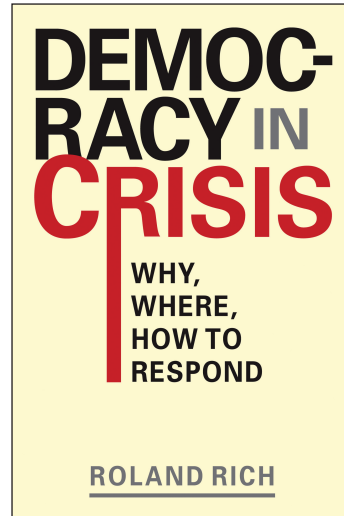


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Democracy in Crisis:
Why, Where,
How to Respond

Roland Rich

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1

Democracy Is in Crisis

I am embarrassed to admit that I was disappointed the first time I met Leonard. He was too tall, almost five foot two! I had imagined pygmies to be shorter. Leonard was at the United Nations in New York for the Permanent Forum of the world's indigenous peoples. They had fought for many years to be granted this annual meeting and also succeeded in having the UN adopt a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Who are the world's indigenous people? The best answer is that they are original inhabitants of territories that were later settled by outsiders. Obviously this includes America's First Nations, Australian Aborigines, and New Zealand Maori, but it also includes the remnants of other now marginalized ancient communities around the world, including the pygmies of the Congo basin.

Leonard had done his homework, and he played me expertly. As head of the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) I was constantly listening to entreaties from different civil society groups seeking cash grants from our fund. I listened to homilies about how improved health or higher-quality education or committed peacebuilding would contribute to democracy, all true to an extent; but my answer was invariably that the UN had created this as a democracy fund, not a health fund or an education fund or a peacebuilding fund. Leonard's pitch was more sophisticated—fund his NGO to go into the forest and register his people to vote so that the politicians of Gabon would take an interest in their plight. Perfect! Of course, Leonard and I both knew that this story, though it had considerable truth, was not the primary reason for registration. Without an identity card in Gabon, one cannot send kids to

school or seek care from a hospital. And Leonard's back story was also compelling. Taken in by French expats who saw to his schooling, allowing him to be the first of his people to graduate with a university degree, Leonard could not ignore his origins. He had no option in his own mind but to dedicate his life to the pygmy people.

Leonard's NGO applied and was given a significant grant after a rigorous competitive process. A couple of years later we concluded that the project had been, on balance, a minor success. The paperwork was a mess and the Excel sheets did not add up just right, but our monitors on the ground reported that some two thousand people had been registered to vote and because many of these were heads of households, perhaps up to ten thousand people now had access to health and education services in Gabon. A pretty good return for an investment of \$180,000.

Now multiply Leonard's project by 600 and you get a pretty good idea of the very fulfilling work of UNDEF. While the General Assembly resolution that created UNDEF included the term *civil society* as something of an afterthought, this is the area on which the fund came to be focused. This was the way we could fund people to help themselves rather than to be helped by paternalistic governments or well-meaning international organizations. And so the money flowed to women's groups, tribal communities, slum dwellers, election observer groups and many other types of advocacy associations in more than 130 countries around the world. The common thread was that all these groups wanted to have a voice in the politics of their country or region and UNDEF was offering not only a cash grant but was also lending them a little bit of the UN brand to help their cause.

Having headed the Australian democracy institute assisting countries in Asia and the Pacific and then heading the UN Democracy Fund with a stint as a researcher at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in Washington in the middle, I had been in the business of promoting democracy for fifteen years. Fifteen years of professional optimism. Fifteen years of encouraging, supporting, and defending champions of democracy in so many countries. Fifteen years of cajoling, placating, and inspiring government donor agencies to continue their support. All of a sudden, with my retirement from the UN, it was no longer my job to be a professional optimist. I could look at the world without my professional lenses. And what I saw was not pretty.

People lucky enough to live in consolidated democracies think of their system of government as constant as the Northern Star. Votes are cast and counted, politicians come and go, policies succeed or fail, but the system goes on regardless. It is this very expectation of constancy that

acts as a bulwark against unconstitutional changes in governance. Locked into what may seem an unending virtuous cycle, it is understandable that an element of complacency may creep in, that the level of participation may decline, and that democracy itself may be taken for granted.

Yet, were one to take an historical perspective of this supposed constancy of the virtuous cycle of democracy and compress the world's written history into a 24-hour clock, democracy as the default best practice form of government has only been around for the last several minutes before midnight. Even more bracing is the realization that democracy made several previous appearances in world history, in ancient Athens, ancient India, and perhaps ancient Mesopotamia, without consolidating itself as the governance norm.

The majority of the world's population is too young to remember, but for that older segment of the world's population that was politically conscious during the Cold War, there will surely be a memory of the fragility of democracy in the face of an opposing Soviet system that seemed at a certain stage to be so powerful that its supporters thought of its eventual dominance in terms of teleological inevitability. The communists were ultimately shown to be deeply mistaken. But those Cold War doubts we occasionally felt and quickly banished remain an important and useful reference point.

The purpose of this book is to sound a warning of a crisis in democracy all over the world. Modern democracy is a fragile system of government that has not yet been consolidated on a global scale and may yet prove to be as historically fleeting as its predecessors. Modern democracy is a vulnerable system open to manipulation from inside and intimidation from outside. There is nothing certain about the maintenance of our democratic systems in a world history that has seen the rise and fall of previous systems. There can be no confidence in the impregnability of democracy simply because it has existed for those short few minutes in human history. Democracies have traversed crises in the past and have demonstrated an admirable ability to self-correct and renew, but having done so in the past is no guarantee that they can continue to do so in the future. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

The internal and external challenges must be confronted with resolution and competence, qualities that are at times in short supply. Deep problems exist in both the established and the transition democracies. The first-wave democracies are witnessing some ugly politics associated with the rise of demagoguery. The disregard of what the demagogues like to call *political correctness* is in reality a rejection of political civility, which is the software that allows democracy to work in

complex mass societies. In the third-wave democracies we are seeing very few successes and too many cases where the next election is faced with the dread of looming chaos. Democracy faces some daunting challenges on the world stage. The authoritarianism we know well from the Cold War era is resurgent. There is a new challenger, messianic jihadism, which we are grappling to understand. But perhaps the most significant challenge is China's Leninist capitalism. Will democracy settle for a kind of moral equivalence with these systems as it did fleetingly with the Soviet system? This would lead to a loss of moral authority, which, to date, has been democracy's greatest asset.

The diagnosis is concerning, but despair is not a useful response. The book will conclude with some policy ideas on how to strengthen democracy and support democratization around the world. Criticism needs to be constructive. I do not pretend to have all the answers, but I do posit some thoughts on key questions. One of the most prominent ways that rich countries relate to poor countries is through official development assistance (ODA). I propose that ODA be radically changed and itself democratized. I cast doubt on the dominant theory of democratization, modernization theory, and call for a women-led process before tackling the issue of how established democracies can renew and invigorate their struggling democratic systems. The writing was concluded at the time of the 2016 US election campaign, and so a further question is posed in the postscript—has democracy been trumped?

Democracy's Soft Power in Decline

When we are not taking democracy for granted, we often mock it because of the frustration and despair we experience with it. Established democracies are not performing well. Gridlock among elected representatives, vetocracy engineered by cashed-up interest groups, and apathy among voters—in particular toward their political parties—are all symptoms of a deep malaise. Chapter 2 deals with democracy's declining soft power, which can be tracked through the work and effectiveness of the various democracy support bodies established to hasten along the third wave of democratization.

Francis Fukuyama's 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, began life as a philosophical treatise on Platonic, Kantian, and Hegelian thought but quickly morphed into a bumper sticker. Its argument that liberal democracy has been accepted as the best way to satisfy human needs became the intellectual ballast for the triumphalism that

many in the West expressed. The title of the book came to be complacently interpreted as obviating the need to work toward the best form of governance—it had already been found.

The high point of democracy's soft power began in the Cold War years with the Carter administration's emphasis on human rights; it strengthened with the Reagan administration's self-confidence to challenge the Soviet Union in treasure rather than blood; it intensified with Gorbachev's failure to reform the Soviet system and also his reluctance to impose Soviet orthodoxy on its fractious empire by force of arms; it solidified with the collapse of the United States' sole global strategic competitor; and it was ratified with glib interpretations of academic theories about the end of history and the Washington consensus. The sense of democracy's superiority as a political system increased to the point of expectation of the near inevitability of its triumph over other forms of governance.

Promoting transitions to and consolidation of democracy by a handful of modest institutions from the established democracies became a measure of the strength of democracy's soft power. The entire enterprise was always plagued by a seed of doubt at its core. Wasn't democracy something that had to emerge from and be fought for by the citizens of the country in question? So what role could foreigners play in that process? And what role had they played in the past? Let's be honest and admit that during the Cold War the West was not so interested in supporting transitions to democracy, a remote theoretical concept at the time; rather, it was determined to undermine the authoritarian Soviet government. Vladimir Putin, incidentally, still thinks this is what the West is trying to do. The key protagonists for this activity at that time were the West's intelligence agencies, and the work was in part to support dissidents and their samizdat publications and, regrettably, at other times to get rid of inconvenient new governments regardless of whether they had come to power through election results.

Democracy promotion came about through a little piece of serendipity. When the Iberian dictators died, first Salazar and then Franco, and their personalistic fascist regimes collapsed, political parties reemerged to contest power. Having been outlawed in the long Portuguese and Spanish fascist period, these parties were unskilled, to say the least. They needed help. In Weimar Germany, a Socialist politician, Friedrich Ebert, left a modest legacy to establish a (subsequently eponymous) foundation to deepen support for his party through civic education. The political party foundation was born and then given fresh life in the post-World War II era when the German conservatives followed suit

and established the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Not only were these foundations given the role of delivering civic education domestically, they also were financed to deliver official development assistance abroad. So when the upstart Social Democrat and Christian Democrat political parties of Portugal and Spain called for help, there happened to be sister party foundations in Germany with the staff and the skills to respond. The success of the transition to democracy in Spain and Portugal was facilitated by this German assistance.

It is one of the notable achievements of the Reagan administration that it took notice of these developments. Homage to democracy is in the American DNA. American democracy was going to be the shining light that would persuade other countries of its merit, and there were certainly times under Presidents Wilson and Roosevelt when the United States took a more hands-on role. An ongoing mission to promote democracy fitted neatly with America's self-perception, and the German foundations' example provided the precedent. The National Endowment for Democracy and the two American political party foundations were born in 1983. Others around the world followed; their work is described in Chapter 2.

While giving credit to one Republican administration for putting the United States in the position to take full advantage of democracy's post-Cold War soft power, it was another Republican administration that squandered it. One can hardly blame George W. Bush for the *Bush v. Gore* legal fiasco in 2000, because he was simply trying to win. But the fact that the world's leading democracy could not competently run an election and then was seen to inject partisanship into the adjudication process dealt a nasty blow to the reputation of democracy. Why would others wish to emulate that fiasco? Blame, however, can squarely be laid at the feet of W's administration in its third attempt at an excuse for the ill-conceived Iraq invasion after the first two were found to be contrived. To impose democracy on a foreign country by force of arms represented the antithesis of everything the institutions of democracy promotion stood for. It suggested, to many in the global South in particular, that democracy was simply being used as a stalking horse for American power; it showed others, Putin included, that the old ways of "might is right" still represented the rules of the game; and it hollowed out democracy's rhetoric, which previously had been among its most powerful weapons but which Bush greatly devalued.

Democracy support work around the world did not end. Committed people everywhere continued its important work. I certainly did not let up, and neither did my colleagues in New York, Washington, Brussels, Berlin, Stockholm, London, and elsewhere. But Bush put a blemish on

our product and gave our opponents powerful ammunition. We continue to debate whether that blemish is indelible.

Global Frustrations of Democratic Transitions

The Iraq war grabbed the world's attention and dominated discussion, but a parallel phenomenon is further sapping democracy's soft power. It is not as dramatic as shock-and-awe, but in many ways it is more telling and insidious. Democracy is not living up to its promise in so many of the third-wave countries. It is not embedding itself into the national culture; it is not producing competent leadership; it is simply not delivering.

The scholarly community has already identified the issue. It presents itself as one of terminology. The word in question is *transition*. That word gave rise to vast expectations that could not possibly be met. It suggested that regardless of the path by which a country came to its "transition," once having accomplished that magic word, the path to democracy was as well-established as a yellow brick road. Indeed, a country could virtually be certain of progressing down this road once it had passed the very first milestone, the transition election. The word *transition* thus gave a sense of inevitability to a process that in the established democracies took a great deal of time and effort with many setbacks.

Having attended a conference at Ditchley House, Oxford, in 2015 celebrating the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta, it came home to me how long the process took in England. It took centuries after those first tentative steps limiting absolutism before its system of government could be described as a democracy. It took over a century or so in the United States before the wisdom of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution could find concrete expression in the reality of the political system, a process that was ongoing when the Voting Rights Act was finally passed in 1965. It has taken some fifty years in Costa Rica for a culture of democracy and peace to become the norm among its people.

Yet by passing through the magic door of transition, the public in democratic nations and beyond anticipates democracy's advance to occur within a few short years. First, the various "square people," to adopt Thomas Friedman's felicitous expression describing those demonstrators camped in their town squares demanding change, put a start to the process of ridding the nation of its dictator. That is quickly followed by the international community bankrolling an election fiesta, usually putting in power the leader of the nation's largest ethnic group. Presto, democracy has arrived.

Chapter 3 will conduct a bracing tour of Africa, Asia, and Latin America to point out the many examples where a decade or two after that presto moment, countries remain on the same complicated path on which they were traveling before democracy supposedly arrived. Even sadder, the tour will drop in on Europe, to Hungary, which has every chance of making democracy a reality in very quick time but which is reverting to strongman leadership.

If transition has any meaning, it must be interpreted as a transition *from* rather than a transition *to*. The *from* is well known. It is the military dictatorship that sees the world in black and white, friend or foe, us or them. It is the personalistic dictatorship ruled by the whim of the dictator and, invariably, his scheming wife and avaricious children. It is the Leninist single-party system that talks about equality but is dedicated to welfare of the elite, the *nomenklatura*. Transition *to* also has a clear meaning in theory but remains shrouded in a fog of reality. Freedom House may call it democracy, but in most third-wave transition countries it hardly lives up to that grand term.

Chapter 3 will also attempt to categorize various outcomes. We have seen some of the rhetoric change, but we are still left with many of the old autocrats. We also have some new forms of governance in the form of Islamist obscurantists dressing up old forms of domination in the form of patriarchy and sectarianism. But perhaps most distressing are the many feckless illiberal democracies going nowhere. Democracies are in crisis, and this has led to a crisis in democracy itself.

Democracy's Three Challengers

Oh how meek were the autocrats when the Berlin Wall was pulled down. In the binary world of the Cold War, the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union had provided the world's autocrats with a game at which they could excel. By simply siding with one or the other, any criticism could be deflected as Cold War rhetoric. The more subtle actors played one side against the other and thus sidetracked criticism from the outset as each side tried to woo the recalcitrant leader. One side or the other not only provided some form of military umbrella for its acolytes but also enveloped them in a coherent-sounding ideological framework. Even the field of human rights was divided, with the Soviet camp claiming ownership over economic and social rights while the Western camp privileged civil and political rights. Some valued the stability this world provided; others despaired at its stasis. The end of the

Cold War put an end to this binary world. For a brief moment there was a unipolar world dominated by the United States, but it quickly turned to a world of uncertainty. In this more chaotic world, the autocrats are resurgent. The resurgence of authoritarianism is detailed in Chapter 4.

Russian president Vladimir Putin has single-handedly rehabilitated authoritarianism. He has not invented anything new or original but has dusted off the old tactics. Deploying his oil wealth, he has given autocracy a patina of respectability and become the tactical leader of the authoritarian camp. Among the old tactics are appeals to nationalism and Russian exceptionalism taking the form of paranoia (“they wish to deny Russia its destiny!”). Many of the old Soviet tactics remain useful—show trials, exemplary assassinations or punishments, nomenklatura patronage for those close to the leader, control of media, and “big lie” propaganda. Putin has added a powerful new tactic unavailable to the Soviet Union because of the Marxist disquiet with religion—he can appeal to traditionalism and religious authority. He has had to move with the times and allow elections, but these proved to be negligible inconveniences once his power was consolidated. Opposition parties can rather easily be intimidated and their leaders merrily imprisoned or banished. Control of the popular electronic media through pliant oligarchs provides an insurmountable electoral advantage.

Putin has had to tolerate certain trappings of a liberal state, among them the existence of civil society. Civil society has never been a feature of Russian life, but a few buds emerged in the Yeltsin years. As in other globalized urban settings, civil society will develop if permitted to operate. It is on this issue that Putin has demonstrated his global leadership of the authoritarian world. He attacked civil society at its weakest point—its links with the international community. In a world where people, goods, money, and ideas travel quite freely, it is only to be expected that civil society will have links to like-minded groups in other parts of this globalized world. Putin attacked those links and portrayed them as unpatriotic and even seditious. He attacked the flow of money to Russian civil society and required groups receiving foreign funds to register as “foreign agents,” which retains its 007 meaning in Russian.

One group funded by the UN Democracy Fund in a provincial capital was required to so register but refused. It was prosecuted. I prefer not to name this group because it would increase its vulnerability. To our pleasant surprise the presiding judge decided in favor of our grantee, noting that the group was simply undertaking activities specifically allowed by Russian law. The outraged prosecutor appealed, but to our further surprise, the regional appeal court upheld the original

judgment. The fact that the money was coming from the UN rather than George Soros may have had some influence on these courts. Should the prosecutor appeal to the Moscow-based federal court, I have little doubt that proximity to Putin would lead to a different outcome.

But even in Russia there can be cyclical downswings affecting the government's patronage and popularity, and in these circumstances Putin resorted to a dangerous ploy available to the autocrat; fighting foreign enemies, near and far. Keeping neighbors destabilized through festered Russian-supported insurgencies in its border areas is a well-known play. Annexing foreign territory—though, admittedly, Crimea has strong links to Russia—is a far more dangerous play. Putin cannot resurrect the Cold War because he has no ideology, a single resource based economy, and limited global military reach, but he can certainly become a regional trouble maker. In any case, enemies near and far simply serve to bolster his nationalist and exceptionalist credentials.

Not content with all these powerful controls on Russian society, Putin has pioneered another. Racism and anti-Semitism are well-known tools, but they are quite difficult to deploy in a world awash with human rights doctrines and rhetoric. So Putin has had to identify a new fifth column within Russia to attract the attention of bigots whose support he covets. Thus he has privileged the fight against homosexuality as an excellent domestic diversion and a battle in which Russia can again be a world leader. Gays are the new Jews.

Putin is significant not simply because of the way he has returned Russia to its introspective petulant traditionalism but because he has emboldened other authoritarian regimes to adopt his tactics. From the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, to various parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, autocrats are being tempted to follow the Putin course and rid themselves of troublesome opposition figures and pesky NGOs. The return of old-style authoritarianism is Putin's gift to the world, and it represents a return of the old challenge to democracy.

The new challenge, coming from China, is outlined in Chapter 5. It is both a traditional rising power challenge and a brand new systems challenge. The genius of the Chinese challenge is to appropriate the economic half of the democratic system and allow its people a certain economic freedom while developing the art of soft authoritarianism and granting its people very limited political freedom. It is a far more potent threat than the old-fashioned Russian authoritarian challenge because of its impressive achievements. Lifting six hundred million people out of poverty in a single generation is a feat never before achieved. We need to be respectful of this unprecedented accomplishment.

But is the Chinese system simply another example of run-of-the-mill authoritarianism? Yes and no. The Communist Party continues to use the normal authoritarian instruments of repression: disallowing free speech, punishing dissent, deploying propaganda. But this is not the full story. It is a form of soft authoritarianism pioneered by Malaysia and Singapore that allows significant room for dissent but punishes the most threatening or at times simply capriciously punishes at random. In either case, the message gets through. But the soft nature of the repression leaves open an important safety valve allowing some of the steam of fury to escape . . . and mostly evaporate. There are one hundred thousand protests in China every year. Occasionally they may even have an impact if they do not threaten the fundamentals of single-party rule. And there is significant economic freedom and even Confucian meritocracy for those with the right education.

Perhaps the most important distinction is the Chinese leadership's ability, thus far at least, to deal with the Achilles' heel of authoritarianism: leadership succession. Next door in North Korea the solution has been dynastic, however inappropriate may be the next in line. There are clearly elements of this in China with Maoist and Dengist nomenklatura continuing to insist on its privileges. But one can only admire the apparent ease and regularity of recent leadership transitions in China. Of course, the ugly bits happen behind locked doors and the eligible cohort is tiny. One reason for this orderly procession of leaders is that it is good for the business of government and the entire political camp benefits. But there is an important, unstated, underlying premise behind the process; it is no longer a winner-takes-all game. The outgoing leader retains status and privilege and even influence, and his family members retain the massive wealth they have accumulated.

This is an important advance on the usual method of bloody coup. It is true that Zhao Ziyang was purged because he showed sympathy toward the Tiananmen demonstrators, but with that political exception, succession has been peaceful and orderly. Until now. President Xi Jinping's current anticorruption purge is bringing down some very big fish and undermining the unstated underlying premise. The purge is without a doubt political and not simply following the course of blind justice. If all corruption were targeted, then the regime would fall. One of the theses advanced in this book is that Leninist capitalism *necessarily* leads to corruption.

Another important advance made by China is its ability to use the carrot even more than the stick. China's growth and relative wealth has allowed it the resources to solve many problems. The purge under guise

of an anticorruption campaign has been used quite sparingly. There has been no need to descend to Stalinist or Maoist levels because the government has the resources and often the competence to fix many problems. Indeed, it is this aspect that provides its greatest claim to legitimacy. China's soft authoritarianism rests on performance legitimacy, and as long as it is able to maintain this level of performance, it will remain a challenge to liberal democracy.

The third challenge to democracy comes from an ancient source. Chapter 6 opens with a discussion of the relationship between democracy and religion. They are incompatible if one adopts a fundamentalist perspective on religion. If laws are god-given, then humans had better stay out of the game of debating, negotiating, and passing laws. If laws are god-given, then there is no room for a parliamentary or even an executive branch of government because the priests can perform this role, though I guess there may be room for priestly judges to try to unravel the inevitable inconsistencies and lacunae of any legal system and for priestly police to implement it. Societies around the world grappled with the religion problem and found varying solutions. A very sophisticated solution is that god gave humans the gift of freewill, thus allowing humans to govern themselves individually and collectively. A complementary though accidental solution to the problem emerged in the New World, the destination for the sects and religions fleeing persecution in the Old World. These settlers believed deeply in religion but feared the wrath they had experienced under a dominant or state religion. They pragmatically agreed that no single religion should be allowed to become a state religion in the United States. Thus was born modern secularism.

Employing the concept of free will and deploying the practice of secularism, religion found a way to coexist with democracy, and though various tensions may at times occur, this dynamic can and does apply to all religions. But if a group rejects these concepts of coexistence and insists that its religion contains all the certainties and provides all the answers any society needs, then democracy is clearly being challenged. Islam has demonstrated over the course of many centuries and in many different parts of the world that it can coexist with temporal government. Accordingly, Islam can also happily coexist with democracy, and several such examples are emerging. But one small group within the Islamic world, feeding on grievances and intoxicated with the prospect of power, rejects temporal power and democracy in favor of an Islamic caliphate where the Koran is the constitution. For want of a better term, the consensus is to call these people jihadis and their ideology jihadism. Admittedly, this has denatured a common meaning of *jihad* as a personal struggle for

righteousness. But usage changes language, and, regrettably, jihad now has a nasty political meaning.

This book argues that religion becomes incompatible with democracy when it mutates from a belief system to a political ideology. Jihadism has thus mutated. Jihadism has certain attractions. Doctrinally, it is simple to understand. The world it describes is one of black and white, right and wrong, allowed and forbidden, *halal* and *haram*. There are no difficult gray areas. Tactically, jihad is particularly convenient. After all, when god has established heaven on earth and shown the path toward it (through jihad), nothing can stand in the way. Everything done in service to progress along that path is justified. Concepts such as human rights or humanitarian law are simply seen as imperfect and inferior positive law at best and the tricks of the enemies of god at worst. Emotionally, jihad is exciting. The concept of a soldier of god has been a recruiting tool for millennia. Why spend years studying, then competing with many others, while often being discriminated against, simply to achieve a boring middle-class existence, when the prospect of adventure in the service of god beckons? Simple, convenient, exciting; no wonder thousands of Muslims from all over the world including Western countries are flocking to the Levant in the service of jihad.

Which leads to another important distinction between jihadism and democracy—the former is utopian while the latter is resigned to pragmatism and least-worst outcomes. Demagogues seeking a path to power have been deploying visions of utopia for millennia, and even in a sophisticated Internet-enabled world, utopia still sells. Jihadism is selling a vague mirage-like version of utopia based on Islam's creation myths and in doing so has rejected modernity and its institutions though not its weaponry. Democracy is correctly seen as an institution of modernity and therefore has no place in the jihadi vision.

Who Are the Allies of Democratization?

The dominant theory of democratization is modernization. It has much to commend it. It links democracy tightly to economic development and wealth accumulation, processes that have near universal approval. It sees democracy as the almost inevitable result of the end of large-scale poverty. Modernization theory does not depend on an individual leader or thinker. Like Marxism, it depends on the demands of an entire economic class—in this case the middle class rather than the working class. According to modernization theory, it is only upon becoming a significant class

in society that the middle class will exert its influence. By that point it will be sufficiently powerful economically and politically that national leaders will find it difficult to ignore its demands. Having achieved material security, modernization theory posits that middle-class people will shift the goal posts. The new goals will broaden beyond the economy and turn to more political issues concerning government services, quality of life, and individual freedom. Before too long, the middle class will see democracy as the instrument to achieve its goals and will insist on democracy's adoption.

Modernization theory attempts to supplant Marxism as the better explanation of the march of history. It has some powerful empirical evidence in support. After all, most of the wealthy countries of the world are democratic. And some of the more phoenix-like transitions from poverty and authoritarianism to wealth and democracy, as in South Korea and Taiwan, tend to fit the thesis of middle-class leadership. Supporters of modernization theory explain exceptions to the rule, such as autocratic Gulf monarchies, as the odd results of rentier economies buoyed by petro dollars. It is also true, with the towering exceptions of India and perhaps Indonesia, that poor countries struggle to build democratic systems.

The middle class is a comforting group to take on the mantle of the transformational actor in society. Middle-class people have achieved a lot. They live relatively comfortably and send their children to school and, often, university. They plan ahead and husband their resources to meet their future needs. In other words, middle-class people have much to lose. The middle-class concept of transition is based on dialogue and peaceful protest, on building coalitions of supporters, and on changing leaders through elections. The middle class prefers pacted transitions over violent overthrow, truth commissions over street justice, and order over chaos so as to maintain its business interests and comfortable lifestyles. Contrast the middle-class scenario with the Marxist precedent: working-class rage directed at society at large, leading inevitably to violence and destruction and without a single precedent of establishing a functioning democracy in its wake.

Chapter 7 examines modernization theory and compares it with other ideas on the process of democratization. As is so often the case in the social sciences, it is difficult to come to a definitive answer that responds to every situation, but clearly, modernization theory retains a powerful explanatory capacity. It seems to work best, however, where the middle class is not only politically strong but also constitutes a majority. What happens when the middle class is powerful and succeeds

in having a democratic system adopted but the majority remains poor and aggrieved? One effect of democratization in this case is that poor people, underprivileged people, and rural people will be significant beneficiaries of the middle class's agitation. They will gain the right to vote and to participate in the politics of their nations. When those underprivileged classes in society seize the possibilities opened by the middle class and proceed to elect their own champions, and those champions begin the process of opening greater opportunity for their political base, where will the middle class stand?

I have probably landed in Bangkok more than in any other city in the world, having served much of my diplomatic career in Southeast Asia, for which Bangkok is the key hub. As a student of democracy, I found Thailand in the late 1990s and early 2000s to be worth watching as it embarked on one of the great deliberative democracy experiments of our time. I spoke to many people in Bangkok involved in drafting a new constitution that would cement Thai democracy once and for all. The middle class at its best. The result, elaborated at greater length in Chapter 7, was such a success that people other than the urban middle class and the elite it supported became interested in democracy. It would not take long before a politician would add up the numbers and start targeting the votes of the non-middle-class majority. Through cynicism, electoral calculation, and attractive policies Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's richest person, accidentally became their hero. An outsider to the established Bangkok elite, he began the process of reshaping the established elite to his commercial needs. They fought back.

I am shocked and embarrassed that nearly all my friends and colleagues in Bangkok who worked so hard to bring democracy to their country now side with the antidemocratic forces that adopted the (late) king as their mascot. They disparage the majority of their fellow citizens as country bumpkins and buffoons. They create the strawman argument that Thaksin wished to overthrow the monarchy, when all he wanted was to ingratiate himself with the royal family using the vast means at his disposal. And, most distressing of all, they argue that one aspect of democracy—elections—are, after all, not really appropriate to their country (because the Thaksin forces peskily keep winning them).

Thailand is an unusual country, proud never to have been colonized, and perhaps we can simply call it an outlier of modernization theory or idiosyncratic in various ways. The middle class according to modernization theory builds democracy, it doesn't undermine it. Or perhaps it does both, depending on where its interests lie. Thailand, it turns out, is not that unusual. On three other continents in three other countries we

can trace a not dissimilar phenomenon of the middle class turning against electoral democracy. The middle class in each country is distinctive, each has traveled by a different path, and each may have valid reasons for some of its actions, but the point remains that in Egypt, Turkey, and Venezuela, the middle class rejects the electoral will of the majority and now harbors doubts about the validity of democracy in its country.

Perhaps the middle class is democracy's champion only when it is a majority. That may be the case in Western countries, but it is never the case in the global South. So is there another candidate? According to Alexis de Tocqueville, civil society fits the bill. Tocqueville noted that associational life in the New World was spontaneous and self-generating. It provided a context in which the community holds a conversation and prepares the foundations for the marketplace of ideas so central to a living democracy. This organized realm of public life is not generated by the profit motive, thus taking it outside the parallel realm of rational economic choice. Clearly, civil society cannot be part of the state, thus creating the contestability so necessary for sound policy formulation. And from the perspective of the global South, perhaps the most critical aspect of civil society is that it is outside the family and thus has the opportunity to be outside all the ascriptive allegiances of religion, ethnicity, and patriarchy that so bedevil its politics. Civil society builds the social capital on which democracies thrive.

In the course of my time as head of the UN Democracy Fund, we received more than twenty thousand applications for funding from all over the global South and we made grants to some six hundred civil society organizations. These are sufficiently large numbers to allow me to draw some tentative conclusions about civil society, especially in the global South. The first and most obvious conclusion is that people are clamoring to take part in the public conversations of their nations. UNDEF projects are voice projects, and we funded dozens of ways for civil society to have voice: dissemination of views; advocacy for policy positions; commentary on constitutional or legislative amendment; networking among the like-minded; production of tools such as websites and repositories to aid in the public conversation; production of media products for newspaper, television, and radio; and, of course, the ubiquitous training processes for all sorts of people from civil society leaders to youth leaders to newly elected legislators, local and national. UNDEF funded the demand side of democratization.

Another conclusion is that the quality of civil society varies greatly. At one end were well-meaning groups that had little idea how to achieve an impact while at the other were highly experienced organizations that

knew how to deliver projects. What we have seen over the past couple of decades is both an exhilarating growth of civil society organizations in nearly every country and a flinty professionalism among the top tier born from Darwinian competition for scarce resources. Which gets us to the nub of the problem. While civil society is essential for democracy, its cost needs to be met by private discretionary funding and perhaps competitive grants from disinterested public funds. Wealthy countries have the tax base, philanthropists, discretionary income, discretionary time, active retired folk, rich parents, and dedicated self-funded people to staff the needs of civil society. Poor countries have far less of each of these pools of funding. A solution to this dilemma flows from global solidarity. Part of the mission of civil society in the global North is to contribute to the funding of civil society in the global South. But this solution is also an Achilles' heel—if autocrats can choke off the flow of funding from North to South by internal regulations, then they can financially asphyxiate their own civil societies. As noted, Vladimir Putin has anointed himself as leader of the world's autocrats and pioneered the means of suffocating infant civil societies. That autocrats consider it necessary to attack civil society in their countries is perhaps the best piece of evidence of its efficacy in democratization. Autocrats fear civil society.

There are various ways one can analyze societies. The discussion on civil society depicts society as a three-circle Venn diagram of government sector, commercial sector, and civil society sector overlapping each other to a greater or lesser extent nation by nation. But an even more basic way of looking at society is as a Venn diagram of two gendered circles with the overlap representing those who do not fit neatly into one circle or the other for reasons of physiology or predilection. Different-sized circles can be used for different issues. Because women generally live longer than men, the female circle will be the larger when considering population size. If, however, one were to consider ownership of land, the male circle would be vast compared to the tiny size of the women's circle. And though it is a difficult phenomenon to measure, a gendered Venn diagram of political power in the world would be not dissimilar to the circles of land ownership. We cannot discuss democracy without also discussing gender, and this is the subject of Chapter 8.

I am somewhat reluctant to launch into this area because of my gender. Some feminists may believe that only women can fully understand the relevant issues. They may be correct, but to abandon a subject to only those who identify with the subject matter is to adopt a deeply unscholarly approach. Should only Christians comment on Christianity? Should only Americans debate American politics? The issue of the role

of women in society is one for everybody to engage with. I am a lawyer who focuses on politics, a diplomat who concentrates on nonstate actors, and a man prepared to write about women's empowerment.

The starting point of any discussion of women and politics is an acknowledgment that all our forbearer agricultural societies began as patriarchies. Troglodyte societies provide us with the iconic meme of a club-wielding caveman dragging a woman back to his cave. This image seems to have two deep truths. The first is that the man is normally the stronger and can overpower the woman. The second is that the man is treating the woman as a chattel to be used for various purposes such as food gathering and preparation, child bearing and rearing, and of course sex. It has been ten thousand years since humankind left the caves for built environments, but we are still negotiating a path away from that caveman trope. Many issues continue to flow from the power/chattel dynamic. Gender violence is almost uniformly unidirectional and manifests itself in everyday life in the home. Violence in wartime strikes the mainly male warriors, but when it engulfs the civilian population it is again women who suffer disproportionately, including through that thus far historically inescapable act of war known as rape. The impact of being considered as a chattel also continues with women usually working land they do not own, unable to escape relationships of dependency and legally blocked from inheriting wealth-producing assets. That cave does not seem so far away. But the great irony that will be elaborated in Chapter 8 is that we are the cavemen and our hunter-gatherer forebears were the metrosexuals.

The insidious aspect of the situation of most women on the planet is that although they continue to live under the shadow of violence and continue to be treated as little more than chattels, the package in which this system is wrapped is called *tradition*, which women are taught to respect and defend. I had a terrible experience of this in Sierra Leone when I visited an admirable group of women who were delivering a project to help give voice to victims of sexual violence—in other words, other women and girls. They worked so hard to comfort the victims and help them to bear witness. They stood as advocates between the victims and the system of police and courts. They even found the money to pay for bus fares to the hospitals and court rooms. As the subject was violence against women, I had the temerity over a delicious lunch of chicken and rice to ask them about their work in relation to female genital mutilation. I experienced immediate pushback! “We don’t call it that. It is simply called cutting.” It was presented as a relatively minor issue of little medical threat and no great harm. So I

asked if their daughters would also be cut. Only one woman was not nodding sagely. She said she was moving to the UK and so did not have to continue this tradition.

Women are annoying chattels. They don't hold still or always do as they are told. They sometimes wish to have their own opinions. But most distressing of all, they have their own biological sex drives to satisfy a Darwinian urge to reproduce. This might even lead them to sneak away from the cave and allow another man to try to impregnate them. Harried men have had to confront this problem through the ages, and different societies have found their own solutions. We are familiar with the medieval chastity belt as a solid physical solution. We have read the stories of eunuchs guarding harems. But there is another physical solution that continues to allow your woman to have your children but makes sex so unpleasant as to greatly diminish the prospect that your woman will voluntarily wish to have sex with you or anybody else. Hack off the woman's clitoris and labia. Dress the practice up as an example of gender equality by calling it circumcision. And then step away from the practice altogether and inculcate it as a mother-to-daughter tradition that has nothing to do with men. Pretty damn clever!

These intelligent and committed women in Sierra Leone were now caught in the system. Their daughters cannot join the women's league in their villages unless they go through the cutting initiation ceremony. To be outside these Bondo societies is to be an outcast in one's own community. These admirable women of Sierra Leone were fighting sexual violence while inflicting it on their own daughters.

Tradition has not been kind to women. Tradition derives from patriarchy, and it retains many patriarchal practices dissimulated as genderless time-honored custom. Modernity has been kinder to women. Modernity allows women to negotiate a path away from the most noxious of the patriarchal traditions. Democracy is women's key to modernity.

Women need democracy, but democracy needs women just as much. Women are the world's largest underprivileged group. Democracy will only succeed if it offers a means for the underprivileged to have voice and a say in dealing with their own predicament. If women identify democracy as a means of their empowerment, democracy will be immeasurably strengthened. Chapter 8 will outline this process. Women need to do much of the heavy lifting, but they will not succeed without a change of attitude by men. Of course we need to continue to invest in women's rights and women's voice, but the investment will not bring the dividends we seek unless we also invest in men and boys and show that there is a path out of the cave; that they do not have to

wear beards and carry guns to be men; and that the world will be in better balance when everybody can contribute to their fullest capacity.

How to Respond?

If I might be allowed to borrow from a showbiz dichotomy about death and comedy: analysis is easy, action is hard. Yes, it is best to begin action with a pretty good understanding of what one is trying to achieve or to fix. And yes, it is good to have a powerful theory to guide one's actions. But action remains so difficult because we have such limited tools at our disposal. Chapter 9 unpacks the democratization tool kit.

According to the recent Bush administration, the military is a powerful tool to bring about democratization. Fifteen years later in Afghanistan that proposition remains in great doubt, a view compounded by the tangled mess military intervention triggered in Iraq. Investment and globalization are also available tools, but they follow a market logic and are not generally undertaken at the beck and call of governments. Governments have limited means of influencing the direction of trade and investment—tax policies, trade promotion, investment treaties, and reductions of official barriers to trade and investment. These are not insignificant, but they do not fundamentally influence the rational economic decisions that direct the flow of trade and investment. Soft power is a mighty tool, but it hovers well above the world of policy prescriptions. What remains is a rather weak tool known as official development assistance (ODA).

In April 1946, Evsey Domar, a US economist, published an article that suggested there was a gap in developing countries between available financing for investment (such as through domestic savings) and the requirements for investment in productive capital, and that this gap could be filled with ODA, thus achieving the targeted growth rate. There are so many unrealistic assumptions underpinning this “financing gap” model that Domar himself quickly disavowed it, but it nevertheless became the theoretical basis for ODA and it continues to haunt the field. One of the assumptions is that capital is necessarily productive, but anyone who has tramped around the world will soon harbor doubts. I have seen abandoned rice silos in Burma built by the Australian government that crushed the rice they were supposed to store—they were apparently good wheat silos!—and an unused desiccated coconut factory in Tonga, also built from ODA, that died from lack of simple maintenance. There are highways going nowhere, stadiums with weeds

growing through the cracks, and I have even dodged the dripping water in the Chinese-built parliament building in Vanuatu that leaked alarmingly, though only in the rainy season.

If ODA is the main weapon to solve the world's problems, then we are in deep trouble! I need to declare my interests at the outset of this discussion: I have had my snout in the ODA trough for many years. In all those years, I delivered my little piece of the ODA product without too much protestation. Upon retirement, I am freer to express my doubts. First of all, ODA is a bait-and-switch game. The bait is ODA as an instrument for economic development. But ODA abandoned this goal long ago in reaction to its utter inability to influence economic development in any measurable way. There is not a single case of ODA lifting any nation out of poverty. The focus of ODA switched to other goals—emergency assistance after natural and human-made catastrophe, education and health programs, expert advice on a vast range of subjects, and a switch of emphasis from economic development to human development. I am not critical of this change in focus because it is a rational response to the failure to have an appreciable impact on economic development, but of course ODA continues to be sold to the public as a key to economic development. If the world can divorce itself from its previous rhetoric (the D in ODA), then it may well be possible to use this bundle of funding for more useful purposes.

How did the rich countries develop? It was certainly not by ODA, though there is an argument that the profits from colonialism filled the financing gap in a previous age. Interestingly, the corollary to this argument is that ODA is in fact a form of reparations for the unjust profiteering from colonialism . . . but that is an issue for another time and place. Rich countries developed because their people pioneered ways of efficient production of goods, which dramatically grew the economic pie. This is often referred to as the industrial revolution. It was followed by further revolutions in literacy, health, consumption, trade, communications, and services. The fuel for these revolutions was innovation, productivity, risk-based investment, and, to a certain extent, supportive government policies. The point about this process is its self-generating basis, with the people playing the major part and the government cast in a critical supporting role.

ODA adopts the exact opposite approach. The government is cast as the main player, and the people have a lesser, often passive role. It is as if all the lessons learned from the economic success of the donor countries have been conveniently forgotten to allow a system of cozy government-to-government relations in which ODA is used as a means to obtain an

array of donor government objectives, originally as part of the alliance-building process of the Cold War, then supporting globalization in the fields of trade and investment, and now in the various policies we have chosen to call wars—against drugs and terrorism. Then let's stop calling it ODA and call it "official bribery assistance" instead. As I said, I have been a part of the ODA game for quite a while and can attest to the fact that many others involved in ODA share this disquiet.

In Chapter 9 I will outline a better philosophy and direction for ODA. Let's get the proportions right. The people have the major role to play in civic, economic, social, and cultural development, and governments have an important but discreet supportive role. So let's have the major flow of ODA directed at the people and a modest flow going to governments. This sounds like such a simple prescription, but it would in fact represent a radical turnaround. How can ODA support the people? Thankfully, there is nothing new to invent here. For many years ODA has recognized the limitations of directing its flow solely through governments, which lack the capacity (another term for *incompetence*) and commitment (a euphemism for *corruption*) to best use these funds. Many different processes have been developed to directly fund people: competitive scholarships, competitive grants to civil society, blind investment trusts where decisionmaking is outside the hands of donor and receiving governments. In a strange way, Evsey Domar's discredited theory had a kernel of truth. There is a financing gap, and ODA can help fill this financing gap—but not if the means of doing so is to funnel the financing through the receiving government. By directly funding individuals, civil society organizations, and businesses, ODA can help fill the financing gap to help society grow in an organic way. Let's help empower people, and then those people can empower their own governments through taxes and votes.

The "people first" philosophy is clearly the way forward, but it is not without problems. Of course there will be howls of protest from receiving governments, but that is what diplomacy is for. There are two more serious structural problems. While receiving governments have been assigned a more modest role in my reenvisioned ODA process, what should be the role of donor governments? As things stand, they play a dominant role, so only half the problem is solved. Donor governments have many policy objectives, and it is not much of a stretch to see ODA morphing into a weapon in the war against terrorism if they are left to their own devices. That is not ODA's purpose. Terrorism feeds off grievances, and ODA is a weapon to help deal with the causes of those grievances. The solution is to leave a

modest part of ODA delivery to donor governments while developing a system to privilege the involvement of people in donor countries. There is an effective way to achieve this result—through the tax system. Chapter 9 will outline how the tax system can engineer a system of people-to-people ODA, leaving governments to deal with the more modest government-to-government slice of ODA.

There was a time when scholars and practitioners thought the solution to the democratization puzzle passed through the process of institutional design. This flowed from a sentiment that government was not an art but a science. Articulation of this sentiment came from the rescue of the ancient word *governance*. The basis of governance, the rules of governance, and the practice of governance could all be scientifically crafted to achieve societal goals and, in particular, democratization. This dovetailed with a shift in the expert advice provided by ODA from fields such as engineering and hydrology to fields such as constitutionalism and parliamentary practice. The new field was called *institutional design*, and Chapter 9 will elaborate on some of these design issues. The field encompasses a number of important areas including constitution drafting, electoral system design, executive branch efficiencies, and improvements in the systems of accountability and transparency.

I need to disclose that I was one of those “experts” in leading the Australian Centre for Democratic Institutions, which assisted parliaments and judiciaries in Southeast Asia to improve their performance. I embarked upon this venture without any particular cynicism. I shared the view that better processes and designs would inch along the curve of governance progress, passing the threshold of competence and eventually leading to a virtuous cycle of responsiveness to public needs. In retrospect, I was buoyed by undue optimism. Yes, legislators, executives, and judges can become more competent at their tasks, and many welcomed the links with their peers and access to new ideas; but increasing the skills of key actors does not change the systems in which they operate. They remain in thrall to the political economy and political culture in which they find themselves. Deep changes, as required in democratization, can only come with changes to the political economy and political culture. Democracy cannot be improved by focusing only on the supply of institutions; it has to be influenced equally by the demand for good policy and outcomes. I came to a rather dispiriting conclusion about institutional design: poor institutional design will deepen and exacerbate problems of governance, but felicitous institutional design cannot itself resolve those problems—it is only one of many aspects that will have an impact on the issues.

The final chapter will identify a few of the low-hanging fruits we can pick to kick-start the process of reforming and renewing our democracies. It focuses primarily on the United States and its dysfunctional electoral system. The electoral system is the most accessible area of institutional design and the one with the most immediate consequences. It is also an area where some useful reform work has already been accomplished and where other initiatives are in progress. It is therefore a realistic option. I am not suggesting that Americans abandon their presidential system and adopt Westminster parliamentary designs, though this may well be one way out of the current vetocracy. That would be a bridge too far. The objective needs to go beyond reforming an institution of democracy. We need to demonstrate that reform is possible, that democracy has not been caught in a time warp of originalism, and that deliberation remains a means to finding better solutions.

No society is static, and therefore all societies must continually review and address their situation. Democracy is the system that best allows this process to be conducted fairly and sustainably. Democracy needs to undertake this task and be seen to do so. Today, however, the pressure is mounting. The world is facing unprecedented challenges. Climate change is the most difficult to deal with. The loss of prestige of globalization threatens to undermine the global economic system. The large and growing reality of inequality in nearly every country in the world cannot long continue without causing inevitable explosions. And conflicts stubbornly continue to erupt. There has never been a time when we are in greater need of functioning democratic systems to help us deal with and adjust to these challenges. Are those systems in place?

Democracy is in crisis all over the world, and the time for action has come.