto.

The failed fourth wave of democratisation

A new group of countries led the fourth wave of democratisation between the late 90s and the early 2000s. The first wave, according to Samuel Huntington, reached Western Europe and North America in the 19th century, the second lasted from World War II to the mid-1970s and the third washed over Latin America and the former Eastern Bloc. In the last case, the principles underlying the so-called **Washington Consensus** strongly reflected the vision of foreign donors and local leaders which, according to the author, led to failure in many of the countries emerging from dictatorship.

These misguided certainties led to **a fatal error: linking political change with economic prosperity**. One should bear in mind that the countries in the fourth wave of democratisation were much poorer than those in the third wave (Southern Europe, Latin America, Asia) and more prone to conflict. Examples of fourth-wave nations include East Timor, Cambodia, Mozambique and Malawi. Many of the first democratic leaders in these countries opted for populist, short-term economic measures that failed to deliver what voters wanted. Even so, this new wave of democratisation.



Nevertheless, this new wave of democratisation fired the enthusiasm of Western leaders who thought that **the same democratic model would work in any country**. This naive belief ignored the history and social reality of each country — both vital factors in determining the success or failure of political and economic reforms.

With the advent of democracy, citizens not only saw a decline in their nations' economies but also **a fall in their living standards**. **Inequalities within countries have widened**, with the working class feeling the brunt of the effects. It was at this point that the working class began to see the unravelling of the link between democracy and economic development, thus spurring the quest for other systems or leaders capable of providing the security they desired. Disaffection also began to take root among the members of the middle class (a group critical to the health of any democracy), who felt that the democratic system no longer gave them the stability they needed to thrive.

Middle class revolt

The author argues that **middle class disaffection is the main reason why democracy is in such a woeful state**. The middle class was in the vanguard of earlier waves of democratization, demanding greater individual liberties and economic liberalization. Yet the idea peddled by Washington that democracy would lead to economic growth has proved false and led to widespread disillusion among middle class voters. Not only has democracy failed to deliver the goods for this sector of the population, **the arrival of populist leaders has worsened matters by showering benefits on the poorest classes to the detriment of others**. These strategies gave the new satraps the votes they need to come to power and from there apply a fresh coat of autocratic paint to the political systems they inherited.

The author cites **Hugo Chávez in Venezuela** and the situation in **the Philippines** as examples where in just fifteen years, the urban middle class has shifted from striving for democracy to battling against it. **The middle class today puts growth before freedom and stability before change**, abetted by the fact that the 'post-dictatorship' leaders of these nations have only met one criterion of democracy — getting elected. Such leaders do not foster the rule of law, protect minorities or further citizens' liberties. They are flawed democracies that obviously fail to deliver the expected results. The way such leaders hang on to power has spawned **an angry, desperate middle class willing to resort to extreme tactics ranging from coups d'état to violent riots**. Often, this struggle leads to a resurgence of the role of the army in national politics, where they become the legitimate force 'restoring law and order'.

The Chinese model, Russia's 'sovereign democracy' and the new powers

The economic crisis which began in 2008 has greatly changed the way many countries see the Chinese model as well as the way China presents it to the world. **The idea that**



China still had a great deal to learn has been wiped away and substituted by a stark auto-defense of its system, based on the argument that democracy is not necessarily the best way to achieve prosperity and stability. The Chinese model advocates economic freedom without political liberties and justifies this by the country's recent economic triumphs. **This new-found confidence can also be seen in the pressure China now puts on its trade partners** — evidenced by Barak Obama's refusal to meet the Dalai Lama in the White House during the Tibetan leader's latest trip to Washington. This snub to the Dalai Lama was unprecedented, arising — according to the experts —from America's need to keep China sweet. The Chinese model is not only catching on in neighbouring countries but also in Africa and Central Asia, where its success is compared with the failures of the Western model.

Russian scholars have **coined the term 'sovereign democracy' to justify Putin's autocracy** and its interference in the politics of neighbouring states that were formerly part of the Soviet zone of influence. It is another interpretation of 'democracy' to accommodate a 'strong man' running a highly-centralised state in which the government calls the shots. The Kremlin has even set up its own NGOs to promote its peculiar notion of democracy.

The author also argues that **the so-called emerging countries have failed to assume their role as regional leaders and promoters of democracy.** For example, Brazil, India, South Africa and Turkey are **loathe to condemn human rights violations in neighbouring countries.** India, instead of slating such violations in Burma, has chosen to look the other way rather than offend China. In Brazil, Lula da Silva did not criticise Hugo Chávez' policies. Although Kurlantzick notes Poland is an exception, with its support for reformists in Belarus in 2010, in general the new giants stick to strict non-intervention and sovereignty instead of using their position to advocate greater democracy in neighbouring countries and to oppose autocratic regimes.

The West's failure

In the final part of his book, the author admits that democracy is probably the best political system for fostering freedom and transparency, both of which ultimately lead to long-term prosperity. Nevertheless, he highlights **the West's failure in democracy promotion, which was rooted in its unwavering faith that democracy in and of itself would suffice to hold back, as it did in the past, the 'counter waves'.** Democracy is currently facing greater challenges and graver threats. For one, democracy's fourth wave affected a very diverse group of nations. **Democracy came quicker and in places that were both poor and unstable.** Such countries are more vulnerable and prone to dictatorial counter-trends.

Things were further worsened by the West's fatal strategy of promoting democracy through a 'great man' rather than taking into account the various voices in a given society. A clear example of this was the support given to **Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan**



without studying the true state of the country or contacting local leaders. Trying to fit all countries to the same Procrustean bed has proven counter-productive and has led to feeble democracies that served the West's ends while actually debilitating the nations themselves.

Furthermore, **Western citizens are losing faith in their own political systems**, as the various mass protest movements in both Europe and the United States have shown. Obama, like Bush before him, committed a fatal error in failing to work with developing countries in order to manage citizens' expectations on democracy's true impact. The current US Administration has distanced itself from non-state players. According to the author, this blinkered approach has led the working classes to see the US as only supporting democracy if it the outcome of the polls is to American liking.

Advice for the future

In summing up, Kurlantzick recalls that democracy's decline has evil consequences, such as more autocratic laws, the growth of conservatism among middle class voters and threats to journalists and human rights defenders. He considers **that the duty for reversing this trend lies with the leaders and citizens of those countries which have themselves experienced the consequences of democracy recoiling**.

The author puts forward **seven remedial steps**:

1. **Manage high expectations** of democracy in terms of economic growth and improved living standards. In the first years of a new system, it is important not to nurture nostalgia for the 'good old days' under the dictatorship — hence the need to maintain a strong social support system.
2. **Prevent growth from stalling**, as recession is the biggest threat to democracy, giving new autocrats the chance to win popular support.
3. **Include the middle class**. The economy will suffer if the middle class leaves the country because it fears its political leaders only help the poor. Measures have to be taken to benefit all while redressing inequalities.
4. **Create mechanisms preventing elected autocrats from taking power**.
5. **Keep the armed forces out of politics**. Without the army as an option, the middle class will not resort to the generals to guide them. Certain rights or privileges may be conferred on the armed forces (as in Indonesia) to encourage them not to meddle in politics.
6. **Understand the Chinese model**.
7. **Wage war on corruption**.



Kurlantzick also makes **recommendations to the United States for promoting democracy**:

- ⊕ Identify **opportunities during the three stages of democratisation**, to wit: (1) when the regime is still authoritarian, **external players can plant the seed of democracy** in dissident groups and promote another model of government; (2) in the transition to democracy, it can **provide money and knowledge** on matters such as civil society and fighting corruption; (3) once a stable democracy has been established, the United States should recognise the progress made and **include these nations in international institutions**.
- ⊕ **Focus spending** on those countries with the best prospects of democratic development.
- ⊕ **Go beyond the 'strong man' idea.** One should not personify the reforms but rather give voice to opinion leaders and stay neutral.
- ⊕ **Respect the winners of elections if they play by the rules.**
- ⊕ Realise that **elections are only the first step**.
- ⊕ Be flexible in one's programmes and adapt them to the conditions in each country. **One size does not fit all**.
- ⊕ **Include emerging giants in plans** so that they can influence their neighbours.
- ⊕ **Show a little humility.** Talking openly with others about the crisis now afflicting the West will not weaken the United States: it will show that America recognises the problem and is working to solve it.