

## ‘Is democracy experiencing a setback worldwide?’

To consider the extent to which democracy is facing a setback, its importance must be acknowledged first. A healthy, expansive democracy provides a world where people are well informed and can freely express their opinions, and the policies of the day reflect the views of the electorate. It provides a form of self-government worth striving for, yet recent years have seen it decline. Freedom House, an organisation that conducts research on democracy in its 2020 report explained that; ‘Democracy and pluralism are under assault’ (1) and found that 64 countries experienced deterioration in 2019, while just 37 made gains, demonstrating plainly a democratic decline (2). This essay will endeavour to explore the large extent to which democracy is experiencing a setback worldwide through explaining three methods used to undermine democracy; misinformation, election rigging, and surveillance.

Misinformation is dangerous to democracy, as it decreases the ability of the electorate to make informed decisions. Misinformation can be used strategically by politicians to prevent or encourage decisions to be made by the public in their favour, thus distorting the effectiveness of the democratic process. Recently, misinformation has been taking its toll on the democratic process in regards to the US election. Donald Trump’s recent loss in the US election has led to him making a series of claims that he had won, and that voter fraud had led to the election results showing him to lose. Through this use of misinformation he has undermined the democratic process in a way that continues to polarise America, in an attempt to extend his presidency, demonstrating a setback in democracy. This misinformation has planted seeds of distrust in the Biden presidency that is due to follow, and with a large proportion of America believing that Trump is the rightful president, Biden may struggle convincing Americans he has been fairly elected. These claims are completely unsubstantiated, and have culminated in the riots at the Capitol Building on the 6th January 2021. This moment was one of tragedy in regards to American democracy, being the country that is said to be the pinnacle of modern day democracy and liberty. This demonstrates clearly the extent to which democracy is facing a set back in America, with the current president of the US using misinformation to incite violence in an attempt to cling to office. Presidential scholar, Nicole Hemmer, said on the matter ‘There isn’t a historical precedent’ (3), demonstrating the disbelief at the lack of democratic integrity the events have seen. It is hard to understate the symbolic importance of the events; for rioters to seize the seat of democracy,

forcing themselves into representatives offices, all incited by Trump advocating misinformation over election fraud. Yet whilst the attack is on America's system, it causes problems for democracy worldwide- where if hindering the following presidency through misinformation becomes acceptable, it could become a trend that may spread. In the same way nations look up to America as a model of democracy, the events set a template for actions of those who wish to undermine it. Therefore, misinformation inhibits democracy, and its use, such as in America, contributes to the setback worldwide.

Election rigging is another method to undermine democracy, where the selfishness of a few to remain in power overrules the direct will of the people. This has become increasingly prominent in recent years, and is thus a factor in the setback of democracy. A notable example of this is the events unfolding in Belarus. The recent election, held on the 9th August 2020 saw Alexander Lukashenko claim he won with 80% of the vote. Yet there is widespread evidence of election rigging, with the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum's report regarding the election in Belarus citing that 'around 69% of the observers of the 'Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections' campaign also reported that their voter turnout calculations did not match the figures announced by the PEC'. The report concluded that 'Belarusian authorities severely infringed upon paragraph 7.4 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document and article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights'(4). It is undeniable that election rigging took place in the elections in Belarus, and has been criticised across the world, but Lukashenko rejects this. The aftermath has been equally horrific, with violent suppression of protests that are merely trying to reclaim their democratic rights; the Office for Democratic Institutions on Human Rights have written 'There is evidence of excessive use of force by police' (5). Election rigging is particularly dangerous in undermining democracy, as it suppresses the electorate and their views under the guise of democratic integrity. This legitimises the leader in their power, making their decisions acceptable even though they are not elected. The reaction of the police accentuates the democratic decline further. Demonstrations in response had genuine reason to occur, yet they were violently suppressed, thus further silencing the electorate, first in their election and then in their protest. This has worldwide implications, with little international consequences for in response, increasing the likelihood for it to happen elsewhere too. Therefore, election rigging is dangerous to democracy, and has featured in the recent decay of democracy world wide.

Surveillance is another tool, often used by totalitarian states, to undermine democracy, or stop it emerging. An example of this can be identified by the events that have occurred in China, where high levels of monitoring are the norm. In Chongqing for instance, there is a surveillance camera for every 5.9 citizens, where facial recognition algorithms can match crimes to faces in the national ID database (6). This Orwellian level of surveillance enables the Chinese government to monitor their population closely, and with citizens well aware of this and the consequences they may face if they rebel, democracy remains suppressed. The tense atmosphere that this creates means that the Chinese Communist Party are able to remain indefinitely in power, without challenge from their populace. This has reached a crescendo in Xinjiang, where the crackdown there has the aim of suppressing Muslims in China, largely Uyghurs, but also including Kazakhs and Uzbeks. Many, estimated to be between 8,000,000 to two million have been detained in camps. The Council on Foreign Relations has reported 'detainees are forced to pledge loyalty to the CCP and renounce Islam... Others said they were tortured and subjected to sleep deprivation during interrogations' (7). This is the epitome of democratic suppression, where atrocities have been committed regarding religion and political views. The use of the surveillance state to repress all those who have committed a crime in the eyes of the CCP has demonstrated democracy is facing a setback to a large extent. In China, the views of all opponents have been silenced to allow the indefinite prominence of the totalitarianism in China. The cleansing of Uyghurs is a complete violation of human rights, but with constant monitoring, and a lack of a transparency, the government is not criticised, with little internal pressure to change. The government cannot be held to account, or removed, and with this, it is able to violate the human rights of Muslims in China, and the civil liberties of its whole population. This has great worldwide consequences, showing a model of surveillance that governments could potentially assume. This stance, coupled with the recent developments in Artificial Intelligence, can witness further decline in democracy worldwide, following the pattern of monitoring in China. Research by The Diplomat has found that China have been exporting surveillance technology worldwide, such as to Mongolia and Ethiopia. Ecuador was assisted by a \$240 million loan from China to install a network of cameras and response centres (8). This is potentially encouraging an increase of authoritarian regimes globally, which is inherently undemocratic. Thus democracy is facing a setback worldwide, suggesting that surveillance may be on the expanding globally, and with this, human rights violations.

Through these three methods, and examples of how they take prevalence in modern society, it has become painfully clear that democracy is facing a setback. Misinformation and accusations of election fraud have witnessed America, which was founded on values of equality, attack its own democratic building in a bid for Donald Trump to unjustifiably cling onto power. Belarus has witnessed its government rig the election, keeping Lukashenko in office, and then brutally suppress protests which oppose it. China has imposed a surveillance state to monitor its population, and in doing so violate the human rights of Uyghur Muslims. Yet these three examples do not fully explore every way democracy has been violated; they merely scratch the surface of an abyss of global government oppression and authoritarianism. Regretfully, this is a growing trend towards a declining democracy; Freedom House, in their annual report, noted 14 years of global democratic decay. It is undoubtedly a case for urgent action, to protect the rights of groups worldwide oppressed by their governments and the undemocratic laws they enforce. As Reinhold Niebuhr wrote; 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary'.

- 1: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>
- 2: <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-freedom-world-2020-finds-established-democracies-are-decline>
- 3: <https://www.ft.com/content/94bb187a-8629-4d82-8e54-592573dce310>
- 4: <https://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/EaPCSF-Monitoring-Mission-report-Belarus-political-societal-developments-elections.pdf>
- 5: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/belarus/459664>
- 6: <https://time.com/5735411/china-surveillance-privacy-issues/>
- 7: <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/chinas-repression-ughurs-xinjiang>
- 8: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/how-chinas-ai-technology-exports-are-seeding-surveillance-societies-globally/>