

Democracy's Decline by Maynard Moore (President, WesleyNexus)

Recent headlines with a focus on the extended pandemic have brought worldwide attention to the crisis in India, as the hospitals have run out of oxygen and people are dying by the thousands as a devastating wave of Covid19 infections sweeps the countryside. As tragic as these deaths may be, the attention given to the pandemic has tended to obscure the decline of democracy in a country that in recent years was a proud example of freedom coming out of a long history of colonial domination. As a consequence of India's decline, less than 20 percent of the world's population now lives in a "free" country, the smallest proportion since 1995. India is still considered an "electoral democracy" by Freedom House, which only highlights the extent to which many of the worst setbacks for freedom are taking place in ostensibly "democratic" countries. The category of "illiberal democracy" is decades old at this point, but it now appears to be becoming the dominant form of politics for much of the planet.

Freedom House has been publishing its annual "Freedom in the World" report for the last 47 years, and the trend has become a reliable downer for the last 15 years. Each year the U.S.-based nongovernmental organization assesses the world's countries on a range of measures of political rights and civil liberties, dividing them into categories of Free, Partly Free, and Not Free. Since 2006, more countries have seen their scores decline every year than increase. Still, 2020 stands out as a particularly bad year, with 73 countries experiencing declines in freedom compared with only 28 seeing gains. It represents the worst decline since this downward trend began.

As troubling as the freedom decline in India appears, it wasn't a great year for the United States either, with the report citing official corruption and a lack of political accountability, the heavy-handed police response to anti-racism protests, and, most of all, Donald Trump's attempt to reject and overturn the 2020 presidential election. The U.S. is still "free," but it declined 3 points on Freedom House's 100-point scale in the past year and 11 points over the past decade—one of the largest declines of any country. The level of freedom in the U.S. is now comparable to that of countries like Romania, Croatia, and Panama. Last year, the U.S. dropped below the "democracy threshold" and is now considered a "flawed democracy" on the Economist Intelligence Unit's annual Democracy Index.

The trend in 2020 is especially grim. The report argues that the pandemic has had a devastating effect on global democracy, noting examples in places like Hungary, El Salvador, and the Philippines, where governments used the virus as a pretext to clamp down on dissent, consolidate power, or enforce brutal and excessive lockdown measures. In a very short section on positive developments, the report highlights two of the 28 countries that saw gains: Malawi—where the constitutional court ordered a rerun of a presidential election due to evidence of blatant vote tampering, resulting in a victory for the opposition—and Taiwan, which held a successful election in the face of a pressure and disinformation campaign from

China, and showed remarkable success at stamping out the coronavirus without coercive authoritarian measures.

In our cherished land, the siege of the U.S. Capitol on January 6 should be considered a wake-up call. At this juncture, there is no evidence to suggest a carefully laid plot by organized or well-trained militias, excepting the wanton march on the north portico by some 200 ProudBoys. One shudders to imagine what might have transpired had organized militias been present with long guns. If a ragtag band of the radically aggrieved and conspiracy minded dolts could force members of the United States Congress to break off pieces of House furniture to defend themselves, and to evacuate their chambers in distress, what could a coordinated, tactical assault have done? The real possibility is that this might be studied as a probing attack to learn and prepare for next time.

Perhaps even more troubling is the current stance of the Republican Party. The days are long past when the conservative movement could point to a map colored in red from coast to coast for Ronald Reagan, and proclaim that their ideas were obviously winning. Even the conservative intellectuals seem to now think that if you can't win democratically, maybe it's time to give up on democracy as a goal altogether. Theories about moving the ballot box out of the easy reach of the masses actually belong firmly within the conservative intellectual tradition. Here's what the National Review's founder and guiding spirit, William F. Buckley, had to say in 1957 on the subject of how widespread the franchise ought to be:

If the majority wills what is socially atavistic, then to thwart the majority may be, though undemocratic, enlightened. It is more important for any community, anywhere in the world, to affirm and live by civilized standards, than to bow to the demands of the numerical majority. Millions who have the vote do not care to exercise it; millions who have it do not know how to exercise it and do not care to learn.

Buckley was specifically defending Jim Crow when he wrote this. His argument was that given "the median cultural superiority of White over Negro," it was only appropriate to prevent Black people from joining a political majority that might favor things like integrated education—that, in the face of such a possibility, "the White community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas in which it does not predominate numerically." The magazine would make similar arguments for years about the white apartheid government in South Africa.

The National Review's current editors, contorting themselves to claim this is *not* another Jim Crow–apartheid thing, are forced to argue that making it more time-consuming to register and cast a ballot is important because it self-selects for literate and civic-minded voters, as if free time on a given Tuesday, and the ability to navigate paperwork-heavy bureaucracy, are traits with an ethical valence. Here is what one such author, Andrew McCarthy, in National Review had to say:

It would be far better if the franchise were not exercised by ignorant, civics-illiterate people, hypnotized by the flimflam that a great nation needs to be fundamentally transformed rather than competently governed. Left to their own devices, many such people would not even take note of elections, much less go through the effort to register and vote.

With advocates like this in the conservative leadership, the dangers of tyranny are on our doorstep; if this sentiment becomes mainstream, and the wake-up call is not heeded, the internal erosion of democracy could well make an insurrection unnecessary.