

“Democracy is like a sand castle”

An interview with Brian Klaas, Roderick Kefferpütz

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Across the globe, democracy is being increasingly questioned and put to test. Authoritarian governments are becoming more emboldened. Roderick Kefferpütz spoke with Dr Brian Klaas, an expert on democracy promotion and authoritarianism, on the role the West has played in democracy’s demise and what should be done to reverse this tide and advance a democracy-promotion agenda.

Roderick Kefferpütz: How would you describe the current state of democracy in the world?

Brian Klaas: Dismal. The world has become more authoritarian. We have witnessed a twelve-year decline of democracy globally. There are several layers to this. First, Western countries are having a crisis of faith in democracy. In the West, we are seeing the rise of populism, the rejection of mainstream parties and the rise of new anti-establishment parties. This all follows long-term trends that have been at work, such as increasing inequality and polarisation. At the same time, there has been a rise of authoritarian populism abroad, which is coinciding with a Western foreign policy that supports this. A lot more people in the West are flirting with or accepting authoritarian regimes in the rest of the world.

Basically, there are four big powers that can affect change: the US, the EU, Russia and China. The first two are democratic and the last two are not. And what has happened since 2016, which is accelerating the decline of democracy, is that the first two – the US and the EU – which normally defend democracy are either cheerleading for authoritarian regimes in the form of Donald Trump or they are complicit in accepting them, as the EU is doing. So when I talk to people in Africa or South-East Asia, they feel like the West has abandoned democracy.

But active democracy promotion, which the West pursued in previous years, hasn’t turned out very well either. The Arab Spring also didn’t lead to great democratic transformation.

Certainly, the West got it wrong quite often. There is a lot of well-deserved hypocrisy surrounding Western democracy promotion. The way the West deals with Saudi Arabia is a prime example. And I am not someone who pretends that the West is always right. But there are a lot of places in the world where Western democracy promotion has made a difference. Look at Madagascar, Ghana or Cambodia. It’s possible to make a difference there because these places are of less geo-strategic importance.

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You mention the Arab Spring – Western aid has been crucial in keeping Tunisia the only surviving democracy after the Arab Spring. Democracy doesn’t come overnight. It takes a long time to take hold and properly establish itself. Look at South Korea after the Korean War or Japan right after World War II. It takes a long time. The Arab Spring was only eight years ago. And yes, there have been countries that went back to dictatorship but the seeds for future

democratic movements may have been planted. Authoritarian governments don't just continue on auto-pilot and stay stable. That never happens. Democracy promotion is a long-term project.

But the West has no long-term engagement on this, does it?

Exactly. There is no Western appetite for any prolonged engagement in fostering democracy elsewhere, largely because of the failures in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. If those had turned out differently, if they had been success stories, then we would be having a different conversation today. The tragedy of these three failures is that they have left a legacy where people believe isolationism is the right thing. There is a new constituency for isolationism. That's a problem. If the US disengages and Europe follows, then the world is going to be shaped by China and Russia.

Do you consider China and Russia to be exporting a new kind of authoritarianism?

They both promote authoritarianism, but their approaches are not the same. Russia actively promotes authoritarianism. It props up leaders because they are authoritarian, believing that this means they are more likely to be allies against the US-led global order. Russia tries to weaken the West by peeling countries away from it. China, on the other hand, is very pragmatic and prefers to entrench existing authoritarian leaders.

In many African countries, China is more popular than the US. The Chinese advance the narrative that you can have authoritarian government and economic growth at the same time. The Chinese model is giving governments a reason to stop holding elections or start rigging elections.

So, what's the answer? What should the West do to stop this authoritarian wave?

The West needs internal and external changes. First, it needs to make the case for democracy again and explain why it is a better system. In particular, we need a concrete solution to economics. I am a capitalist but one who believes in regulation and the government having a role in the market. We need to insulate people from the rough edges of capitalism and halt increasing inequality. That will make people more comfortable with democratic government.

People are disillusioned with the democratic system because they are not happy with how capitalism is working for them.

Then, the West needs a consistent pro-democracy foreign policy. When I talk to dissidents and torture victims in authoritarian governments, you realise they are not going to win on their own. They are losing, because they can get crushed so easily. It's not a fair fight. The only thing that addresses this imbalance is if the dictator knows that if he kills people, like they were going to do in Egypt during the Arab Spring, there will be consequences and an international news story. Western governments need to stand up for democratic principles. I am embarrassed by the West's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia. Selling weapons to Saudi Arabia undercuts Western soft power in other countries.

The best democratic investment the US ever made was the Marshall Plan. It created all of its allies, it created a secure and prosperous world, and all those countries became innovative, democratic, rich states. I don't see why this should not be possible in other parts of the world.

Do we need a "League of Democracy" – a concert of democratic states that promote democracy abroad?

Yes. In my first book, *The Despot's Accomplice*, I propose a 21st century League of Democracy which would be a

trade zone. Just look at the EU and what it did for Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. Those countries democratised in the span of two to three years and stayed democracies. And if you look at the GDP per capita it's like night and day – from deeply poor to all of a sudden medium income to reasonably rich countries. That can happen in other places too, if you manage to tie in an economic incentive, for example connecting trade to how open a society is. Then there would be a clear incentive for countries to democratise without the West needing to have a heavy hand or foreign intervention.

But then we are also seeing a democratic rollback in Eastern Europe, such as in Hungary.

Yes, they are outliers. Some of this is xenophobia, some is fear politics and anti-Muslim sentiment. Economics is not a silver bullet. But I believe the world would become more democratic if there were economic reasons to democratise.

You mentioned the Western crisis of confidence in democracy. Younger generations too have less enthusiasm for democracy. To what extent do you believe democracy needs an upgrade for the 21st century?

Sure, there need to be reforms with regards to certain democratic models. The US is a prime example – it has serious problems with money in politics. But for European democracies, I don't believe their system needs to be fixed or needs an overhaul. People are disillusioned with the democratic system because they are not happy with how capitalism is working for them. What we need is an update for capitalism, especially to deal with globalisation and the even bigger challenge of automation. The anger towards democracy is not with the process of not having a say, it's that the results are not coming in.

Democracy is like a sand castle. You can put lumps of sand into a castle shape reasonably quickly, but it won't be beautiful. It takes a long time to make a good sand castle.

And the reason that younger people are more willing to dispose of democracy is because they have not seen the alternative. People in our generation don't know what it is like to not have democracy. I meet dissidents and torture victims who plead that we give them a tiny bit of political support – just a statement from the embassy. And then you have people in the West who basically don't care about democracy. I just wish they could meet the others in the world.

Democracy is like a sand castle. You can put lumps of sand into a castle shape reasonably quickly, but it won't be beautiful. It takes a long time to make a good sand castle. Then it can be washed away quickly and once it is, it's gone. Westerners forget about this. When democratic governments turn authoritarian, there's no going back. There aren't any prominent examples of a democratic country turned authoritarian and then gone back to democracy again. Thailand just recently tried to get back to its elections and the military rigged them. As soon as you have a dictator in power, they will put their finger on the scale and make sure they win. Once you go there, it's hard to get back.



Dr. Brian Klaas is an Assistant Professor at University College London and a columnist for *The Washington Post*. Dr. Klaas is an expert on democracy, authoritarianism, US foreign policy, American politics more generally, political violence, and elections. His published works include *The Despot's Apprentice: Donald Trump's Attack on Democracy* (Hurst & Co, November 2017) and *The Despot's Accomplice: How the West is Aiding & Abetting the Decline of Democracy* (Oxford University Press, December 2016).



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