

A Grim Report on Democracy

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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This week Freedom House released its annual *Freedom in the World* report. This in depth report is particularly useful because it makes comparisons over time and identifies trends in democracy and freedom both globally and within different regions. The [central findings of the report](#), that “Global freedom suffered its fifth consecutive year of decline in 2010” and “(T)he increasing truculence of the world’s most powerful authoritarian regimes has coincided with a growing inability or unwillingness on the part of the world’s democracies to meet the authoritarian challenge, with important consequences for the state of global freedom,” are grim. The report goes on to detail the decline of democracy and freedom throughout the world.

Freedom House’s finding should not come as a surprise to anybody who even casually consumes international news. Fraudulent election in Belarus, Iraq and Afghanistan being, at best, stuck in some kind of post-conflict semi-democratic morass, and the stubborn persistency of authoritarian regimes from Pyongyang to Havana all support these findings. Democracy is frequently spoken about in waves, with the third wave beginning in southern Europe in the 1970s. For the last few years, however, democracy has been in something of a trough with few advances or breakthroughs and a paucity of hope.

This is, of course, not good news for people who are either fighting for democracy in their own country or who believe the spread of democracy is, for any number of reasons, desirable. Moreover, there is no excitement about democracy comparable to, for example, the first half of the 1990s where the end of Communism in Europe, apartheid in South Africa and democratic advances in Asia, Latin America and elsewhere, contributed to a global expansion of democracy.

While this news is not good, there is another side of this story. A report on authoritarianism in the world would not necessarily declare 2010 such a successful year either. This hypothetical report might raise concern about the large demonstrations after the reelection of President Alexander Lukaschenko in Belarus and echo the sentiment that the Belarusian autocrat’s days in power may, in fact, be numbered. This report would also raise concerns about the growing difficulty authoritarian regimes Beijing to Teheran and beyond have in ensuring media repression in the age of the internet, as well as the substantial number of public demonstrations and other evidence of discontent in China despite, or perhaps because of, its growing economic clout. While this report would not strike a tone of panic, it would reflect uncertainty about the future of authoritarianism.

There is, of course, no such report on authoritarianism in the world, because, among other reasons, no country or political force, other than Jihadists, are likely to concede their interest in expanding authoritarianism. Many non-democratic leaders still seek to couch their regimes in democratic terms, such as the term “sovereign democracy” used by

Russia's non-democratic leaders. This desire on the part of many authoritarian leaders to put democratic lipstick on a non-democratic pig also reflects the strength of democracy in the world even during this period of democratic retreat.

There is still a lot of flux in the international system as generational transitions of power, new technologies and the difficulty and cost associated with maintaining stable authoritarian regimes continue to raise problems for the world's non-democratic regimes. These conditions will lead to democratic openings in the not too distant future. There is no guarantee that these openings will lead to democracy as the difficulty associated with turning those openings into meaningful democratic advances is clear and one of the driving forces behind the Freedom House findings for 2010. 2010 was a rough year for democracy, but it was more or less a rough year for all regimes. Therein lays the hope for democracy.