

FROM LIBERAL PROMISE TO AUTHORITARIAN TEMPTATION: DECAY OF DEMOCRACY IN A POST LIBERAL WORLD

INTRODUCTION

Democracy was once humanity's proudest invention — a living promise that power would forever rest with the people. Not long ago, the world declared the triumph of liberal democracy but there's a world emerging around us where elections are still held, but the choices no longer matter, where news channels speak in unison, praising efficiency over freedom, where citizens scroll endlessly through feeds filled with progress charts, yet feel voiceless in their own societies. Protests erupt not against kings or dictators, but against elected leaders who stopped listening. In this world, democracy still exists but only as a ritual, not a conviction.

THE POST-LIBERAL PARADOX: DEMOCRACY WITHOUT DEMOCRATS

In the decades following the Cold War, liberal democracy seemed ascendant. The idea that citizens could govern themselves through institutions and rights was widely accepted. Francis Fukuyama even declared a kind of “end of history” moment where liberal democracy emerged as the final form of government. But today we live in a post-liberal world, one where democracy persists but liberal values fade. We see a decline of democracy not in dramatic coups, but in the slow corrosion of institutions, norms and trust.

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Democracies may die at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders—presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power.

THE INSIDE COLLAPSE: WHEN DEMOCRACY FAILS ITS PEOPLE

It refers to the internal processes by which democracies erode and fail to deliver on promises to their citizens which can make them susceptible to authoritarianism. This slow, internal erosion is often called "democratic backsliding". In Nepal, it was an abrupt social media ban. The ‘Nepo kid’ campaign accused politicians' children of flaunting luxury lifestyles funded by corruption. In Madagascar, it was a failure to deliver water and electricity. While in Peru, youth are rallying against corruption scandals and rising crime. At the same time in Morocco, youth-led protests across several cities, demanding better education and healthcare, escalated into violence. In Kenya, youth-led demonstrations earlier in 2025 challenged government fiscal policies and taxation increases.

In the Philippines, thousands of mostly young people rally against some \$1.8 billion (€1.56 billion) being lost to alleged corruption in bogus flood-relief projects. Drawing on recent protests in Madagascar, Nepal, Maldives and Paraguay, the idea of "The Inside Collapse" highlights how internal problems like corruption, economic hardship, and inequality can make democracies fail their own people. These issues erode public trust and expose structural failings, often causing instability and political upheaval. These latest developments illustrate a wider trend : the increasing visibility and influence of GenZ-led protests(A wave of youth-led movements using digital activism through social media platforms like Facebook, X, YouTube and TikTok to mobilize against these deep-seated grievances) in diverse parts of the world. In Asia, one prominent symbol has been a flag derived from the Japanese anime One Piece, depicting a skull with a straw hat, symbolizes Luffy's quest to chase his dreams, liberate oppressed people and fight the autocratic world. Within the narrative of the anime, this flag represents a group of characters who challenge authority. Among youth protesters in these countries, it has been adopted as a broader emblem of collective action and resistance to perceived unfairness. The flag gained popularity as a tool of political expression and defiance during protests in Indonesia, Philippines and Nepal and has also popped up on the streets of Paris. But can these mass movements which often begin on social media platforms, bring lasting change?

RAGE WITHOUT ROADMAP: THE DILEMMA OF MODERN MOVEMENTS

Young people are hungry for change. The young Gen-Z revolutionaries have real power. But they don't have the power to control what they've begun or to ensure that the movements they started actually improve their lives. Gen-Z protesters, for instance, often describe their movements as leaderless because social media decentralizes command and coordination.

This lack of a figurehead fosters flexibility and a sense of egalitarianism, but it also leaves movements without sustained organizational structures or clear chains of command. Yet one key lesson from the past decade is clear that Mobilization on social media alone is not enough. Youth-led or Gen Z protests embody the spirit of resistance and renewal, but their biggest strength, spontaneity is also their weakness. These movements often lack structured leadership, long-term strategy or a unified vision, which makes them powerful in expression but fragile in endurance. The dramatic events have turned the Himalayan nation into the latest cauldron of political change after similar youth-led movements in Sri Lanka(2022) and in Bangladesh(2024) also led to the overthrow of governments in those South Asian nations. Emerging studies on democratic resistance and resilience emphasize the importance of hybrid strategies that combine institutional approaches (for example, election campaigns and legal reforms) with extra-institutional methods (such as street protests).

Despite contextual differences, these movements share three defining characteristics of social media-driven activism

- First, social media enables young people to share personal experiences of injustice and connect them to broader socioeconomic structures of inequality, abuse of power and the absence of a secure future.
- Second, social media provides a space for young activists to exchange tactical knowledge both domestically and across borders, fostering broad learning networks. The #MilkTeaAlliance—a prodemocracy network that emerged online after the 2019 Hong Kong protests and gained further momentum during Thailand’s youth-led demonstrations(2020) is a prime example.
- Third, as online dissent escalates, illiberal and authoritarian regimes often respond with censorship and in many cases armed repression. This dynamic was evident in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Nepal.

THE TEMPTATION TOWARD AUTHORITARIANISM: THE APPEAL OF A CHINESE MODEL

Surveys by global institutions like Pew Research and Freedom House reveal a growing section of youth, especially in developing nations, who view China’s “soft authoritarianism” — a system that offers economic growth with political control — as a functional alternative to what they perceive as a “broken democracy.” Younger people tend to have more favorable opinions of China than older people do. This has long been the case in the United States and is also true in over half of the other countries surveyed.

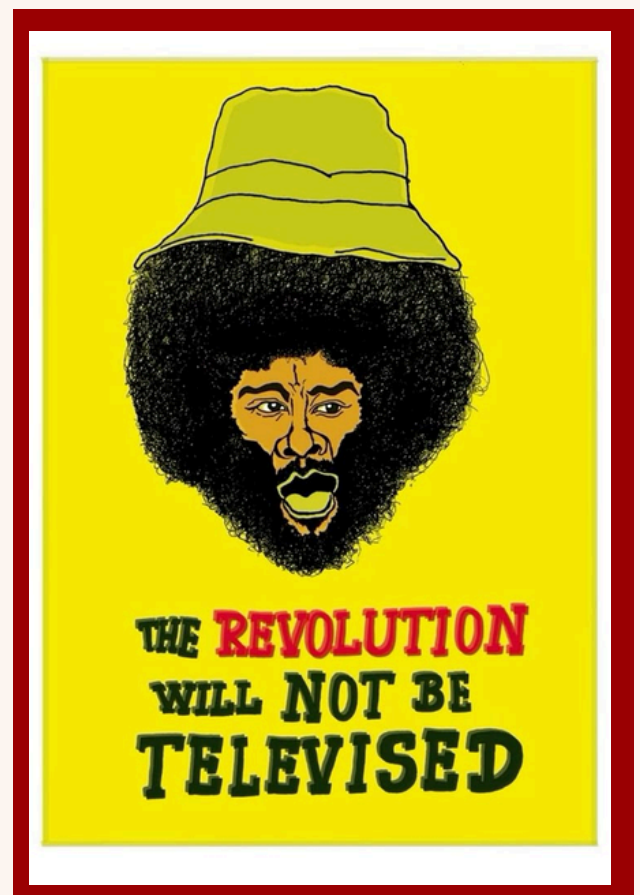


To most Chinese, especially the older generations, sacrificing some of their rights to feel safe and prosperous appears reasonable. Chinese legitimacy is the absolute opposite of democratic legitimacy. Liberal systems have the power to protect rights and electoral consent. Conversely, the CCP (Chinese communist party) relies on ideology, economic outcomes and nationalism. The official discourse now champions “whole-process people’s democracy”, which in reality refers to highly regulated involvement as opposed to free elections. Scholars suggest that model provides effective as well as technocratic “benevolent authoritarianism” as an option where democracies seem to be deadlocked. In the entire world, the success of China unsettles the theory of modernisation that held that economic development would lead to democracy. However, comparative studies indicate that authoritarian governments are not always superior to democracies. Stable democracies that have robust institutions and the rule of law tend to have more permanent growth and innovation.



China has demonstrated that it is possible to attain rapid development using authoritarianism and that inadequate checks can also make one vulnerable. There is no question that China has been the most successful non-Western world state in bringing economic prosperity and in rooting out the feudal vestiges. Despite its enormous economic achievements, technological progress and increasing military power, the CCP did not want or failed to achieve social progress in terms of liberty, life, and rule of law. However, in the minds of many, China's economic rise over the past 30 years cast doubt over the superiority of democratic government, at least with regards to creating economic growth and prosperity. Xi Jinping offers his "China Model" as an alternative to neo-liberalism in a new world order. In a period when liberal democratic political systems have been riven by radical polarisation, lack of a broad consensus, hostile party politics and rampant inequality, China offers its version of an efficient technocratic "benevolent authoritarianism" as an alternative. As democracies across the world grapple with internal decay from corruption to polarization and from populist politics to institutional erosion — a silent fascination has begun to rise: the Chinese model of governance.

Many see in it an image of order amid chaos, a promise of stability over uncertainty. But what fuels this belief? It is not so much love for authoritarianism as it is disillusionment with democracy. When elected governments fail to deliver basic governance, when protests yield no tangible reform and when freedom turns into disorder, people begin to seek efficiency over expression. Yet, is authoritarianism truly a feasible idea? It offers stability, yes but a controlled stability. The price of such order is freedom itself. As Rousseau famously warned, "I prefer liberty with danger than peace with slavery." It reminds us that true freedom may be risky, chaotic and uncertain but surrendering liberty for the illusion of safety is far worse. Once people surrender their voice for the sake of efficiency, they also surrender the right to question power and Stability without liberty becomes mere silence, not peace.



CONCLUSION

“Only democracy - having the capacity to question itself - also has the capacity to correct its own mistakes.” Michnik ~Adam
Authoritarianism may promise order, efficiency and stability, but Control cannot substitute for freedom. The allure of a “quick fix” through strong leadership is tempting, especially in times of crisis but it comes at the cost of individual liberty, pluralism and justice. A phrase on a poster spotted during the protests in Nepal — “corruption is sus, stop ghosting democracy” is a call to citizens and leaders to reject corruption and not abandon the principles of democracy.

It’s a witty, youthful way of saying: Don’t let corruption silently kill democracy — stay accountable and engaged. What the world truly needs is not an alternative to democracy but a revival of its core values — transparency, accountability, civic engagement and respect for human rights. Democracies may stumble, institutions may weaken and protests may rise but abandoning the principles that make freedom meaningful will only create emptiness in place of governance. Ultimately, democracy is not flawless but its strength lies in its ability to reflect, adapt and renew itself.