

Review - Democracy in Retreat

Written by Kenneth C Upsall

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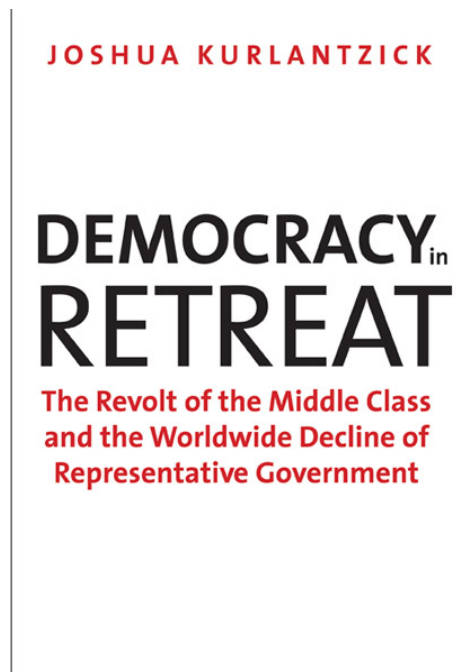
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KENNETH C UPSALL, NOV 6 2013

Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government

By: Joshua Kurlantzick

New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013



In 1991, Samuel Huntington hypothesized that democratic transition occurred in waves with his book, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*. Since that time, the idea of democratic waves has been established by social-sciences as conventional wisdom. With *Democracy in Retreat*, author Joshua Kurlantzick provides a compelling argument for the regression of democratic governments around the world following the massive proliferation of democracies since the late 1970s. While the idea that democracy is in a global recession[i] or that the Arab Spring may, in fact, be a false start on a fourth wave[ii], Kurlantzick expands the debate about democracy's future by examining middle class reactions to democratic government around the world. Using a wide range of examples, the author provides excellent background to the troubles currently faced by popularly elected governments.

Outlining the various "waves" of democracy throughout the twentieth century, Kurlantzick accepts Samuel Huntington and Seymour Martin Lipset's belief that the major driver of democracy is a well-established and financially stable middle-class (p.37). Kurlantzick's argument is that the middle class has become disenfranchised with democratic leadership due to rampant corruption, poor or declining economic conditions and the respect for minority groups that democratic government demands. 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, the complex characteristics of

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their favored 'big man' or—perhaps most important—the level of public support in that nation for democratization” (p.173). The author feels undue emphasis has been placed on the creation of democratic governments while ignoring underlying factors within the states in the last twenty years. This misplaced focus has created the conditions for democratic rollback across the globe.

The gains democratic government enjoyed during the third wave and in the post-Cold War era “barely took account of the uncertainty about actual conditions for growth in developing nations” (p.59). Simply having a democratically structured government and holding elections was seen as major victory for many of the states Kurlantzick examines. Unfortunately, there were deeper economic and developmental problems that would lead the middle-class in these states to question the utility of democratic governance. Such problems are also becoming a further obstacle for sustaining viable democratic government systems around the world. Due to the lack of growth opportunities and stagnation of middle-class living standards globally, Kurlantzick argues convincingly that the democratic gains of the last twenty years face the greatest challenge yet to popularly elected governments. Based on his own calculations using Freedom House data, Kurlantzick asserts that as of 2005 more than half the global population was living under a democratically elected government. Since this high-water mark, “not only has democracy experienced its longest and deepest rollback in forty years, a confluence of political, economic, and social changes could halt global democratization indefinitely” (p.26). Kurlantzick does believe democracy is here to stay, affirming that “the prospect of democracy being wiped away completely, as seemed possible in the 1930s, now appears all but impossible.” His stated purpose is “not to suggest that democracy is in its death throes, but that it is in decline over the past decade—a decline that should be worrying because of its vast impact on human rights, economic freedoms, and the international system” (p.27).

The problem seems to be with the democratic process as opposed to the structures of democracy itself. Kurlantzick uses many examples of populations dissatisfied with their democratically elected leadership for failure to move social programs forward, increase equality and create strong and stable economies. From states with deep democratic roots such as India to former Soviet Bloc states and relative new-comers like Thailand and Indonesia, most citizens of democracies seem to be disillusioned with their current situation. The author does a good job of providing snapshots from around the globe, citing examples from Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe as well as South and Southeast Asia. There are, however, times when Kurlantzick, who works for The Council on Foreign Relations studying Southeast Asia and democratization, seems to rely heavily on examples from his region of expertise: Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines receive a great deal of attention, while examples from other geographic areas are mentioned but not quite as well developed.

The alternative provided by Kurlantzick is a state-centric system similar to China, which embraces the use of free-market and capitalist IPE but with a much more conservative and autocratic central government. The author concedes that such a system is economic liberalization without political liberalization and therefore may seem a better model for the economic growth lacking in third and fourth wave democracies where most of the rollback is occurring. This use of socialist economic strategy was also seen in earlier waves of democracy, as “very few nations in the second or third waves adopted wholly free market policies” (p.59). Such a strategy has stabilized the economies of these earlier democracies and allowed for the institutions of government to take root within the state itself. Kurlantzick feels that, “in previous reverse waves, eras when global democratic gains stalled and went backward, there was no alternate example of development remotely as successful as China today; the Soviet Union claimed to be an alternate example, but it never produced anywhere near the sustained growth rates and successful, globally competitive companies of China today” (p.119). The recent global financial crisis has also acted as a catalyst for change, with state-centric models of “authoritarian capitalism” having weathered the storm much better than their democratically elected counterparts. Kurlantzick does point out that democratic government seems better able to react to such problems as financial crises and citizen disenfranchisement than their authoritarian competitors in the long run.

In order to stifle attempts by authoritarian and state-centric governments to actively frustrate democratic proliferation, the author presents a conclusion with prescriptions for emerging and established democracies alike to follow in order to thwart democratic rollback. Kurlantzick outlines seven steps for emerging democracies to take in order to solidify gains: manage expectations, prevent growth from stagnating, keep the middle class onboard, create mechanisms to

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foil elected autocrats, retire the army for good, understand the china model and declare war on graft. These problems are all outlined in the text with excellent examples, each subject receiving highlights from locations around the globe. Kurlantzick advocates for a better policy prescription for emerging democracies than the failed Washington Consensus roadmap of the 1980s and 90s, he provides points for entrenched democracies to follow in order to re-brand a pro democratization foreign policy which emerging states have started to view with understandable skepticism in recent years. Ten areas of focus can be synthesized down to a few key points: better understand the opportunities that popular democratic movements present, focus on institutional fortification beyond simply holding elections to include building stronger domestic economies and creating a culture which is rule of law driven, and focus spending in ways which will improve individual situations instead of focusing on a one size fits all template for every emerging democracy.

Finding ways to improve economies and legal institutions in emerging states is the focal point in his argument: Kurlantzick hopes that by achieving economic success for the middle class, democracy will be stabilized. While he highlights failure of the Washington Consensus to achieve economic stability, his prescriptions for economic improvement appear at face value to be similar. The key is in his assertion that a one size fits all approach is not a path to successful proliferation of democratic government. While the symptoms and disease in many states are similar, the cure is different in each case. Kurlantzick's presentation is a compelling one, and forces the reader to look at democracy more as a process than as an end-game. *Democracy in Retreat* carries the debate about foreign policy, intervention and self-determination to a new level by pressing the reader to think about how states and leaders are responsible for the successful advance of democracy.

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Kenneth C Upsall graduated with honors from Norwich University in 2013, receiving a Master of Arts in Diplomacy. His research interests include government formation, democratization issues and US foreign policy.

[i] Carl Gershman, "The Fourth Wave," *The New Republic*, (March 14, 2011). Retrieved from: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/world/85143/middle-east-revolt-democratization>

[ii] Larry Diamond, "A Fourth Wave or False Start? Democracy After the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs*, (May 22, 2011). Retrieved from: "<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67862/larry-diamond/a-fourth-wave-or-false-start>