The Issue of the Protection of Democracy

Democracy is defined as a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives. It is characterised by the principles of political equality allowing all citizens to participate in the creation of the rules that will impact their lives. It is a core value of the United Nations and supported by many UN policies and human rights. However democracy worldwide is increasingly under threat. According to reports from organizations such as Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit, democratic principles have been eroding globally, but even identifying these regimes is becoming increasingly difficult, let alone attempting to reform their form of governance.

Many countries worldwide are afflicted by dubious election integrity, media suppression and authoritarian rulers, enabling authoritarian regimes to control and manipulate their citizens without consequence. Such unrestricted power undermines the values of democracy and can lead to dissent and conflict between the regime and its own citizens.

Election integrity is a key indicator of an autocratic regime, but also one of the most difficult to assess. Countries that are considered democracies may fail to hold free and fair elections, essentially allowing authoritarian governments to take hold. Russia is an example of a democratic country that holds regular elections of dubious integrity. Despite Russian citizens having a multitude of options for candidates, the Kremlin seems to ensure that none of these opponents were credible, with many political opponents having been imprisoned over the years after being seen to pose a threat to Putin’s regime. This essentially allows Russia to maintain its autocratic tendencies, while projecting an image of democratic integrity.

Media suppression is another key issue which threatens democratic values. Widespread censorship and fake news, not only serves to indoctrinate and disempower citizens, but also undermines public trust in the governing institution. In Iran, the government uses internet censorship to control the flow of information, blocking access to 70% of the internet including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Through state controlled media, Iran also seeks to present an idealised and one sided perspective of events, encouraging citizens to share the views of the authoritarian regime.

Judicial systems are another pawn in the emergence of autocratic regimes, with independent courts often made to install judges that align with their political values and interests. This leads to a corrupt legal system, such as in India, where high ranking government officials make use of threats or bribes to ensure that the verdict aligns with their governments interests.

Authoritarian rulers are often in charge of states with weakened democratic values, and these individuals are characterised as having a lack of accountability to their citizens, allowing them the unrestricted ability to control the governance of their country. This lack of accountability is at the heart of decaying democratic institutions, as the less accountable a leader becomes, the more uncontrollable and isolated their policies tend to be. Once autocrats are free of procedural constraints, their actions are technically legal which makes it difficult to remove such a person from office. In the case of Hungary, the path to autocracy proceeded legally by changing the Constitution. Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party achieved a constitutional majority in 2010, allowing it – legally – to rewrite Hungary’s constitution. This rule-following behaviour enabled Fidesz to fly under the radar.

The indicators and effects of an autocratic regime can be further displayed through militarisation of police forces, fortified protection for politicians, sky-high taxation, restrictions in many professions, attenuating property rights, indiﬀerent state health care, poor state schooling, a weakened local currency, huge price inflation, and declining voter participation.

However these indicators are not the only issues that need to be addressed, we have also arguably lost the ethical principles which democracy was fundamentally built upon, with political philosophies like that of John Locke’s Social Contract theory being increasingly undermined. We may therefore need to redefine democracy, and seek to ensure the embodiment of it’s definition by all countries, to ensure that a government is for the people and by the people.

While addressing these issues is paramount to ensuring the continuation of democratic practices, it is also important to recognise the potential for unrest and conflict that may result from removing such dictators. Indeed, in many cases these leaders may be preventing the takeover of the state by even more hostile political opponents or terrorist groups. It is also important to note the correlation between low income countries and countries that are ruled by authoritarian regimes. In these cases, solutions involving economic or trade sanctions are also likely to harm the innocent citizens within the country more than the autocratic leaders that rule over them.

Questions to consider:

Which countries are most impacted by a decline in democratic standards?

How can we prevent democratic countries from falling into autocratic tendencies?

Can we facilitate the change of autocratic countries to democratic principles?

Can we alter political philosophies which democracy is developed from?

How can we aid those who have been aﬀected by autocratic regimes?

Does the economic condition of a country impact our ability to address its declining democracy?

How can we improve our democratic systems across the globe?

Useful links:

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/democracy-crisis>

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2022/08/crisis-and-fragility-democracy-world>

<https://www.un.org/democracyfund/content/guidance-note-un-secretary-general-democracy>

<https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/democracy-under-threat-a-case-for-co-ordinated-action/>

<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>