

Brian Klaas on the Global Crisis of Democracy



Department of Government MSc Conflict Studies student **Anan Khatib** reflects on the recent *public lecture* by Dr Brian Klaas, who discussed his new book *'The Despot's Accomplice: How the West is Aiding & Abetting the Decline of Democracy'*, at LSE on Thursday 13 October .

When the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, signalling the end of the Cold War, it seemed as if democratisation was on an unstoppable march forward. Indeed, it was against that backdrop that Francis Fukuyama notoriously proclaimed the “end of history”. With the triumph of Western liberal democracy over Communist tyranny, the thinking went, we may well have had finally figured out the optimal configuration of human government and there was no going back from there. The globe was about to be completely submerged by the so-called “third wave” of democratisation.

A crisis of democracy

But democracy's prospects do not look so bright today. To borrow the words of a recent Nobel Prize laureate, the times they are a-changin'. Democracy is no longer trendy. According to the [Economist Intelligence Unit's 2015 Democracy Index](#), the world has lost much of the progress that it attained in those boom democratisation years: the trend has slowed down worldwide; and in some instances it has even been reversed. Democratic features of governance, in addition—including political participation and press freedoms—as well as sentiments associated with, or conducive to, democracy, are all eroding or in decline. This development is not very recent either. Freedom House, a nonpartisan organisation that monitors democracy, political freedom and human rights trends around the world, [found](#) 2015 to be the tenth consecutive year of decline in global freedom.

One does not necessarily have to mull over statistical data to recognise that it is indeed the kind of reality we live in. The evidence, sadly, is everywhere and overwhelming. The Arab Spring has turned into a dark, morbid winter; Turkey has exploited a failed coup attempt to align itself closer to Russia and adopt an increasingly authoritarian posture; illiberal attitudes, promoted by reactionary figures of the likes of Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, and Rodrigo Duterte are gathering traction and amassing political victories around the globe. Our world, it appears, is experiencing a crisis of democracy.



Six main features of the ‘decline in democracy’

How did this come to be? How did we get caught up in a democratic recession in the 21st century? Dr Brian Klaas attempts to address these questions in his new book *The Despot's Accomplice: How the West is Aiding and Abetting the Decline of Democracy*, which he introduced at a launch event at LSE's Old Theatre on Thursday 13 October 2016. For his research, Dr Klaas, a Fellow in Comparative Politics at the LSE, travelled to troubled democracies in Africa and Eastern Europe and interviewed former and current government officials, diplomats, grassroots leaders and others and arrived at the conclusion (as you might have already inferred from the book's title) that the West, whether deliberately or inadvertently, has had a big hand in creating and propagating this global crisis of democracy.

Using personable and engaging stories from an impressive range of case studies—from Belarus to Latvia, and Madagascar to Tunisia—Dr Klaas attributes the decline of democracy to six main features of Western conduct in recent decades and provides suggestions to amend them. First, he observes, the West is increasingly abandoning active democratic promotion around the world, preferring autocrats that would cut corner to promote their interests to having to deal with the instability and uncertainty that goes with democratic transition. To correct this, Dr Klaas argues, the West needs to realise, from past experiences, that control regimes' apparent stability is nothing but a mirage. These regimes are bound to collapse and create major difficulties for the West in the long-term.

Second, in countries where the West does promote democracy it has set the bar at an extremely low level (Madagascar being a case in point). Consequently, there is little incentive to fully democratise. The end result is what Dr Klaas calls “counterfeit democracies”, which only have the appearance of a democracy but, in reality, are nothing but. The West, therefore, needs to set a higher bar that will push countries to democratise more fully. Third, the West's democracy promotion strategy employs mostly sticks and little carrots, and as a result it has been of little effect. The West needs to come up with a “new carrot”. It needs to employ, in other words, soft, rather than hard, power. A potentially effective carrot, Dr Klaas suggests, could be a democratic trade zone, which give preferential access only to full-fledged democracies.

Fourth, the West needs to lure long-serving dictators and despots away from power by employing, what Dr Klaas calls, a “golden handcuffs” exit strategy in which the despot is incentivised to leave his post by providing him immunity from prosecution and guaranteeing his safety. Fifth, the West should not insist on eradicating all of the overthrown regimes' institutions as it did in Iraq, for example (de-baathification). Those institutions could allow smoother transition to democracy, as was the case in Tunisia. And sixth, Western countries need to improve their democracies at home so that they can lead by example.

The West: part of the problem and key to the solution

Now, five out of the six elements of Dr Klaas's argument might, at first glance, raise a few eyebrows. For the author, as one audience member pointed out during the Q&A session, is suggesting that the West is a big part of the problem, but that, at the same time, it also has all the keys to the solution. Looking at how past instances of Western interventionism and efforts to promote democracy have panned out, one cannot but be sceptical at the wisdom of taking this course yet again.

Dr Klaas responded to this point by, quite convincingly, pointing to the alternative: Russia and China (to whom he dedicates a full chapter in his book). These, for Dr Klaas, are the two countries that do the most damage to democracy: China indirectly by presenting a model of authoritarian rule that is very seductive, but that which will not necessarily work elsewhere, whilst Russia is actively trying to undermine democracy. Given the alternatives, then, the West might as well be the only hope. This time, however, what is required from the West is a long-term commitment to the project.



One cannot but remain pessimistic, however, that any real long-term commitment from the West is possible at this juncture. Part of the reason, as Dr Klaas himself pointed out, is the nature of democracy itself. Due to electoral pressures, democratic regimes cannot afford to make long-term calculations. Indeed, to get re-elected a democratic government needs to produce results in the short-term, lest it will be booted out come next election cycle. Second, there is unavoidably a collective action problem at hand. Such a commitment requires strong leadership to steer the democratic block in the right direction. The post-Great Recession era, however, looks more like, what **Ian Bremmer** calls, a G-Zero world, with an international system characterised by a growing vacuum in global governance. But this status quo will not last forever. Some power or a collective of powers will eventually fill in that vacuum. And to reverse democracy's global decline, one can only hope that whoever it might be, it will seek to apply at least some of the prescriptions that Dr Klaas puts forward.

Anan Khatib is an MSc Conflict Studies student in the **LSE Department of Government**.

Follow Anan on Twitter – **@anan_khatib**



Note: this article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Department of Government, nor of the London School of Economics.

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