

## DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN 2012

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In assessing the health of democracy around the world, many conclusions can be drawn from the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2011 annual assessment (1).

Among 165 independent countries studied, the report found:

- Public confidence in political institutions continued to decline in some – leading to growing public unrest that could threaten democratic governance in a number of capitals,
- Twelve Eastern European countries and seven in Western Europe saw their democracy grades slip in 2011,
- The U.S. has been adversely affected by political polarization, brinkmanship and paralysis, and so remains situated towards the bottom of countries listed as “full democracies”,
- Democracy in Latin America has been negatively affected by violence, drug trafficking and other rampant crime in some countries, and
- Near-term, the European outlook is troubling, with the resilience of Europe's political institutions tested by “harsh austerity, a new recession in 2012, high unemployment and little sign of renewed growth.”

The Economist asserts that almost half of the world's nations today are democratic, but also applies its panoply of rather Anglo-centric measurements to conclude that last year there were only 25 “full democracies”, 53 “flawed democracies”, 37 “hybrid regimes” and 52 “authoritarian regimes”. Yet which resident of the so-called “full democracies”, including the U.S., Canada and U.K., would not classify our own governance system as ‘flawed’?



Fall of Berlin Wall, November 1989

*Photo credit: the kidswindow.co.uk*

In the 44 countries of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the Economist identifies only one “full democracy” (Mauritius) among nine “flawed”, 11 “hybrid” and 23 “authoritarian” governments. This undervalues a number of encouraging indicators, including, for example, the fact that since 1991, according to another Economist survey, 30 parties or leaders in sub-Saharan Africa have been removed by voters. For a much more optimistic view of the continent, see: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/02/africas-amazing-rise-and-what-it-can-teach-the-world/253587/>.

The Economist study notes that in Central/Eastern Europe and the Balkans there has been a decline in support for democratic governance, but concedes that this might well reflect not a wish to return to authoritarianism, but instead merely “the exhaustion of contemporary political systems and a general unfocused disillusion, apathy and disengagement.” More encouragingly, support for democracy has increased in former member states of the Soviet Union.



Tehran protest after 2009 election in Iran

*Photo credit: Behrouz Mehri/AFP Images*

## **Arab Developments**

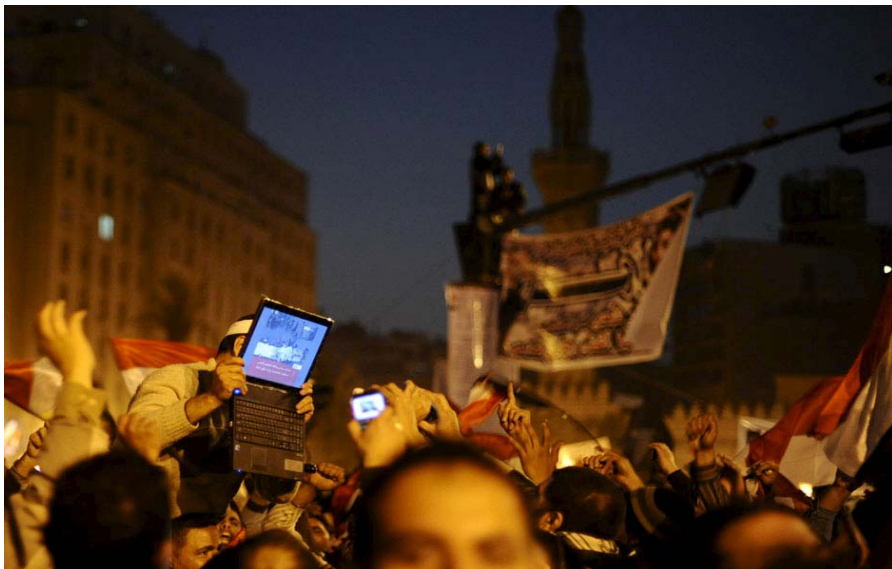
The report rightly stresses the unexpected democratization in a number of countries in the Arab world, a phenomenon which has shattered many foolish stereotypes about the Middle East and North Africa. It has also reinforced the view that people everywhere want to determine who governs them and how, and indicated that yet another wave of democratization could be underway. What was termed the ‘Authoritarian International’ has now taken major blows among 340 million Arabs, much assisted by Internet news, Al-Jazeera, Facebook, and other social media.

Democrats everywhere should be overjoyed. Outsiders should not prefer the safety of the *status quo* in the guise of “stability” over political freedom. We must not allow a fear of radical Islam to keep us from supporting nascent Arab democracies. Nor should we buy into the self-serving sophistry of tyrants that the only way to contain radical Islam is through dictatorship. There is a better way and that is what people throughout the Arab world are choosing. They must not be left to stand alone or wait in vain for the support of democrats everywhere.

Richard Rowson, president emeritus of the CCD, noted the electorate’s ability to overcome fear in an earlier U.S. electoral experience:

*... I remember well a lecture in my class on early American history... on the Presidential election campaign of Thomas Jefferson. Many feared, he said, that atheism would rule and “free love” would prevail, were Jefferson elected... yet when the election was over and the people had spoken (my professor) said, “They dug up their bibles and let their daughters out of the closet.” The fears and rumors maligning Jefferson's candidacy were quickly forgotten.*

For the 33 member nations of the Arab League – all with large Muslim majorities – a major issue in terms of democratic governance will be how to apply the direction in the holy Qur’an: “commanding right and forbidding wrong.” When Indonesia, the largest Muslim democracy, held parliamentary elections in 2009, support for extremist parties declined. Most voters seemed concerned about good governance, jobs, and economic growth. Overall, support for fundamentalist parties fell. Similarly, in Malaysia’s 2008 elections, most voted for parties that promised good governance. Parties that had purely religious agendas did poorly.



Man holding computer shouting “Internet, internet...” Feb. 2011, Tahrir Square, Cairo,

*Photo Credit: Reuters*



## Syria

Despite the torrents of mindless atrocities by the Assad regime in Syria, if the democratic revolution can somehow succeed sooner or later, it could change the strategic regional balance of power. Even the possibility of such an outcome is unnerving autocrats in Iran, China, North Korea and elsewhere. Turkey's vibrant democracy and Egypt's democratic efforts and pivotal position offer a current example of a contagious regional democracy, which is pushing "Islamists" into collaboration with moderates. Democracy and the rule of law can best accommodate both traditionalists and reformers.



Families flee fighting in Idlib, Syria, March, 2012

## Russia

With serious election irregularities reported by both Russian and international observers, Vladimir Putin was returned to the presidency in the March 4th election. It appears this was mainly because of continuing support in the Urals, Siberia and elsewhere, beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg, for order and national pride. Jeremy Kinsman, Canada's ambassador to Moscow in the 1990s and a director of the CCD, recently returned from Russia, noting that "... in the huge anti-Putin rallies... springing up of late, democratic impulses are finally beginning to assert themselves in today's Russia..." There was fortunately little government interference with the pre-election rallies; there were also large pro- and anti-Putin ones before and after the election.

A month before the voting, Mikhail Gorbachev predicted that Putin would be swept from power by Russia's new "glasnost generation" unless he meets their demands for democratic reform. Gorbachev added that Putin should not be

seeking an unprecedented third term after a pact to swap jobs with President Dmitry Medvedev: “The difficulty facing Putin is that so many problems have piled up in the country. Many people, including some who are close to him, feel that we are in a kind of a dead end... The time has come for a renewal and a change of the entire team.”

A recent article on Russia’s ‘crony capitalism’ by the Canadian Chrystia Freeland makes important related points: <http://goo.gl/ZZzeP>.

### **Democratization in Fragile Nations**

Pauline Baker, president emeritus of the Fund for Peace, discussed democratization in fragile states in a 2011 article. She is encouraged by the toppling of despots in North Africa and the Middle East, concluding that grass roots political action, as opposed to military coups and assassinations, are becoming the primary means of removing unpopular leaders in many parts of the world. She agrees that elections are an essential feature of democratization, but thinks they can be conflict-inducing if “held too soon, are blatantly manipulated, lack transparency, or are marked by violence.” She adds that “even if conducted efficiently, they may result in power shifts that not only marginalize powerful elites, but entire communities, creating sectarian or ethnic conflict.”

In Baker’s view, state building offers the best way to avoid potential problems, such as civil conflict, humanitarian emergencies and national break-ups. This will include writing new constitutions, providing basic freedoms, having free and fair elections, and building or restructuring key institutions. The latter would include the public service, police, armed forces, judicial, legislative and executive branches. She finds Tunisia’s transition, whose constituent assembly is charged with writing a new constitution and appointing an interim government, to be the best current model in use.

The International Criminal Court and other international judicial mechanisms can play important roles in hastening the demise of authoritarian regimes. True, their presence can sometimes delay democratization because a tyrant concerned about being indicted is more likely than not to hold on to power. But they can also improve the quality of governance over the longer term by encouraging, through their presence, greater accountability on the part of public officials.

When Central and Eastern Europeans rose against totalitarianism in 1989, outsiders rushed to cheer them on. When Burmese monks led protests against the country’s military rulers in 2007, we encouraged them and insisted that the generals must go. When Iran’s regime launched a bloody crackdown on peaceful demonstrators following its massively-rigged 2009 presidential election, we demanded that those responsible be sanctioned. There was no talk of indefinite transition periods or turning to yesterday’s tyrants to oversee moves towards democratic futures. We understood that the transitions, after years of despotism, would be messy. We expected that mistakes would be made. Democracies everywhere are works in constant and flawed progress or retreat.

## Conclusion

In multi-party democracies, citizens voluntarily give governments the authority to rule, but must remain engaged in the political process to ensure good governance. The goal is to provide without fear or favouritism all residents with fulfilled lives, and for social, regional, national and international harmony to prevail.

Some governments have, to the detriment of democratic progress elsewhere, overlooked their own principles as they pursue economic interests or seek what they believe will be their own security. Abusive and totalitarian regimes are even praised. How many times have those fighting for the rule of law and basic freedoms been abandoned by democratic governments because it might cost them something to help?

The world admires Nelson Mandela of South Africa; Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma; and Gao Zhisheng, Liu Xiaobo and many other democrats languishing in prisons across China and elsewhere – yet most of us rarely pay a price as nations to assist their efforts meaningfully.



Protesters featuring photograph of jailed Chinese human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng walk to the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong.

*Photo credit: GETTY*

The CCD and other governance-focused NGOs provide important outreach to civil society in countries yet to achieve democracy. One useful tool is the CCD Diplomat's Handbook for Democracy Development. (<http://www.diplomatshandbook.org/>). Widespread democracy education is urgently needed to spread the concept. How many know, for example, as the Indian economist Amartya Sen has pointed out, that famines do not occur in functioning democracies because leaders must be responsive to citizen demands?





President Barack Obama congratulates economist Amartya Sen after presenting him with a 2011 National Humanities Medal, February, 2012 *Photo credit: daylife.com*

Democracy banners flew over virtually every national capital in the second half of the twentieth century, even North Korea and Zimbabwe, no matter how much realities mocked political freedom. Democracies should stand always against oppression, terror, corruption and segregation – and thrive on diversity, differences and respect for all persons and cultural communities. Their peoples understand and support what Aung San Suu Kyi said about universal concepts. She spoke about Burma, but her words seem equally applicable everywhere, “It is a puzzlement to the Burmese how concepts which recognize the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of human beings, which accept that all (persons) are endowed with reason and conscience and which recommend a spirit of brotherhood, can be inimical to indigenous values.”



Aung San Suu Kyi campaigning in February, 2012

Democracies exist today in all regions of the world. The universal desire for representative government, guaranteed human dignity, and the rule of law

continues to have momentum. It is now supported by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), which supports one in three parliaments in the developing world and an election every two weeks. In 2010, it helped over 130 countries and devoted US\$ 1.36 billion in resources to democratic governance programs.

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<http://goo.gl/fByqW>