

Reviving Democracy Promotion

Larry Diamond

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic gave rulers an excuse to further suppress liberty around the world, democracy was facing hard times. Fourteen years ago, the world began sliding into a democratic recession, and every year since then more countries have declined in freedom than have gained. Autocrats have become emboldened by the distraction and decay of the advanced industrial democracies at the very time that China and Russia have been surging in global influence and ambition. More than at any time since the end of the Cold War, freedom and democracy are now in desperate need of international support. The United States must lead that effort. Here are six things the next American administration can do.

First, American rhetoric and diplomacy must clearly stand in defense of universal values such as human rights, accountability, rule of law, and free elections. These values must be consistently enunciated, even to “friendly” governments. Around the world, our ambassadors on the ground represent our values. Through their public statements, appearances, meetings, and small grants, they can support and defend embattled civil society leaders, intellectuals, independent media, and democratic opposition. They should be instructed to do so. And Washington must back up their words and actions.

Second, we need to reinvigorate a comprehensive campaign of public diplomacy to counter the Chinese, Russian, and other authoritarian propaganda and disinformation. We must broadcast truthful news and information about the behavior of authoritarian regimes and promote the values, ideas, and civic tools and obligations

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of democracy. This knowledge and information must be conveyed through multiple means—through the rapid action and viral reach of digital media, and through the slower, deeper work of exchange programs, massive online courses, and flash drives containing virtual libraries of classic and modern works on freedom and democracy, translated into many different languages.

Third, we have to push back in particular against authoritarian “sharp power”—the efforts of states like China and Russia to penetrate and sway other countries not through the soft power of their ideals but through covert, coercive, and corrupting influence activities. China in particular has been using its wealth to trap poorer countries in debt, pry away control of their critical infrastructure and natural resources, “train” their journalists in the “Chinese” way of reporting, subvert the independence of the media, and corrupt politicians and businessmen. Democratic forces in these societies need resources and most of all information, training, and networking to push back against the PRC’s neo-colonialism.

More generally, independent media and nongovernmental organizations need financial and technical assistance to defend internationally guaranteed rights of information, internet access, privacy, assembly, association, worship, and so on. Increasingly, the key pillars of civil society are under attack by their governments, which seek to marginalize and intimidate them and starve them of resources. The need for assistance has intensified during the COVID pandemic, as governments seek to use the public health emergency to stifle all independent voices, and as dire economic conditions dry up indigenous sources of revenue. Increased support is especially needed for independent digital and other media (including investigative journalism), human rights and anti-corruption groups, think tanks, and advocacy groups. Fortunately, the Congress has recently significantly increased funding for the National Endowment for Democracy to disperse some of this assistance. But the U.S. government must also insist on the right of civil society actors to receive international support as a human right.

Fifth, we have to bring pressure to bear on the specific authoritarian actors who are ravaging freedom and accountability. The best method for doing so is not national sanctions on a whole country, but targeted sanctions on kleptocratic elites who are ravaging their people’s rights and stealing their resources. The Global Magnitsky Act empowers the president to block visas and to impose property sanctions on individuals and entities responsible for gross human rights violations or significant corruption. We need to make more pointed use of it and encourage our democratic allies to join us.

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Finally, we must renew our position of global leadership, both among the community of liberal democracies, such as the G7, and in the battle for global institutions. China and Russia seek to dismantle the entire post-World War II architecture of norms and institutions affirming human rights, transparency, and the rule of law. We cannot allow their cynical conceptions of sovereignty to reshape the global system of governance. We must reassert our energetic presence and forthright leadership in the United Nations and its bodies (like the Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization). We must resume our leadership role in global accords like the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. And we should become once again the “arsenal of democracy,” providing other countries with the equipment, medicines, and vaccines necessary to fight the COVID pandemic. In these ways, we can reverse the current authoritarian wave and demonstrate anew the superior value of liberty and self-government.