

# ***The Impact of Improvement in Modern Global Situation on Democratic Reform in the 21st Century***

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**Abstract:** Democracy is widely considered as a better form of regime in terms of others, such as monarchies and totalitarianism, since the freedom, human rights and equality of people in democracy regimes can be safeguarded. Meanwhile, a democratic government is under supervision of different sectors, thus preventing from abusing of power and corruption. The purpose of this article is to analyse the potential for democratic reform based on the previous studies, in order to have an implication on the factors and the future trends of democratic reform in the 21st century. This paper finds out that the process of democratic reform is getting faster as the technology and globalization progress, and the existence of social media and internet allows the faster spread of the idea of democracy, meanwhile causing a pressure to the stability of authoritarian regimes. Globalization allows countries worldwide to become more interdependent, and promotes economic activities that can further support the spread of democracy. Authoritarian regime countries who do not participate in globalization would face a problem of falling behind in economic development and hence become less stable.

**Keywords:** democratization, authoritarian, globalization.

## **1. Introduction**

The recent formation of modern democratic system can be tracked to European enlightenment in late 1700s to 1800s. European enlightenment was a movement of culture and ideology that emphasized by science revolution and rationality. People were inspired by the discoveries of Newton and Galileo, and started to question the rationality of political autocracies of the church and monarch, causing people to look for a fairer and more equal social system. The system called the separation of powers mentioned by French enlightenment thinker Montesquieu [1]. The British philosopher John Locke mentioned that the duty of the government should be protecting the rights of the people, life, freedom and property. People do have the rights to overthrow the government if they infringe the right of the people. Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated in the social contract theory that people should be naturally free and equal, and government should be representing the will of people [1]. The theories stated by scholars during the European enlightenment has tributed a template for the modern democratic political regimes. Their contributions caused the change of the modern world politics, forming a global fever of democratization reform in the following centuries.

Democratic reform is a hot topic in modern politics. Previous studies have shown the impact of economic development, legitimacy of authoritarian governances, and several external causes onto the

democratic transition of authoritarian countries in history. Meanwhile, it is conceptualized that the human history of democratization into three different waves [2].

Currently, there are 74 countries in the world has transited their regime from authoritarian to democratic ones; however, when human society stepped into the 21st century, the situation of global democratic reforms seemed to be worse. The period after 1990s until 2024 was widely believed as the backsliding stage of the third democratic wave. In recent years, several cases happened has appeared a backsliding trend of democratization reform globally, for example, the rise of authoritarianism in countries like Russia, India and Turkey, the rise of populism ideologies in the US such as Donald Trump's presidency in 2017 to 2021, and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan to seize power by armed forces. Even during the Arab Spring in 2010, which was widely expected to set Arab countries into a liberalized region, the majority of those countries, for example, Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, failed. Those countries that failed to convert or maintain their democratic regimes also paid a very high cost through bloodshed and monetary loss.

Every wave of democratization would be followed by a backslide of waves [2]. The degree of the global freedom has been declined for more than a decade as major democratic regimes put less focus on foreign affairs, which led to the growth of authoritarian activities, showing a backslide of democracy after the third wave in 1990s [3]. The situation of democratic regime nowadays is getting threatened. To deal with this problem, studies are required to improve the current situation and be well prepared about the future upcoming fourth democratic wave.

In this article, factors that have affected the past three waves of democratization are analyzed to verify the sustainability of the democratic regimes and have a general evaluation on the current factors for the upcoming fourth wave.

## **2. The First Democratic Wave**

### **2.1. The Establishment of Modern Democratic System in the US**

The period after America's independence and the French revolution from 1800s to early 1900s was widely recognized as the first democratic wave in modern history. In late 18th century, the "Deceleration of Independence" announced during the American revolutionary war mentioned that people were born to be equal. At the same time, people did have the right to pursue happiness and overthrow the autocratic government that were abuse of using their power. With this kind of faith in mind, Americans won the revolutionary war and gained its independence from England. Later, the US adopted the first written constitution in human history that the separation of powers – executive, legislature, and judiciary – ensured representative democracy and universal suffrage, which consolidated the democratic regime in the US. The power of the government was being limited and corruption and abuse of power could be restricted, since the source of the power of the government were from the people. Thus, the movement would be also supervised by the legislature, judiciary, and people at the same time. The separation of powers ensured the transparency and fairness of the democratic legitimacy and became an integral component of modern democratic system [4].

The independence of the United States showed to the world that democratic system was feasible, although it was a nascent concept that had not implemented yet in the human history. Therefore, the success of the US provided a model to the rest of the world to refer to, further stabilizing and supporting democratic institution to the world, promoting peoples' civil liberty personal rights, equity, and limiting government's power from abusing.

### **2.2. Europe**

In late 18th century, the French revolution occurred leading to the collapse of autocratic monarchy regime in France. Meanwhile, the establishment of the ideas of "people's sovereignty" and "republic",

contributed a framework of modern democratic regimes [5]. The republic was built under the national motto “liberty, equality, fraternity.” Like the US, the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” indicated the equality and rights for people. As the democratic reform comes in a wave, the success of French revolution created a challenge to the European absolute monarchy, feudalist and autocratic regimes, since many people from many European countries like Germany, Italy and Hungary were inspired to fight for their freedom and democracy. Their regimes were under threatened and forced them to change into more democratic regimes, followed by a diminishing of power of nobilities and church hierarchies, causing the rise of the people and parliament, which further promoted free market economy and the progress of industrial revolution with improving living standard.

After the French revolution, there were several times of style changing to the form of regimes, including republic, restoration, and empire. French societies were trying to find an optimum way to rule a country that can ensure human rights, freedom and democracy. The different possibilities of political systems French society tested provided several templates for European countries to refer to. For instance, England and Spain converted their regime from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy regime. Monarchies could reserve their social status by sharing part of their power. At the same time, people did enjoy more freedom and rights by taking part into the political systems and make decisions.

### 3. The Second Democratic Wave

The second democratic wave happened after the end of World War II (WWII) in 1945, due to the collapse of totalitarianism worldwide that provided a breeding ground for more countries to turn into democratic regimes. After WWII, the Axis power countries that were controlled by totalitarian governments were defeated, and European countries and Japan as a defeated country were highly damaged in both economic and political aspects. To recover social stability and economies postwar and consolidate the democratic regimes worldwide, the US was the country that played a major role in promoting and stabilizing democratic regimes postwar by announcing a series of economic and military assistance policies that significantly contributed to the future world democratic pattern [6]. The Marshall Plan (European Recovery Program) was one of the policies that had a significant role in rebuilding the European economy post-WWII. With more than 13 billion dollars funded to 16 West European countries on material support, rebuilding infrastructures, and recovering industrial productions, there was a prominent rise in productivity for those countries that were being supported. The agricultural production and living conditions of those countries were also recovered within a very short period, and the economy and confidence among the citizens has rapidly boost up as a result of the Marshall Plan.

Another major contribution of the US to the democratic reform post WWII was prevented from the expansion of communist regimes that created a symbol of the Cold War by further consolidating the democratic allies [7]. There was a rise in the ideology of communism worldwide. More people in France and Italy began to support their communist parties because they were actively participating in anti-fascism activities during WWII, leading to the rise of the power of communism in Western Europe. However, the success of the Marshall Plan has significantly boosted peoples’ confidence in free market economy and democratic system by improving the economic plight post-WWII. Meanwhile, the support of the US in Asia was also an important movement to prevent the communist ideology from further expanding down south. The US was actively involved in the post-war recovery in Japan, which included economic and land reform, enactment of constitutes, and improving industrial production. By the 1950s, Japan achieved a so-called “Japanese economic miracle” by largely developing its technology and export-driven growth, coupled with the US military forces stationed in

Japan. Japan became the key ally of the US which has been supporting democratic regimes in the Asia region.

#### **4. The Third Democratic Wave**

The success of the Carnation Revolution in 1974 in Lisbon, Portugal indicated the start of the third democratic wave, with the carnation flowers placed in soldiers' guns' muzzles, and the authoritarian Estado Novo government was easily overthrown without much bloodshed. The feature of peaceful transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes had become the main tune throughout the third waves of democratization, and the reason behind this can be explained in several aspects.

One of the factors that resulted in a peaceful democratic transition was globalization and improvements in information technologies [8]. With the improvement of technologies, there were more and faster ways to receive messages worldwide. The set up of unions, one example could be the European Union (EU), has largely increased people's mobility among the member countries by removing restrictions between them. This would have made the speed of information spreading even faster, and people around the world have more opportunities to communicate. People had a better knowledge of the political situation around the globe to motivate them to pursue a better government system, liberty and rights. The legitimacy of authoritarian regimes was under-supervised and questioned by other countries which has made it much harder to be maintained.

The "snowballing effect" was another cause of the third wave of democratic reform. "Snowballing" exists when one country has successfully overthrown its authoritarian regime and set up a democratic regime, providing an incentive to the surrounding countries [2]. The revolution of 1989 in Europe was an example in this case [8]. In the late 1980s, the Soviet Union (SU) policy, "Openness and Reconstruction," stated clearly that SU would no longer intervene in the domestic affairs of allied countries. This policy directly affected the regime stability in Eastern Bloc countries and Eastern Germany, and their communist regime started to collapse without the support from the SU. In June 1989, Poland was the first country that had done a democratic transition in Eastern Europe. Four months later, Hungary declared itself as a republic, representing the end of the authoritarian regime, followed by Eastern Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. These Middle Eastern Europeans successfully transited into a democratic regime within only two months. People in these countries had a strong dissatisfactory opinion against their government. When Poland succeeded as the bellwether, the rest of the countries gathered, incentivized each other, and achieved success in democratic transitions.

#### **5. Democratization in the 21st Century**

##### **5.1. Precondition of Democratic Reform**

From the previous democratic waves happened, it can be observed that the time intervals between the three waves are getting shorter and shorter. The democratic backsliding after the first wave existed for one-hundred years, while there was only 30 years' gap between the second and the third waves. There are many factors that affect the democratic reform in waves, and more waves of democracy are expected to surge forward when these factors improved.

Economic development has led to increase in education level and numbers of the middle classes, which are some of the important factors for democratization [9]. This is because economic development in a country caused the increase in the number of middle classes, and more resources were put onto the education systems which making the concept of moral ideas, personal rights, equality and freedom better understood by citizens. The concept of democracy can be acknowledged in the authoritarian government countries, hence stimulates their pursue for it. The role of the middle classes in a country is to achieve democracy. Since they have been satisfied with their basic material

needs, they are more willing to focus on their personal rights and social issues. Hence, they will participate in political activities to strive for their personal rights.

## 5.2. Factors Leading to the Fourth Democratic Wave

In recent two decades, the improvement of the information technology has changed the way of communication between peoples. The existence of internet and social media makes information dissemination and gathering complete in an astonishing speed. What happened in a country domestically and any international event can be quickly grasped by people, and people can respond to it. This is a threat to the authoritarian government, since their regime legitimacy can be affected by foreign propaganda. Many of the authoritarian government countries have set their policies to prevent people from knowing the facts, but the existence of new technologies can be across the border of limitations, which make such policies ineffective.

Globalization in the 21st century is another key factor leading to the fourth wave of democratization. International organizations nowadays connect people around the world together as one unity. For instance, the establishment of the EU has promoted growth in trade and citizens' mobilities within Europe. Member countries become interdependent and supervise each other on human rights protections and stabilities of their democracy systems. Another function of the EU is to require its surrounding dictatorial regime countries to reform by several interventions, for example, trade sanctions and cutting of diplomatic ties [10]. Meanwhile, the international organizations are also responsible to provide humanitarian relief to countries that might need supports. This will further promote the ideas of democratic and freedom globally, enhancing its creditability. The propagate of global citizenship has made people put more emphasis on universal values as one of the goals of democratization.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, this article summarizes the causes and impact of the three waves of democratization in human history, followed with some implications on the upcoming fourth democratic wave in 21st century. The aim of this article is to have an evaluation on the factors that may promote the upcoming fourth wave with the utmost precision by analyzing the similarities and differences from previous three waves. The findings show that there is an acceleration on the process of modern democratic reform, which may be the result of the improvement of information technology and increase in interconnections between countries leading to globalization in recent decades. The convenience of modern technologies has made information reception and delivery in a very short time. People can easily communicate with each other across far distances, have discussion of public affairs, actively participate in politics and higher level of supervision on government behaviors, and are able to ask for global assistance when the democratic system is under threat. The existence of international unions is the embodiment of globalization, and the ideology of democracy can be maintained and promoted by supervising the status of human rights and government activities in countries around the world. Investment and global market in those countries will increase since it has created a "public-trusted" area for capitals to join in, hence boosting economic growth that can further increase budget on civil education, further promoting the concept of freedom and human rights.

However, this article is a qualitative study which may have not yet taken into account all possible factors that might affect the result of democratization in a specific region. Hence, the method of triangulation that contains larger amount of data can be used in future studies. The theoretical foundation will be more credible with multi-sources research findings. Data analysis tools can also be used to collect large numbers of samples to analyze the trend for potential policy design.

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