

»» Democracy under pressure

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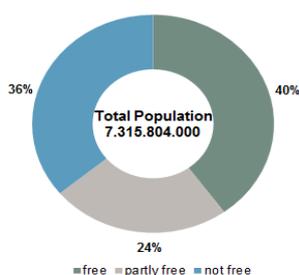
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Following the end of the East-West conflict, the triumph of democracy seemed inexorable: in the wake of the incipient "third wave of democratisation", some observers, like the renowned US political scientist Francis Fukuyama, believed the "end of history" was drawing near. In the meantime, however, the world is experiencing opposite trends.

Setbacks in implementing civil and political rights

The number of democracies has risen worldwide in the last 50 years: while there were only 35 such states in 1970, today more than 110 countries enjoy free elections. Since 2000 there have been more democracies around the world than non-democracies. Yet this does not always correlate with the level of freedom that the population actually experiences: according to the latest edition of the "Freedom in the World" Index, 105 countries

Breakdown of global population by degree of freedom in country of origin



Source: Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2016

lost ground in the last decade with regard to implementing civil and political rights (as a benchmark of basic democratic conditions). More than half of the global population (60%) currently lives in the 109 countries that the index describes as "not free" or "partly free". What is striking is that the global setbacks noted since 2006 are not just limited to countries that already exhibit a low level of democracy. In fact, this phenomenon is also seen in countries that have followed a democratic path and even count as consolidated democracies. Literature lists the following main reasons:

- Worries about losing control, experienced by many governments given the burgeoning

protest culture and the increasing opportunities to mobilise large groups of people quickly (e.g. via social media). This is fuelled among other things by externally assisted regime changes (Iraq, Afghanistan), the "colour revolutions" in Central Asia and the "Arab Spring", which initially raised hopes for democracy but ultimately disappointed.

- Terror attacks and sharp increases in refugee numbers in Europe, which lead to populist defensive reactions, xenophobic statements and new security measures, jeopardising basic democratic values
- Growing social inequality, exerting a negative impact on political participation
- Phases of slower growth and stagnating incomes, which disappoint citizens in both the oldest democracies (Europe, USA) and in younger ones (Brazil, India, Turkey) and weaken their output legitimacy.

Constraints for civil society

This is particularly reflected in the discrimination of minorities and constraints for civil society stakeholders and human rights defenders, often discussed with reference to "shrinking" or "closing space" for civil society. Having an active, diversified and independent civil society is a key indicator of the national level of democracy. However, measures against civil society engagement are currently being taken in many countries. Its room for manoeuvre is increasingly restricted (*shrinking*) or barely available (*closing*). These measures range from legislative and bureaucratic means through increased monitoring to intimidation, persecution and criminalisation. According to the organization CIVICUS there were 96 significant restrictions to the room for manoeuvre of civil society worldwide between June 2014 and May 2015. A re-occurring feature are so-called "NGO laws", which lay down extensive regulations for non-governmental organisations (NGO) in terms of their registration, financing and reporting. Their licences can be withdrawn at any time by citing threats to "public security" or claiming that they are "agents of foreign powers" or

entangled in terrorism due to external financing. Vaguely formulated wording gives state bodies a wide range of implementing these regulations.

Democracy is more than just holding regular elections

Even Fukuyama now observes a recession in democracy. Nonetheless, there are always spontaneous democratic impulses against authoritarian models of governance (Ukraine, Hong Kong, Tunisia) and democratic success stories – such as Myanmar, where a new parliament was elected in free, peaceful elections at the end of 2015 after decades of military rule. To sustain democratic structures, however, simply holding elections under international standards on a regular basis is not enough. There is also a need for state actors to enable political participation between the elections, to allow the effective, transparent and peaceful reconciliation of interests in society, and to have sufficient capacities as well as to act in a human rights-oriented manner. This includes developing and/or securing an "enabling environment" for civil-society actions as well as effective, democratic control mechanisms (parliament, independent jurisdiction, free press). ■

Literature

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