

# Worldview: Democracy at risk - from West

Trudy Rubin, *Inquirer Opinion Columnist*

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Any member of Congress who refuses to compromise on the budget sequester this week should be given this mandatory assignment: Read *Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government*.

Author Joshua Kurlantzick examines the spate of retreating democracies over the last two decades and finds something startling. The middle classes - supposedly the bulwark of democracy worldwide - are often turning against it. As our governmental paralysis continues, the same thing could well happen here.

Two decades ago, Francis Fukuyama famously argued, in *The End of History and the Last Man*, that the world would inevitably evolve toward liberal democracy and market economics. Yet 2013 represents the seventh consecutive year that declines in freedom outweighed gains, according to the Freedom House index.

Kurlantzick offers keen insights into what has gone wrong.

After 1991, the Soviet economic model was discredited. Former communist states turned toward democracy, along with many developing countries. Yet too often they assumed that embracing democracy would confer instant wealth.

"It was a widely held belief in East and Central Europe, and in most emerging democracies," says Kurlantzick, "that democracy would bring prosperity. When the first years brought slow growth, that was a real disillusionment."

Absent a culture of democracy or strong leadership, many new democracies struggled; the high expectations of poorer citizens were shattered. But what accounts for the growing frustrations with democracy evinced by its supposed middle-class bulwark - in countries as diverse as Venezuela, Thailand, Egypt, and the Philippines?

Much of the problem can be ascribed to the Three C's - chaos, corruption, and the crash.

Democracy can open the door to irresponsible populists such as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, who appeal to the poor (and often wreck the economy). The middle class feels its well-being is threatened.

Moreover, when dictatorships fall in countries with no rule-of-law tradition, a political vacuum often breeds lawlessness and chaos. A prime example is Egypt, where much of the middle class, and many urban poor, now yearn for the stability they had under Hosni Mubarak, though they once rallied against him in Tahrir Square.

Corruption has also become associated with newly open societies. "Rising corruption can lead to popular alienation with democracy," writes Kurlantzick. In autocracies, corruption is usually controlled at the center, but the collapse of such regimes provides much broader opportunities for graft.

One of many examples: In postcommunist Russia, Boris Yeltsin's fire sale of state-owned natural resources to private "oligarchs" convinced ordinary Russians that democracy equaled theft, and fueled the yearning for a new strongman.

Middle-class anger has also been stoked by the 2008 financial crash, which resulted in huge economic pain yet let most of the bankers who caused it off the hook.

Little wonder that much of the world began to question the validity of the Western liberal economic model. All the more so when the European Union can't resolve its postcrash financial crises, and Washington can't get its fiscal act together. As one State Department official quoted by Kurlantzick puts it: "How can we with a straight face be telling countries in Africa and the Middle East that they need to develop better systems for governing when we can't even pass a budget?" Indeed.

With the Western model in decline, little wonder, too, that many Asian, African, and Latin American nations look with new interest at the Chinese model of *undemocratic* development, mixing capitalism with continued government control of key sectors in an authoritarian state.

However, let me stress this: Whatever the risks to U.S. interests posed by the growing gravitational pull of China, the biggest threat to global democracy lies within the West itself.

If Western citizens lose faith in their own systems, new democracies are bound to do likewise. In Europe, postcrash austerity has aggravated job loss and impoverished many middle- and working-class citizens, especially in southern Europe. The post-World War II social contract that ended a century of European conflict is fraying. Right-wing fringe groups are attracting more of the vote.

Meantime, middle-class Americans feel threatened by rising inequality and permanent job loss - and their fear leads to disillusionment with government. Congress is paralyzed, with Republicans pressed by their hard-liners to reject any compromise on revenue and spending. Irresponsible fringe groups proliferate, fueled by billionaire backers. Conspiracy theories go viral on the Internet, like the one I just received, proclaiming: "Secret Obama plot to stay in power until 2020."

America's deep democratic roots and strong civic organizations remain a bulwark. Yet relentless right-wing efforts to demonize government undermine our democratic institutions. Washington's meltdown convinces the world that our democracy can no longer deliver.

And when the world's paramount democracy can't function, why would developing countries want to follow our lead?