

Justified Alarmism? Assessing the Claim of a Contemporary ‘Authoritarian Wave’

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NICCOLO FANTINI, OCT 9 2019

In 1992, Francis Fukuyama famously wrote about the ‘end of history’ marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which he considered the last opponent to liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 2006). Nevertheless, history has all but come to an end. According to the latest Freedom House report on freedom in the world, we are facing a crisis of democracy (Freedom House, 2019). The report hints at diffused attacks on democratic values, substantial freedoms and the rise of ‘emboldened’ autocrats. Even the US, a long-standing democracy and aspirational model for other countries, has been taken as an example by Levitsky and Ziblatt to show how established democracies can potentially die, especially since Donald Trump’s election as President in 2016 (2018).

Is this alarmism justified? Is the contemporary world really experiencing a ‘wave’ of authoritarianism similar to those democratic waves described by Huntington? In what follows, I will claim that, even if this is partially the case, this ‘wave’ should be understood in a specific way. To do this, this essay has been divided into two parts. The first is theoretical and looks at both definitions and frameworks for analysis. The second, more empirical, section will review the factual evidence in search of this ‘authoritarian wave’. The results will show that increased authoritarian stances are mainly found in countries that never consolidated democratic institutions. I will therefore argue that the authoritarian tendencies stimulated by external factors, such as economic downturns and geopolitical shifts, are most likely to impact ‘hybrid’ regimes rather than consolidated democracies. The latter are instead suffering under an endemic, *populist* wave, which differs from an authoritarian relapse.

Defining and Theorizing the ‘Authoritarian Wave’

In his book, ‘The Third Wave’, Samuel Huntington defines a wave of democratization as ‘a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period of time’ (1993:15). If we therefore want to turn this definition around and apply it to an understanding of an ‘authoritarian wave’, then we can say that the latter involves a group of *democratic* regimes transitioning to *authoritarian* systems. The number of such transitions should then be higher than the number of democratization cases over the same period.

Even though this kind of definition theoretically provides us with a clear checklist for inquiry, the blind application of it in our current investigation would be detrimental, if not impossible. Indeed, we should note that, while we employ the term ‘authoritarianism’, Huntington writes of ‘nondemocratic regimes’. Huntington’s analysis is thus partially plagued by a dichotomous understanding of democracy and authoritarianism. While he does admit that it is more useful for his analysis to have a yes-no distinction in place (1993:11), this approach tends to simplify the conclusions. What may be counted as a successful democratization may indeed be, instead, the transition to a regime that is neither a full democracy nor a rooted autocracy (Rose and Shin, 2001). When considering an ‘authoritarian wave’, we should thus go beyond the dichotomous approach, employing a more comprehensive and flexible understanding of transition.

In order to do this, we must first establish a general working definition for authoritarianism and democracy. If an ‘authoritarian wave’ is the transition from a democracy to authoritarianism, then it is crucial to determine where the ‘threshold’ for transition exactly lies. Huntington’s ‘minimal’ definition of democracy as a system in which ‘fair, honest,

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and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes' is a good start, but we should complement it with a notion of 'consolidated democracy', as understood by Linz and Stepan (1996). As they write, consolidated democracy is 'a political regime in which democracy as a complex system of institutions, rules, and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase, "the only game in town"' (1996:15). As such, adding to Huntington's 'minimal' definition comes a system based on the constitutional Rule of Law, the state's *capacity* for bureaucratic and democratic governance, and the strengths and resilience of institutions (Diamond, 1999:71). To give an example of a consolidated democracy, one could take the case of Italy employed by Diamond. The political and social turmoil after the Years of Lead (*Anni di Piombo*) in the 1960s-80s and the subsequent 'earthquake' caused by corruption scandals within parties in the 1990s (*Mani pulite*) did not lead to a collapse of democratic institutions, but instead to a reform of the system to enhance democratic accountability and Rule of Law (Diamond, 1999: 169).

If democracy has to be consolidated to be included in our analysis, then how should we define 'authoritarianism'? As we saw, we cannot define it negatively as non-democracy, because it would lump together deeply entrenched autocratic regimes, such as North Korea, and more 'hybrid' forms of autocracy, such as those described by Karl in Central America (1995). There is a considerable difference between the former type and the latter. Juan Linz, in his classic 'Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes' already pointed at the *qualitative* variations among authoritarian systems, whereby there is a 'fairly wide range in which those regimes operate' (Linz, 2000:161). More recently, a vast range of literature has been attempting to study the forms and implications of those regimes that, for instance, adopt democratic procedures on the surface but are *de facto* authoritarian, such as contemporary Russia under Vladimir Putin (Krastev, 2011). Definitions like 'New Authoritarianism' (Krastev, 2011), 'Illiberal Democracy' (Zakaria, 1997), and 'Competitive Authoritarianism' (Levitsky and Way, 2002) all try to make sense of a new form of regime composition, where borders between democracy and authoritarianism are increasingly blurred. Levitsky and Way's theory of Competitive Authoritarianism is especially telling here, because it highlights both the relationship between hybrid authoritarian systems and factors that might affect their trajectory (2002). In particular, the idea of a 'linkage' or 'leverage' between democratic and authoritarian countries in fostering democratization, as most evident in the pro-democratic attitude of the US and the EU, is proven to have promoted democracy in several instances, such as in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Levitsky and Way, 2010). This kind of 'linkage' is most effective in competitive authoritarian regimes, as they are more unstable in their domestic power-balance (Huntington, 1993:137). Olcott and Ottaway, for instance, show how 'semi-authoritarian' regimes may either remain stable, become full-fledged democracies or move on to embrace closed authoritarianism (1999).

Thus, authoritarianism should be understood as an *attribute of degree*, unlike democracy which, paraphrasing Linz and Stepan (1996), we understand *only* as a consolidated democratic system. For the sake of the current inquiry, authoritarianism, therefore, does not always imply a closed and entrenched authoritarian *system* like North Korea even though the *highest* degree of authoritarianism would indeed denote such a system. In this sense, an 'authoritarian wave' is essentially a *deepening* of non-democratic attributes such as disrespect for the Rule of Law or limitation of Free Speech. Every political system, including democracy, can therefore acquire authoritarian *attributes*. The crucial question is, however, to identify that level of authoritarian *depth* after which a consolidated democracy ceases to be a democracy. Indeed, I will argue that consolidated democracies are subject to externally and internally provoked fluctuations, which manifest themselves especially through the appearance of *populism* (Arditi, 2005). While populism is conducive to anti-democratic attributes (Urbinati, 1998), the consolidated quality of these democracies should be able to absorb these pressures.

Empirical Evidence

Looking at Freedom House's latest data on Freedom in the World, one immediately understands the importance of taking 'authoritarianism' as a variable of degree. Indeed, while around half of the global population is living under a non-free regime as opposed to a fully free one (Freedom House, 2018), this does not mean that this half is all oppressed by a hermetic dictatorship. Freedom House does in fact distinguish between 'not free', 'partly free' and 'free' status. However, there is still considerable space for variation *within* these three broad categories. In addition to this, there does not seem to have been a dramatic change in terms of regime *type* since the start of the millennium. Comparing Freedom House data from 2000 with that in 2018, we can barely spot a difference, with 'free' countries

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stable around 45%, 'partly free' at 30% and 'not free' at 25% (Freedom House, 2000 & 2018). The *Polity* project validates this data, clearly showing a steep fall in autocracies and a sudden boom of democracies during the 1990s (Polity IV, 2010).

Nevertheless, given our theoretical considerations above, the *Polity* report also shows that the number of so-called 'anocracies' or, for what matters, 'competitive authoritarian' regimes have remained stable since that momentous change (Polity IV, 2010). Ottaway in her book, which is ominously titled 'Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism', is indeed recognizing the game-changing role played by these new forms of regime (2013). Her examples of such regimes include Egypt, Azerbaijan, Venezuela and Senegal. What these case studies have in common is both their instability as hybrid regimes and, more importantly, their condition as non-consolidated democracies before the 'consolidation' of the competitive authoritarian regime. With the possible exception of Venezuelan democracy, whose failure in the 1990s has been however associated with *caudillo*-culture and oil dependency (Levine, 2002), none of these countries ever had democracy standing as the 'only game in town' (Linz and Stepan, 1996:15).

What about today's 'authoritarian wave'? Aligning with our initial definition of 'wave', it seems that cases of authoritarian deepening outnumber those of authoritarian retreat. Largest gains and declines in 2017 by Freedom House seem to confirm the assumption that deepening of authoritarianism is mainly present in non-consolidated hybrid regimes (Freedom House, 2018). Tunisia, for instance, has seen the reaffirmation of the old oligarchy over the judicial and legislative process after successful democratization (Freedom House, 2018), while Tanzania's ruling party has become increasingly repressive and assertive against the opposition (Paget, 2017). A primary case of authoritarian revival is that of Turkey under Erdogan, whereby the country is 'exiting the most basic provisions of a democratic regime' (Öktem and Akkoyunlu, 2016: 469). As Esen and Gumuscu point out, present-day Turkey is a classic example of competitive authoritarianism, with an unfair election process and the concentration of powers in the hands of Erdogan (2016). The *deepening* of authoritarianism attributes in the country has been mainly possible by a combination of an unconsolidated democratic system and external economic pressures, which enabled the ruling AKP to re-convey power outside the weak democratic institutions (Somer, 2016). The problem created by democratic institutions is most evident if we consider that eight out of the twenty negative changes highlighted by Freedom House concern African countries, where institutions are notoriously weak (Lewis, 2018).

Thus, while strictly authoritarian systems, such as China and Saudi Arabia, have also become *more* repressive and authoritarian (Diamond, Plattner and Walker, 2016), the majority of countries affected by this 'authoritarian wave' present the distinctive, 'hybrid' regime characteristic of competitive authoritarianism. Why do these regimes, like Turkey, not adopt full authoritarianism? Drawing on Levitsky and Way's theory of 'linkage', it seems that the international environment does play a crucial role in determining the trajectory of these regimes (Levitsky and Way, 2002). As they put it, 'periods of liberal hegemony place a "web of constraints" on nondemocratic governments that seek to maintain international respectability and viability' (Levitsky and Way, 2002: 62). In this sense, they claim that post-Third Wave democracies both failed to move towards consolidated democracy *and* full-fledged authoritarianism. To put it differently, the geopolitical power of the US and the influence of its system proved key in maintaining, at least, the appeal of liberal democratic forms. The example of Hungary, which is currently undergoing an authoritarian deepening, can well show the necessity of the Orban regime to maintain democratic 'appearance' *vis-à-vis* the EU for legal and diplomatic purposes (Bogaards, 2018).

One explanation for the contemporary 'authoritarian wave' is, thus, geopolitical. As Diamond and Plattner demonstrate, the 'Big Five' of global authoritarianism, namely, China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, have profited from US and 'Western' retreat after the 2008 economic crisis and asserted their anti-liberal stance (Diamond, Plattner and Walker, 2016). China, in particular, with its quick rise as a second world economy, is offering an appealing and anti-democratic alternative to the Western-led democratic crusade (Chen and Kinzelbach, 2015). Some have gone even so far as to claim that there is a global 'alliance' of anti-democratic powers, such as China and Russia, to counter liberal and US hegemony, which is increasingly losing its grip as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis and the often reported 'democratic crisis' (Von Soest, 2015). Levitsky and Way's 'linkage-leverage' theory could therefore be applied in its pro-authoritarian guise, even if less directly and overtly. Still, geo-political concerns are very much related to economic ones. Writing on the Turkish authoritarian relapse, Öktem and

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Akkoyunlu clearly include the 'onslaught of neoliberal economic governance' as an important cause (2016:469). On the other hand, Weyland warns against 'leftist populism' in South America, which, most notably embodied in the Venezuelan transition under Chavez, has reappeared as a pattern for authoritarian deepening in weak Latin American democracies such as Nicaragua and Argentina (2013).

These external factors, as already pointed out, do not fail to affect consolidated liberal democracies. A study by Armingeon and Guthman has shown how the 2008 crisis affected confidence in democracy and democratic institutions in Europe (2014), while Dani Rodrik has written how 'the economic anxiety and distributional struggles exacerbated by globalization generate a base for populism' (Rodrik, 2018:13). Cases such as the success of Donald Trump are evident examples of this latter causal pattern (Pettifor, 2017). European populism has also been strongly exacerbated by issues of globalization and migration flows as the cases of France's *Front National* and Italy's *Lega* demonstrate (Lubbers, Gijsberts, and Scheepers, 2002). The core concern for an 'authoritarian wave' bringing the demise of consolidated, Western democracies originates in the authoritarian rhetoric and attitude of populist movements that put a strain on direct democracy and disseminate a homogenizing and excluding propaganda (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012).

However, these fears are partially exaggerated. Based on Canovan's theory of populism as *endemic* to democracy, whereby it represents the 'redemptive' as opposed to the 'pragmatic' face of this political system (Canovan, 1999), I claim that *consolidated* democracies must face the possibility of populist waves in those times when hardships and external causes tend to alienate the governed from those in government. At this point, we come back to the issue of democratic consolidation. Only strong democratic institutions and democratic culture will be able to absorb the centrifugal forces of populism (Taggart, 2000). Of course, the possibility of a consolidated democracy undergoing de-consolidation should be not entirely dismissed (Foa and Mounk, 2017), especially if the populist pressures are strong enough to break through the consolidation threshold (Abts and Rummens, 2007). A notable exception among unconsolidated democracies in the Freedom House 'authoritarian wave' report is the United States, which has lost 3 points due to opaque electoral and government proceeding since the last election (Freedom House, 2018). Trump's explicit disdain for democratic norms and institutions has sparked concerns and debate over the resilience of US democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Levitsky and Ziblatt, however, note that 'unwritten rules are everywhere in American politics', showing how US democracy is founded more on practice and custom than it is often thought, making it shakier, yes, but at the same time more flexible (2018:102).

Conclusion

This analysis of current trends in global politics has found that there is indeed what we may call an 'authoritarian wave' responsible for *deepening* authoritarian stances of many regimes. The trend is mainly caused by changing international geopolitical and economic conditions that put political systems under pressure in terms of delivery-capacity and favor stances that are more assertive. However, the analysis has shown how this 'authoritarian wave' has mostly taken place in so-called 'hybrid' regimes, which have weak and unstable democratic institutions. Their already authoritarian nature makes them more vulnerable to internal and external influences. Consolidated democracies, on the other hand, suffering under the same type of strains, have been faced with populist reactions, which are, however, endemic to their fundamental democratic nature and can be absorbed by the solidified democratic system.

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