

Author analyzes democracy's faltering

James Flanigan | Oct. 2, 2013

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

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RETREAT
The Revolt of the Middle Class
and the Worldwide Decline of
Representative Government

DEMOCRACY IN RETREAT: THE REVOLT OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE

WORLDWIDE DECLINE IN REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

By Joshua Kurlantzick

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This book is as current as tomorrow's headlines even as it covers the last 20 years in reporting a decline from democratic ideals in governments around the world.

Today's events in the Middle East and huge protests in Turkey, Brazil and even Russia were not supposed to happen. In 1991, when the old Soviet Union imploded, experts confidently predicted that democracy would sweep all before it as middle classes arose everywhere thanks to global prosperity. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama declared in his 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, that "mankind's ideological evolution" was complete. Western liberal democracy is "the final form of human government," Fukuyama wrote.

But it was not to be, writes author Joshua Kurlantzick in *Democracy in Retreat*, a review and guidebook for U.S. policymakers. A journalist and fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations, Kurlantzick explains that the advice and preachments of U.S. officials that developing countries would become prosperous if they opened their markets to trade and held free and democratic elections did not produce the desired results. Rather, what has characterized the last decade across a broad swath of nations is internal strife and a decline in democracy.

The author starts with a description of protests in Thailand that led to the fall of its elected government in 2006 and almost continuous violence between parties of the middle classes and poor since then. Unrest has been contagious. Kurlantzick recounts social strife and electoral chaos in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malawi, Kenya, Venezuela, countries of Eastern Europe, and, of course, the Middle East where the "Arab Spring" of 2011 has so far spawned revolutions, elections, civil wars and violent overthrows.

U.S. officials should worry as the economic crisis drags on, writes the author, because "publics in many developing regions may become far more distrustful of democratic rule -- a prospect that could indeed help set the world back" to the time of Cold War, before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and freedom's euphoric bells were rung. Indeed, Kurlantzick points out, the West has competition now as China's economic growth and

development becomes a model for political leaders of industrializing nations who see that China's Communist Party (so far) has been able to allow economic liberalization without permitting notable political change.

But the question arises: What went wrong for the bright visions of yesterday? Well, history happened of course: the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s; the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S., wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and the economic crisis in the United States and Europe that has lingered for the last five years.

Beyond that history, profound changes have transformed economies around the world. In the last two decades, the Internet has made possible global trade and money flows on an unprecedented scale. A world has emerged in which all are informed through instant communications on cell phones and Facebook pages, but not all see opportunity or justice. Thus sectarian and class divisions have multiplied. On President Barack Obama's recent trip to Senegal, a housewife with an empty shopping basket told a reporter, "The Senegalese are fed up, and we are hungry. ... There's no work here."

Long-term changes have occurred almost without notice. The Middle East has seen the fastest population growth in history and now the average age in almost all countries is under 25. Yet there is little industry or employment or even training for those young people to participate in modern industry.

Why does Kurlantzick believe that the post-Cold War world, which spawned so many democracies, now suffers democracy in retreat? His answer is a good one. Newly independent nations and developing countries have not built the necessary institutions that make "government by the people" work, such as independent judiciaries, rule of law, and free and fair elections as opposed to the equivalent of gang wars that yield only rule by autocrats and bosses.

In his next-to-last chapter, titled "Failure of the West," the author criticizes American diplomats and leaders for backing expedient but corrupt dictators rather than nurturing deeper ties with diverse groups. He cites particularly U.S. support of Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai to the exclusion of contacts with other parties in that divided and fractious land.

Underlining how current is this book, which was published in early 2013, Kurlantzick wrote an "Appendix: Egypt" in which he reported how the 2-year-old elected government of President Mohamed Morsi and the formerly outlawed party of the Muslim Brotherhood were centralizing power, introducing restrictions on the population, and threatening religious minorities. "Public support for democracy as the best system of governance remained tepid," the author wrote before publication. He was prescient, of course. Popular unrest and the Egyptian Army removed Morsi from office July 3, suspended the constitution and appointed an interim government pending new elections.

Prescient but not defeatist, Kurlantzick winds up his book with "Prescriptions for the Future," urging U.S. leaders and diplomats to support the building of institutions for democracy in other nations. Prevent economic growth from stagnating, he counsels, and "keep middle classes onboard." The author understands the difficulties of trying to nurture nation-building. In addition to recommending that officials "declare war on graft and realize that elections are only step one," he adds the prescription: "Show some humility." Wisdom along with hope, in a word.

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