



How democracies die: What history reveals about our future

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to be business as usual before too long. This book is a very welcome academic treatment of an important 'security' institution in Pakistan.

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How democracies die: What history reveals about our future, by
Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, London, Viking, 2018, 312 pp., £16.99
(hardback), ISBN 0241317983

It goes without saying that the book by Levitsky and Ziblatt comes at the right time. Both Harvard scholars provide an authoritative contribution to a growing literature in political science, one that has developed over the last few years around the general theme of autocratisation. The development of scientific interest in the processes of political change and transition towards autocracy reflects the change in the political environment and discourses since the nineties. This transformed into the slow transition of periods of optimism towards the diffusion of democracy, through a more realistic approach due to the emerging problems of democratic consolidation in newly established democracies, and takes us up to the present pessimism (still, not always justified, as the previous enthusiasm) as far as the fate of democracy is concerned. Beyond the conjunctural and even emotional aspects related to the development of democracy and democratisation worldwide, there are solid empirical elements that justify the growing interest in the process of autocratisation: these phenomena occur with alarming frequency, despite the difference in intensity and outcomes, in different regions of the globe. For instance, Venezuela, Hungary, Russia, Thailand, Ecuador, all belong to a growing set of countries that are moving (or have already moved) towards increased authoritarianism.

In this context, what is the added value of this book? Both authors are established scholars in the field of political regime studies and in this volume, which is clearly aimed at broader audiences, they bring all their experience of study and dissemination to these issues. The central message of the book is directed towards an American audience and is loud and clear: when it comes to democracy and the risks to democracy, the United States (US) is no exception. What is happening, or happened in other parts of the world, can happen or is already happening in the US, and the experiences of other countries can be useful to understand and find a solution for the democratic problems of the US.

The book thus mainly focuses on the US, however, as in the best tradition of comparative politics, the authors regularly refer to other countries and contexts, past or present, as a tool used to better understand and explain the US case. So, what is happening to American democracy? The authors' thesis is that the

Trump presidency is both the logical consequence of a long process of deterioration of the formal and informal rules of democracy, and one of the most serious risks of an authoritarian turn that American democracy has ever faced.

Through the chapters of the book, the authors lead us into a gallery/museum of (political) horrors through the historical examples of how democracy 'died' in other countries, or at least was severely compromised: from Fascist Italy to Chavist Venezuela, through the Chilean military coup of the seventies, Putin's Russia or Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. From these examples, the authors draw a clear conclusion, which is then applied to the American case. Through the various examples of autocratisation, the authors contend that the institutional and political safeguarding tools used to counter authoritarian leaders, prevent their rise to power and limit their actions have failed, which is a phenomenon that is also observable in the US case. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, Donald Trump is the result of this failure: the relinquishment of the safeguarding role of political parties (and here the responsibilities of the Republican Party are extensively described), and the progressive dismantling of two basic rules of American democracy highlighted by the authors, namely the forbearance by political actors within institutions, and the mutual tolerance between political parties.

The comparative examples used, and the lessons drawn from American political history (in this respect Levitsky and Ziblatt show how gatekeeping worked well in the past through the examples of Charles Lindbergh, Joseph McCarthy and the failed bids for the presidency of the segregationist governor George Wallace), allow the authors to identify four main signs of a potential authoritarian leader: disrespect for democratic rules; denial of the legitimacy of the opposition; toleration of violence; and disregard for civil liberties. On this basis, in their final chapter both scholars write an 'authoritarian report card' of Trump's first year of presidency. The results are varied: on the one hand, the leader shares all the indicators of potential authoritarian leaders, on the other hand, US democracy seems to be resilient enough. As the authors note the president's actions have not kept up with his rhetoric (p. 178), the mechanisms of institutional checks and balances seem to hold up well, and the organised political and social opposition to Trump is active and lively. The result of the 2018 mid-term elections is additional evidence of American democracy's capacity to successfully implement solid counterbalances to potential authoritarian threat. In this respect, perhaps the only other weakness of the book is precisely the underestimation of the resilience and reaction capacity of US institutions and society. That being said, two findings of the book deserve further discussion.

First, regarding the criticism of the political parties' failure (the Republican Party, in particular) to isolate extremist political ideologies and leaders. At different times the authors suggest that the Republican establishment should have supported Hillary Clinton instead of Trump, sacrificing immediate gain for longer term returns (p. 68), using the example of Austria or France, where centre-right parties preferred a green or centrist candidate to a far-right one. Besides the differences in the electoral and party system which, alone, make such a comparison very difficult, the question is truly intriguing. Are anti-extremist coalitions always effective in dealing with extremist parties? Under what condition is a *convention ad excludendum* strategy better than an

institutionalisation of extremism strategy, which seems to be the option chosen, for instance, by the Austrian People's party with the far right FPÖ. This is a major question that still needs to be addressed.

A second crucial aspect of the book is linked to the role of the crises that Levitsky and Ziblatt consider as critical junctures for the authoritarian turn, in particular security crises such as terrorist attacks and political violence. This issue deserves a thorough examination, because a crisis could also lead to the reinforcement of democracy, as a reaction. Under what conditions, then, does a crisis become a catalyst for autocratisation or democratic renewal? It seems that the configuration of other agency-related and structural conditions should be assessed in order to have a more comprehensive picture.

In conclusion, despite appearances, this is not a book about Donald Trump. On the contrary, the most interesting part of the work deals with the long-term and general evolution of US democracy, rather than the short-term, recent political events. Before (and beyond) Trump, the real threat to American democracy lies in the heavy polarisation of society as a consequence of the rise of inequalities. The authors write that 'parties become wedded to incompatible worldviews (...) especially when their members are so socially segregated that they rarely interact' (p. 116). So, look at the wood (of inequalities) and forget the (orange) tree. This is a powerful message that echoes the words of Charles Tilly (2007) on de-democratisation, when he warned about the risk that differences in ethnicity, gender, race, wealth, or religion 'translate directly into categorical differences in political rights and obligations' (2007, p. 75), paving the way to autocracy.

Yet, the most worrying message of the book still is that authoritarian leaders always have and always will be there. The solution then lies in weakening their political and economic breeding ground, by any political means possible.

Reference

Tilly, C. (2007). *Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Performances of injustice: The politics of truth, justice and reconciliation in Kenya, by Gabrielle Lynch, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, xv + 338 pp., £22.99 (Paperback), ISBN 9781108444934

Transitional justice processes are often hailed as the optimal way to enact transitions from societies affected by political violence, conflict and/or authoritarian