The assault on the Capitol building in Washington, January 6, 2021. Photo: Tyler Merbler (CC BY 2.0)

Epilogue

Shlomo Avineri

Looking ahead to the next few years, it seems that one thing is clear: nothing is clear. What lies before us is radically different from the post-1945 international scene, which while roughly divided into two distinct periods, was in both cases anchored in distinct and somewhat predictable themes: first the Cold War, and then, after the imploding of communism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the unquestioned American hegemony. The current scene, by contrast, is in total flux, heightened of course by the havoc caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a phenomenon unprecedented and unequaled by anything known to humanity until now.

To speculate about the outcome of the pandemic would be futile, but other recent developments, global and regional, can be addressed with greater certainty, while not forgetting that much can still be upended by the course of the pandemic and the steps taken by different societies to confront it. It is crucial to point out that the impact of the pandemic has been exacerbated by globalization and the constant movement and travel of tens of millions of people as part of the economic and recreational aspects of globalization. Previous plagues took years to spread from their source of origin; in 2020, it took just weeks before the coronavirus engulfed the entire world.

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democracy—its institutions, and even its very legitimacy. Far from enjoying the triumphalist vision of an End of History crowned by an almost messianic promise of the permanence of democracy, developments across the globe signaled serious cracks in the ability to withstand challenges, sparked in part by the failure of market mechanisms to self-correct under pressure when confronted by major crises.

These challenges to liberal democracy appeared first in some post-communist societies and were initially attributed to social and historical contexts specific to those countries. While early on it became clear that a transition to a consolidated democracy in Russia would not happen soon, mainly due to the state's strong historic autocratic traditions dating back centuries, hopes were still held for other former Warsaw Pact countries whose histories were different and could help legitimate and sustain transitions to democratic politics and institutions. But further developments in countries such as Hungary and Poland demonstrated the strength of authoritarian and extreme nationalistic forces, in part harking back to historical memory and experience, which turned out to be stronger and more popular than the tendencies claiming allegiance to liberal institutions and norms.

But soon, and surprisingly, similar developments occurred in established democracies as well—first in Italy, and then in Britain and the United States, and in a slightly different form in France. The fragile multi-party system in Italy collapsed, Brexit was the culmination of a process of growing xenophobia tinged with racism in the UK, and the ascent of Trump in the US all suggested a deep malaise and a growing challenge to the principles and norms of the foundations of liberal democracies. The rise of the racist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party shows that even in Germany, which has justly prized itself for internalizing the lessons of its own history, ultra-right forces still simmer under the surface.

While the developments in these countries had specific and particular immediate causes in each respective society, they had one element in common: the weakening of the traditional parties on both sides of the political spectrum. Social-democratic and liberal parties on the one hand and conservative parties on the other had been the mainstay of the democratic post-1945 order in the West, reflecting a broad consensus for the values and mechanisms of liberal democracy. But these parties became ossified and highly bureaucratized, and in many cases lost touch with their traditional constituencies. They also moved from being the representatives of the traditional working class and lower middle classes and focused increasingly on identity politics and cultural issues—women's rights, immigration, race, and LGBT issues. These were issues that obviously were anchored in norms of social justice and equality, but focusing on them much more than on the traditional material issues of the working class created alienation in wide sectors of the population. Loss of employment due to globalization, coupled with feelings threatened by mass immigration, some of it illegal, of refugees from Third World countries exacerbated these feelings of alienation and laid the foundations for the yearning for strong leaders who could addresses their immediate day-to-day problems largely neglected by the traditional political parties. This weakening of the existing parties or the populist transformation of these parties, as in the case of the of the Republican Party in the US, led tens of millions of voters to Trump and Brexit as well as to xenophobic parties and leaders in countries like the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden that historically had been the beacons of openness and tolerance.

A paradox underlying all these cases was that the process of European integration on the one hand led to a heightened consciousness of trans-national European identity, mainly among younger and university educated people, and at the same time strengthened chauvinistic

nationalism among other groups: the social divide in the UK regarding Brexit is a prime example.

The ubiquity of social media played a crucial role in these tendencies. While it contributed a lot to the democratization of the political process, it also helped move views that were confined to the margins of the public sphere into the mainstream of the political discourse. Authoritarian populists like Trump clearly utilized these avenues of mass communication and benefited from their availability.

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The second major development is the retreat of the US from its historical role since the end of World War II as the bastion of democracy. The US can be justly criticized for many aspects of its global role, but the Soviet Union lost the Cold War to a large extent due to the American global role, even with all of its mistakes. This role was weakened first by Obama's somewhat naive beliefs (in the Arab Spring, for example) and then more emphatically by Trump's implicit support for Russian moves, especially in the Middle East, and his conscious attempts to weaken NATO and the European Union. Future historians will probably disagree about Trump's motives, but there is no doubt about his policies' outcome: undermining the transatlantic alliance has greatly helped Putin's Russia, and together with the economic ascendancy of China, the challenges to democratic forces in the West are obviously growing.

This is not the renewal of the Cold War in the traditional ideological sense of liberal democracy vs. communist totalitarianism. But the weakening of Western democracies, which

Trump's presidency accelerated in a major way, now requires a rebuilding of historical alliances that must be reasserted both internationally and internally.

The regional aspects of these twin developments are clearly linked to the failure of the Arab Spring. The pious hopes that Arab countries could move swiftly from different forms of military dictatorship and traditional autocracy toward consolidated democracies proved to be out of touch with social and historical realities in the region. Different forms of authoritarianism seem to be able to maintain their hold in Egypt and Syria: on the whole, the Arab Spring was able to challenge military rulers, with mixed results, but was not able to undermine the legitimacy of traditional monarchies, especially if they are headed, as in Jordan and Morocco, by rulers considered descendants of the Prophet, or draw their legitimacy from the stewardship of the two holy sites of Mecca and Medina. These monarchies, as well as the Gulf states, mainly due to their oil wealth, seem now to be more secure in their hold on power than before the recent convulsions, though the rapid reforms in Saudi Arabia may bring unforeseen consequences in their wake.

As for the Palestinians, it appears that their wholly unrealistic approach to what they can achieve through international support has also cost them the hope they placed in an almost universal Arab consensus. They have boxed themselves into marginalization, and their inability even to establish a minimal consensus between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip may condemn Palestine to be a failed state even before becoming a state.

The greatly diminished power of ISIS should not be seen as the disappearance of radical Islamism, but calls for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon as one aspect of the vicissitudes of modernization in the wider world of Islam.

Western modernization was linked in various ways to processes of secularization, yet in the

Islamic word it took a different course. Thus, one cannot understand the current political developments in both Iran and Turkey, with all the differences between them, outside of this context. Both countries have seen radical attempts at secularization, but in both cases, these were not the outcome of wide popular demands, but were imposed forcibly from above by authoritarian rulers: Ataturk and the Shah tried to secularize their societies by adopting Western models of radical secularization and forced them on highly traditional societies. These attempts succeeded up to a point, but eventually led to a widely popular religious reaction to such attempts at forced secularization. The Islamic Republic in Iran and the rise to power of Erdogan's AKP party are, in a way, the "return of the repressed," and thus earned broad popular support within basically traditional societies against Western-educated and secularized elites. The power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and ISIS in Syria and Iraq similarly represents wide popular resistance to forced secularization imposed in these cases by military rulers. If one looks for parallels in the West, 17th century radical Puritanism in England would be an apt choice—an attempt to go back to an imaginary, pristine religious past.

These forces will not disappear, as they are structurally linked to the limits of forced secularization from above: the chances that either the ayatollahs or Erdogan will be soon toppled by secular democrats are an illusion. There will obviously be changes in Iran and Turkey, but they will come from within the existing regimes, not from outside the system. In countries like Egypt and Syria the alternative to radical Islamism is not a liberal secular democracy but different forms of military authoritarianism that get their support, not surprisingly, also from Christian and other minorities—the Coptic Church in Egypt and various Eastern rite Christian communities as well as Kurds in Syria.

These cross currents have their complex impact also on the Israeli scene, including Israeli-Palestinian relations. The continued dominance of Netanyahu's right wing Likud is part of the universal weakening of center-left parties in Western democracies. This has obviously been helped by Palestinian intransigence and lack of realism regarding what they can achieve, and there is no doubt that Trump's presidency greatly boosted Netanyahu and the Israeli right in general. The moves toward normalization with four Arab countries may have marginal impact on the strategic regional balance, but certainly contributed to a general feeling in Israel of achieving greater acceptance in the Arab world. They also clearly added to Netanyahu's popularity in the country, despite the serious allegations of bribery and corruption now waiting to be addressed in the courts. This is unlikely to change under a Biden administration, though the tone and atmosphere may be slightly different. Most Israelis still have doubts whether the Palestinians are truly reconciled to the existence of the Jewish state, and the key lies in Palestinian hands to change this perception and thus enable the resumption of meaningful negotiations.

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There is no doubt that Israeli democracy is under stress, in part due to the general weakening of the liberal left all over the world, as well as the one party and its leader, Likud and Netanyahu, remaining in power for a long time. This is coupled by voices trying to limit the independence and efficacy of the courts. Yet overall the Israeli democratic system, with all its shortcomings, some caused by the continued control of millions of Palestinians in the territories, is basically resilient, as shown by massive demonstrations against the Prime Minister calling for his resignation.

Three inconclusive elections failed to unseat Netanyahu, but neither did they grant him the parliamentary majority needed for immunity from criminal prosecution, and for the first time there appear to be cracks within his own party.

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If there is one lesson clearly to be learned from the pandemic it is that the market itself is not self-correcting. When a major crisis occurs, it is to the state and the government that the business community turns for help, and calls for social solidarity rather than individual self-interest become dominant. There is no "invisible hand" capable of stabilizing the economy, and it seems that only the government can be of help: contrary to Reagan, the government is not the problem—the inability of markets to correct themselves is. Conservative market fundamentalists, from Boris Johnson to Netanyahu, have come to admit it.

This means that one of the tasks of post-COVID democracies will be to rebuild a more effective social and economic safety net for wider sectors of the population. This will also call for the restructuring of strong political parties, on the left as well as the right, to adequately address these problems and to avoid a situation in which alienated large groups will look to populist charismatic leaders as alternatives to the democratic process. The attempted coup of January 6, 2021 in Washington should be a warning signal. One cannot say anymore "it can't happen here." On the international scene, a serious effort must be made to reaffirm the legitimacy and efficacy of a rule-based international order that has been significantly damaged in the last years.

Both steps may ensure that even if democracy is not universalized immediately, existing democracies would be able to survive and be strengthened. Restoring stability should be the prime aim. It is a difficult but not an unattainable goal.

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