



# Signs of a global democratic revival?

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In recent days, thousands of Iranians protested in the nation's southeast; women burned their headscarves in the north; students launched a new protest song at Tehran University's College of Social Sciences, and people urged "death to Khamenei" and shouted the name of an imprisoned activist in the streets of Tehran.

With Iran's protests now attracting women, students, doctors, lawyers, workers, athletes, and others, the regime seems unsure of just how hard to crack down. The authorities have killed hundreds and arrested tens of thousands, and Iran's Revolutionary Court is now issuing death sentences against demonstrators. But — perhaps hoping to cool one hotbed of protest — Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ordered further probes into deadly violence in the southeast and compensation for its victims.

Iran's spreading protests in the face of brutal reprisals not only beg the question of whether — after waves of uprisings in recent years — this uprising will threaten the regime's hold on power, but also come amid signs of democratic renewal around the world: from mounting protests in China to battlefield victories in Ukraine to a renewal of democratic norms in the United States and Brazil.

These developments provide a timely reminder (after a nearly two-decade-long decline of freedom and democracy around the world) that people who live under, or are threatened by, authoritarian rule will take great risks for freedom — and that those who live in free societies may treasure their freedom more than we realized.

In China, where strongman Xi Jinping wields more power than any leader since Mao and is increasingly restricting freedom, thousands of people participated in nearly 700 "dissent events" between June and September of this year, Freedom House recently reported (while acknowledging that these figures are probably a "drastic underrepresentation" of actual dissent across the country).

Angered by delayed housing projects, inadequate pay, COVID-19 restrictions, and other problems, protestors in China marched, blocked roads, and launched labor strikes. Moreover, they acted in the face of reprisals by companies and local governments that often included violence, showing that those living under authoritarian rule often will risk life and limb for freedom and prosperity.

In Ukraine, where people in the newly liberated city of Kherson celebrated with tears and gave soldiers a hero's welcome, citizens of this former Soviet republic have shown that they will endure great sacrifice to maintain their freedom and remain independent from a revanchist Russia.

Ukraine's battlefield victories have the potential to strengthen freedom and democracy far beyond its own borders. By preventing Russia's attempted conquest, Ukraine is helping to restore international norms with the help of sizable economic and military aid from the U.S.-led free West.

Speaking of the United States, which has long served as a beacon for would-be democrats around the world, the smooth casting and counting of votes in recent days, along with the defeat of candidates who vowed not to respect democratic norms in the future, are proving very reassuring to America's allies.

European officials, in particular, are breathing a sigh of relief, for they now expect continued strong U.S. support for both NATO and Ukraine. That, in turn, will reassure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and — to the extent that Ukraine continues to turn back Russian forces — reenergize the world's democracies as they face off against the emerging anti-U.S. bloc of China, Russia, and Iran.

Prospects for freedom and democracy's continued global vitality also received a boost when Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who lost his bid for re-election, didn't make good on his threats to contest the results and instead laid the groundwork for a smooth transition to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

To be sure, weeks of inspiring events like these do not necessarily signal a halt to democracy's global decline.

China, which is challenging the United States for global supremacy, is investing enormous sums around the world through its "belt and road" initiative while promoting — to the governments receiving Chinese aid — a form of authoritarianism that it says will prove more effective than U.S.-style democracy. Meanwhile, Ukraine has not yet defeated Russia, Iranian protestors have not yet toppled their government, and democracy remains under threat across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Nevertheless, in a world in which information crosses borders faster than ever, more people in authoritarian lands see how those in democratic lands live, and they want the benefits for themselves. Also in such a world, democracy's advances in one place can provide momentum for its success elsewhere.

The recent, and mutually reinforcing, events in Iran, China, Russia, the United States, and Brazil offer hope that maybe — maybe — we're turning a corner.

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