

19 The historical breakthrough of democracy

1. The First and the Second Wave of Democratisation

The dismantlement of authoritarian forms of government and the installation of democratic institutions is a fairly modern phenomenon. This transformation has its spiritual roots in the American and French revolutions, which stated the principles of popular sovereignty, political equality and respect for political freedoms. In concrete terms, however, the first international wave of democratisation started in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and it spread at an increasing speed up to the end of the First World War. After the war a number of democracies came into being and by 1920, some 30 states had introduced democratic modes of government.

Soon, however, a tendency in the opposite direction became evident. During the decades that followed, the 1920s and the 1930s, there were far-reaching democratic setbacks. In a way, it had all started in Petrograd 1917 when the Bolsheviks seized power. But the event that has come to stand out as starting the trend was the Fascists' assumption of power in Italy in 1923. In the years that followed, up to the beginning of the Second World War, democratic governments were abolished in many European countries. This reverse wave was particularly strong in Southern Europe and in Central and Eastern Europe; of the 12 states in the latter area (including Germany and Austria), all but one, Czecho-Slovakia, turned to some kind of authoritarian rule. The anti-democratic movement was considerable in Latin America too. In the 1930s military regimes were installed in all countries on the continent except in Columbia. Japan also followed the trend. All in all, two out of three states which had been democratic at the start of this period turned to authoritarian government. Accordingly, at the beginning of the 1940s there were only some 10 democratic states in the world.

By the end of the Second World War there was again a distinctive change of the trend. This was the starting point of a second wave of democratisation. Democratic rule was re-established in the defeated countries – Japan, Italy and West Germany – and in the states in Western Europe that had been under German occupation. Restoration of civic and popular institutions, and the introduction of new democracies, soon occurred in many places in Latin America. Democratic modes of government emerged in some countries in the Middle East as well, in part as a result of the process of decolonisation, which had then started. As we all know, this process affected Asian countries too – for example, India, the Philippines, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), where democratic institutions were simultaneously installed. On the whole, this wave of democratisation continued in the subsequent decades. As a result, in the early 1960s some 50 states in the world could be classified as essentially democratic.

But fairly soon a process of unmistakable retrogression occurred. In the mid and late 1960s, military power again started to occupy the corridors of power in Latin America. The

process began with a military take-over in Brazil and was followed by similar events in, for example, Peru, Uruguay and Chile. In Europe there was the military coup in Greece, and in Africa the democratic procedures, which had recently been installed, were abolished just a year or two after independence. They were replaced by one-party rule and military government. A similar tendency manifested itself in Asia, with the resulting turn to authoritarian modes of government in several countries.

This period – the late 1960s and the early 1970s – can be seen in retrospect as the heyday of the view that is referred to as the “developmental dictatorship approach”, i.e. the belief that social and economic progress can be more effectively accomplished through authoritarian forms of government. Not least the promising developments that had taken place (as it was assumed) in the Communist world – especially in Castro’s Cuba – were often held up as encouraging examples.

2. The Third Wave

Nevertheless, since the middle of the 1970s we have witnessed an increasingly positive trend for democracy. This third wave of democratisation reaches up to our time and has been far more comprehensive than the ones before. The winds of change first affected, and then overthrew, the remaining authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe. It started in Portugal, with the fall of the old Salazar regime in 1974. The same year, the military junta in Greece had to resign, and in the following year, after the death of Franco, the dismantlement of the fascist dictatorship in Spain was initiated. A similar development could soon be seen in Latin America. The authoritarian model, which had so heavily dominated the region, is really the exception today. Cuba and some Central American States, Guatemala for instance, could be mentioned as remaining non-democracies.

The wave of political change hit Eastern Europe more rapidly. The election in Poland in the spring of 1989, which resulted in an overwhelming victory for the opposition, indicated that a new development was under way. During the next autumn and the following year the Communist one-party regimes fell like dominos, from the Baltic area in the north to the Balkans in the south. This was certainly one of the most radical – and unpredicted – political changes in modern times. However, there is still some way to go to meet democratic standards in some countries; and in some places this path has been troublesome indeed because of strong internal conflicts and even civil war (as in the former Yugoslavia and Georgia).

Nowadays, there are question marks regarding development not only in Belarus and the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan, Kirgistan and Kazakhstan but even in Russia and Ukraine, where development has come to a halt in crucial areas. Yet, the fall of Communist rule – taking place in what had been seen by outside observers as the heartland of modern authoritarianism – certainly sent an encouraging message to fighters for democratic reforms all over the world.

Soon after this, a movement towards political pluralism started in Africa. The democratic states that existed at this time (such as Botswana and Gambia) could easily be counted. Yet, inspired in part by the events in Eastern Europe, a comprehensive dismantling of one-party rule has come about, affecting military regimes as well. But again, the backlash has been considerable as feelings of national unity have had a hard time taking root, while regional and clan identities have reemerged as the dominant ones. The future democratic development in sub-Saharan Africa in particular is today under threat

again, hampered by an amount of political corruption hard to imagine. Tendencies similar to the African ones have been noticed in Asia. Countries such as the Philippines, South Korea and Pakistan have reintroduced democratic practices, and “new” states (which were not involved in any earlier wave of democratisation), such as Singapore and Taiwan, have recently joined the democratic family. At the same time, however, it should be noted that several countries, for example such important ones as China and Indonesia, still cling to the authoritarian mode of government. It is also worth recalling that the current wave of democratisation has only marginally affected the countries of the Middle East.

All the same, in terms of democracy the world of today is essentially different from the one twenty years ago. At that time a clear minority, some 25 percent, of the states in the world were democratic, whereas today the number of democracies has increased considerably, though regressions have surely taken place.

3. Democratisation of the Baltic Region

Except for the occupation of Denmark and Norway during World War II, the Scandinavian countries have been under democratic rule since the first wave of democratisation. This wave also reached the Eastern shores of the Baltic Sea, bringing democratic government to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as Poland. None of these states, however, survived the democratic setback during the interwar period. And when Communist rule swept over the region, democracy was kept out in the dark for more than fifty years.

However, the Soviet Bloc was not always as monolithic as was often assumed. During certain periods there were times of thaw, when political control over the societies in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was loosened. One such period occurred during the reign of Nikita Khrushchev. Towards the end of the 1950s policies of destalinisation and peaceful coexistence with the West were introduced. The 1956 revolt in Poland was tolerated by the Soviet authorities, while the insurrection the same year in Hungary, which had a wider scope, was crushed by military force from the Warsaw Pact.

After 1956, several rebellions were instigated against the Communist authorities in Poland, which paved the way for the Solidarity revolution in 1980–81. The uprising in Poland was led by workers, although other groups of society also joined force. The free trade union *Solidarność*, with its leader Lech Wałęsa and his intellectual supporters Jacek Kuroń and Adam Michnik, more or less dominated the opposition. When *Solidarność* was at the height of its influence it counted over ten million members. The brief period of relative freedom was ended when martial law was imposed in 1981. No doubt, the real decision was taken in Moscow. The development in Poland could be described as “Soviet non-intervention”. It ended the democratisation process – with a minimum of violence – for a period of almost ten years.



Figure 89. Administration of Valdas Adamkus' presidential oath outside the Cathedral in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 1998. Photo: Alfred F. Majewicz

Three waves of democratisation

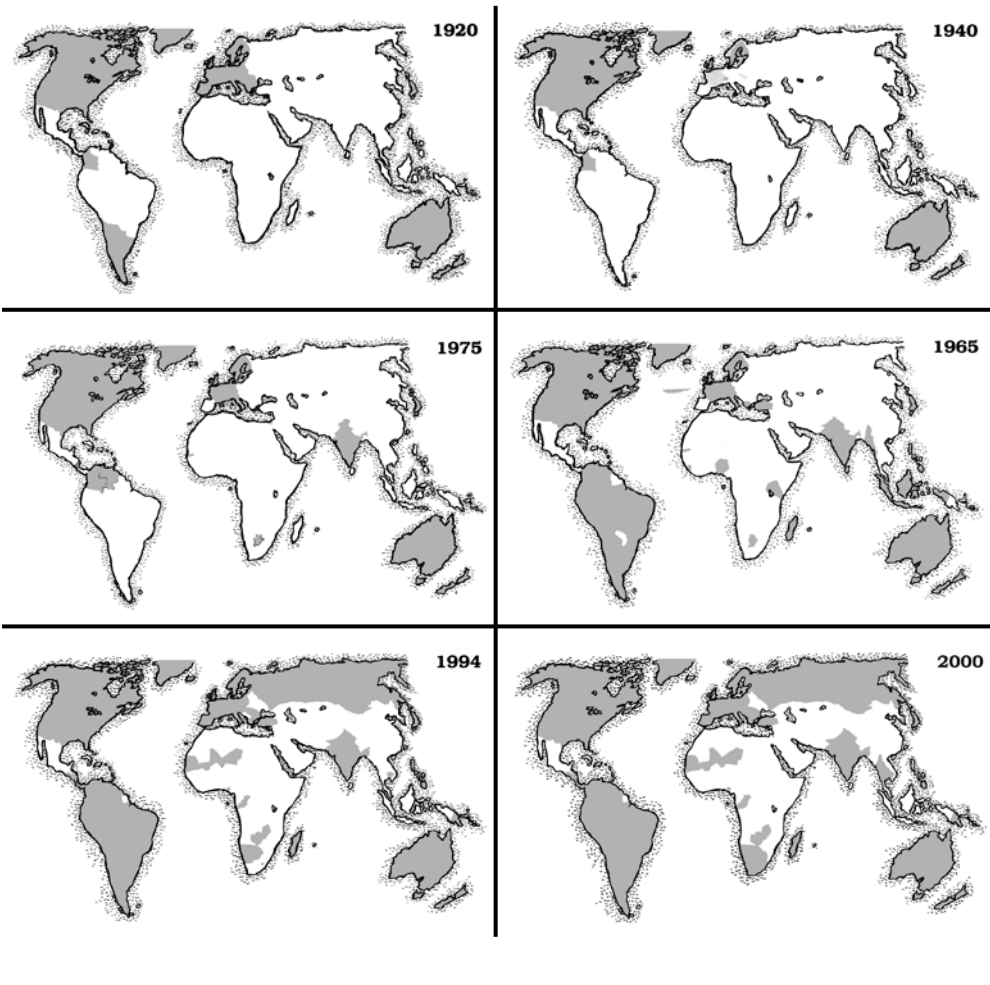
The first wave of democratisation. Democracies in our sense of the word developed during the last century. When the European empires dissolved and new states emerged after the First World War several of them adopted democratic forms of government. By 1920 some 30 states were democratic.

First Setback. The 1920s and 30s saw serious setbacks for democracy. Communism in Russia, fascism in Italy and nazism in Germany and later Japan was part of this development. In Western Europe only UK, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland stayed democratic. By 1940 barely 10 states were democratic out of a total of 50.

A second wave of democratisation started after the Second World War. Democracy was reinstalled in the defeated and occupied countries. The Latin American continent also developed democratic rule. As decolonisation in Africa and Asia started around 1960 democratic rule was introduced in e.g. Tanzania, India and the Philippines. By the early 1960s some 50 states were democratic. With decolonisation the number of states in the world increased significantly.

Second Setback. In the middle and late 1960s the military regained power in many countries in Latin America. Military regimes also took power in several newly independent states in Africa. By 1975 some 20 of the previously democratic states were under authoritarian rule, while 30 remained democratic.

A third wave of democratisation emerged in the middle of the 1970s with the fall of the juntas in Portugal and Greece in 1974. Latin American countries, one after the other, changed. Remaining non-democratic countries are Cuba and Guatemala.



The national consciousness of the Baltic peoples had been raised during the relative loosening of political control during the preceding decades. Such national consciousness had been in existence during the whole period of Soviet rule, although the possibilities of expressing national feelings had been restricted. In Estonia, a number of societies for the preservation of ancient monuments had been created which later were united into the Estonian Heritage Society. These seemingly non-political organisations were of great importance for the rediscovery of Estonian history and culture, as well as for political institutions after independence (see chapter 26). But even more important for the Baltic awakening was the environmental question. Popular protests were voiced against the deterioration of the environment in all Baltic republics. Of course, the Chernobyl catastrophe speeded up the process. But there were also many internal sources of environmental discontent.

The most important factor, however, in explaining the return to independence of the Baltic States and Eastern Europe was Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of "demokratizatsia". Gorbachev envisaged a revitalised socialist society with elements of democracy and pluralism. The democratisation process was to be limited, however. It was only to take place within the framework of the socialist society and its one-party system. Although Gorbachev's reforms were inadequate for democracy in the Western sense, it had an unexpected result. The democratisation process led to increasing demands for autonomy in the Soviet republics and – eventually – to the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In 1989 – 200 years after the French Revolution – the peoples of Eastern Europe were finally in a position to decide their own fate. The revolutions in the East European countries took place at an ever-increasing pace. After the 1989 revolutions the political changes returned to a quieter phase, during which the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule started. Many setbacks occurred in the process, but by the beginning of the 1990s all East European countries had experienced at least one comparatively democratic election which could provide the basis for further political transformation. As a result of these elections, the beginnings of new party systems could be discerned.

However, in the Baltic States it was not the resistance movements that decided the outcome of the independence struggle but rather the ill-fated 1991 *coup d'état* in Moscow. Yanayev and his collaborators wanted to restore the glory of the Soviet Union, but the result of the coup was the demise of Soviet power. Only after this event could the historical return of democracy to the Baltic States be completed. The first fully democratic elections since the interwar period were held (for those who had received citizenship), beginning in Estonia and Lithuania in 1992, shortly followed by Latvia in 1993. The key question of citizenship has remained controversial in Estonia and Latvia, having large minorities of Russian immigrants. While these countries today look forward to being accepted in the EU in the first wave, ethnic integration and citizenship policies could constitute a major hurdle. Determining the nature and stability of democracy in Russia is still a delicate matter. But after the 1991 presidential election, and the parliamentary elections of December 1993, democratic rule must be said to be under way.

Many states in central and eastern Europe regained or achieved independence and arranged elections with Poland being the first in 1989. Likewise, the end of the Cold War has made it possible for internationally controlled elections to be held in several African and Asian states.