

The Falling of Democracy Worldwide

China versus The West. Is China Responsible for Falling Democracy?

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Theme: [History](#)

[We repost this article by the late Prof. Joseph H. Chung, first published by GR in August 2021. Prof. Chung was an indefatigable voice on the politics of Asia-Pacific, especially on the dynamics of the Korean Peninsula.]

One of the global challenges of the 21st century is the falling liberal democracy. Indeed, the state of democracy is so alarming that some are talking about the crisis of democracy.

Is the decline of democracy a temporary phenomenon? Is it a more fundamentally structural problem? Can it restore its power and glory of the past?

The slump of democracy is a terribly important problem, because it is based on Judeo-Christian way of thinking and the corner stone of the Western civilization.

It is a serious challenge for the West, because the Asian civilization represented by the Chinese political system is becoming more visible and more popular.

Some opinion leaders in the West may fear the possibility that the Chinese authoritarian regime be considered as a possible alternative to the West's liberal democracy.

In this paper, I will first examine how serious the fall of democracy is. Then I will discuss the factors responsible for the decline of democracy. Finally I will examine if the Chinese political regime is responsible for the decline of democracy...

How serious is the Fall of Democracy?

For decades, in great many countries, the American democracy has been the role model of political regime. In fact, the popularity of the American democracy is such that the basic principles of democracy are integrated even in the constitutions of non-democratic countries.

There are many data showing the retreat of democracy. For instance, the Freedom House has produced alarming data.

In the period, 2005-2020, the number of countries where democracy improved has fallen from 83 to 28, whereas, that of countries where democracy deteriorated rose from 52 to 73. (See [this](#))

The demographic distribution of political regime in 2019 was as follows: pure democracy (4.5%), defective democracy (43.6%), hybrid regimes (16.7%) and authoritarian regimes (35.6%).

According to a survey made for the world as a whole, in 1995, 48% of respondents in 154 countries were dissatisfied with democracy. Now the percentage increased to 58%.

According to a report of Cambridge University, democracy fell in all developed countries, especially in the U.S. Before the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, only 25% of Americans were dissatisfied with democracy, but after 2008, 45% were dissatisfied. (See [this](#)) (2020.01.29)

In all well established democracies like the United States, democratic governance will continue its inexorable decline and eventually fall. (See [this](#)) (2019.09.08)

Many countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia, especially in Europe, people are dissatisfied with democracy and chose authoritarian regime.

The Guardian presents the results of a large scale poll with 50,000 persons in 53 countries carried out by the Alliance of Democracies Foundation in 2021. (See [this](#))

The dissatisfaction with democracy rose further after the pandemic. Before the pandemic in all democratic countries included in the sample, 70% of respondents was satisfied with democracies. But in 2021, the percentage of satisfaction with democracy was 65 % for developing countries, 51% for developed countries, 45% in Europe and 76% in Asia.

One of the messages coming out of the Global Poll is that despite the trend of falling democracy, the love of democracy remains high. In fact, 81% of respondents say that democracy is important for their country, but only 63% say that their country is democratic.

One intriguing outcome of the poll is that, in China, 71% of the respondents say that they have a right amount of democracy.

What are the factors responsible for the Decline of Democracy?

There can be many reasons for the decline of democracy. For some, it is the fault of China. The authors of the Freedom House Report (2021) make this statement without elaboration.

“Beyond the pandemic, Beijing’s exports of anti-democratic tactics, financial coercion, and physical intimidation have led to an erosion of democratic institutions and human right protection in numerous countries.”

But, there is another perception of Chinese influence on the decline of democracy,

“By demonstrating that advanced modernization can be combined with authoritarian rule, the Chinese regime has given hope to authoritarian rules everywhere.” (See [this](#))

On the other hand, only 38% of the respondents of the Global Poll expressed their fear of Chinese influence on democracy. As for the Russia’s influence on democracy, only 28% confirmed such influence.

Then, what are the main determinants of the retreat of democracy? The Global Poll identifies the following three determinants.

First, the US appears to be the most responsible for the retreat of democracy. No less than 44% says that it is the U.S. which is a threat to democracy.

“Since 2020, the perception of the US influence as a threat to democracy around the world has increased significantly, from a net of +6 to a net opinion of +14. This increase is particularly high in Germany (+20) and China (+16)” (theguardian.com)

Second, the high tech companies are significant threat to democracy.

According to the poll, 50% say that high tech companies are a threat to democracy; it is particularly so in the U.S.(62%).

Third, the inequality of income is the threat to democracy. No less than 64 % say that inequality is the threat to democracy.

It goes without saying that the American influence, the domination of large high tech companies and inequality of income distribution are closely interrelated.

The poll makes it clear that the decline of democracy is attributable to the poor management of democracy of leading developed countries implying that the future of democracy depends on the leadership of these countries.

And, the respondents of the poll are very pessimistic about the leadership of the U.S. and European countries.

“With the United States, the biggest promoter of democracy and human right in retreat and the European Union experiencing existential battle, it is uncertain how liberal order can check the rising of the Chinese authoritarian model.” (theguardian.com)

The poll shows “ neither the US nor G7 can simply assure the mantle of defender of democracy.” (theguardian.com)

“In fact, democracy is in decline, because its most prominent examples are not doing enough to protect it”. (The Freedom House Report, 2021)

These quotations are saying that the government of the US and developed democratic country have to find their redemption by doing better job for the protection of democracy.

Here, I must ask why the U.S. has failed in protecting democracy, let alone promoting it. I think that Washington has failed on two fronts. On the one hand, it has failed to make America a true democratic country and on the other, it has failed in propagating democracy in the world.

The most important yardstick of measuring the performance of a democratic government should be its capacity to provide such public goods as foods, clothing, housing, public health, education, people’s security to the people.

The U.S is the richest country in the world. Yet, Washington’s capacity of providing these public goods is dismal. The homeless people are filling streets of cities; 20% of the population has no affordable medical care; more than 25% of school children are starving without school meals: Americans are afraid of going out, because every day, 1.4 cases of armed street violence kill people. In the eyes many democratic countries, the American democracy is no longer their model.

The failure of Washington in protecting democracy and the rise of authoritarianism among

democratic countries may make non-democratic countries to feel more satisfied with their authoritarianism.

As we saw above, the major threat to democracy is the combination of large high tech companies and the inequality of income and wealth. This is the unavoidable outcome of neo-liberal economic system of which the U.S. is the champion.

Remember how neo-liberal economic system works

First, the government' role is minimized, or rather, it is paralyzed.

Second, to make profit, the production is automated and labour cost is minimized through the freezing of wage and abolition of effective labour unions.

Third, competition is limitless. Only the fittest survive, but as the free competition continues the number of fittest shrinks.

The combination of profit making and the limitless competition produces a situation where the income and wealth is bound to be in the hand of a few winners.

Moreover, the decreasing power of the government leads to a serious situation in which the big corporations dictate national economic policies, in which the oligarchy of politicians-bureaucrats-businessmen establishes the culture of corruption and aggravates unequal income distribution.

The inequality of income distribution is measured by the Gini coefficient which varies between zero and 100; the higher the Gini coefficient, the wider becomes the income distribution in favour of the rich.

The Gini coefficient which represents acceptable income distribution is about 35.

But, most of the developed democratic countries have a Gini coefficient varying between 45 and 50. The Gini coefficient for the U.S. is 50. Under such situation, only the transfer of income from the rich to the poor through taxes can provide reasonable amount of welfare to the poor; Washington has failed to do so.

Washington's approach to the evangelization of democracy is another determinant factor of the decline of democracy. The core of Washington's propagation of democracy has been the strategy of regime change through coercion and military intervention.

The amazing thing is that the U.S. has coercively intervened 60 times since 1950 in 48 countries, but succeeded only in handful cases in changing regimes. This leads us to question if the attempts were really regime change or something else, for example, the access to raw materials.

There is no doubt that Washington's regime change operations have been one of factors of the decline of democracy.

Is China responsible for the Decline of Democracy?

In order that China is responsible for the decline of democracy, the Chinese ideology-Confucian socialism- should be global enough to be competitive with American ideology

represented by democracy.

Allison summarized well the basic structure of the two sets of values.

Graham Allison, wrote a book: *"Destines for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides Trap? Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017"*

Allison is saying that Western value (democracy) is so different from Chinese values (Confucian socialism) that the Chinese values cannot influence the Western values.

Here is Allison's view of Western values.

"The United States is a missionary nation derived from the belief that the non-western nations should submit to the western values of democracy, free market, limited government, human right, individualism, the rules of law, and should embody these values in their institutions." (Allison.14)

Here is Allison's perception of Chinese values.

"The value of authority, the subordination of individual rights and interests, the importance of consensus, and avoidance of confrontation, saving face, and, in general, the supremacy of the state over society and individuals" (Allison p.138)

In addition, Allison provides a table which shows the difference between the American values and the Chinese values.

Perceptions	America	China
Self Perception	Number one	Center of universe
Core value	Freedom	Order
View of government	Necessary evil	Necessary good
Form of government	Democratic republic	Responsive Authoritarianism
Exemplar	Missionary	Inimitable
Foreigners	Inclusive	Exclusive
Time horizon	Now	Eternity
Change	Invention	Restoration and Evolution
Foreign policy	International order	Harmonic hierarchy

(Allison p.140)

In this table, we see how wide the difference between the two sets of values is. The difference is so deep and so wide that it looks impossible to integrate them into one set of values, let alone find reconciliation.

Another point is that the American values are missionary, while the Chinese values are inimitable. In other words, the Chinese political regime cannot be a threat to democracy.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Chinese socialism cannot be responsible for the decline of democracy. The phenomenon of the fall of democracy and rising authoritarianism takes place in democratic countries not non-democratic countries.

Hence, it can be said that the only way to restore democracy does not consists in blaming

China but in putting pressure on the government of democratic countries to adopt policies conducive to more equal income distribution and to assure the needed public goods.

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