

Why our freedom is in danger



BOOK REVIEW

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There is little doubt that we live today in an era of democratic recession. Across the world, in democracies, new and old, we witness the relentless rise of populism, often associated with a lurch towards authoritarianism. Yascha Mounk, who teaches politics at Harvard, dissects these political trends, identifies their structural origins and postulates what could rescue liberal democracy from the existential dilemma that beset it.

Mr Mounk makes an important distinction between liberalism and democracy. Democracy, he says, is a "set of bind-

ing electoral institutions that effectively translates popular views into public policy." In other words, we are talking about a representative form of government. Liberalism, on the other hand, involves institutions that "protect the rule of law and guarantee individual rights such as freedom of speech, worship, press, and association to all citizens (including ethnic and religious minorities)". A liberal democracy, therefore, is a polity that "both protects individual rights and translates popular views into public policy". The crisis liberal democracies confront today is because these two components are out of sync; they are no longer held in balance.

Mr Mounk uses a number of case studies to demonstrate how electoral democracy has, through legitimate means, brought to power populists who claim to speak in the name of people. At least in the initial stages, they convey a sense of empowerment to significant constituen-

cies and this must be acknowledged and addressed. It is another matter that when the simplistic solutions to complex challenges that populist leaders offer fail to deliver, as they inevitably do, there is recourse to deflecting anger towards domestic and foreign targets, in particular minorities and migrant communities. The rule of law and respect for individual rights then become casualties. Subsequently, authoritarianism becomes the instrument to suppress dissent and loss of popular support.

But what explains the lure of populism and the support for populist leaders? Mr Mounk argues that answers lie in technological advance, globalisation and rising income inequalities. Technological advance has empowered and enriched a relatively limited technocratic and financial elite, while living standards have stagnated for most people. Furthermore, the author shows how relatively speaking, ethnically homogenous societies have

found their steady evolution into multi-ethnicity deeply threatening, further exacerbated by fears of losing jobs and incomes to migrants. And the rise of social media has exacerbated these sentiments. Political elites are no longer able to control social messaging as the channels and instruments of communication have become democratised, enabling "many-to-many" messaging, unmediated by authority.

The process of globalisation has had a similar impact. There is little doubt that most of the challenges that the world confronts are cross-border in nature. They demand collaborative responses from states and adherence to a common set of norms and regulations. And yet, this also leads to a pervasive sentiment that nations are losing control over their destinies to foreigners and a general mistrust of international institutions becomes apparent. This is most starkly evident in the support for Brexit in the UK and, of course, Trump's slogan of America First.

Although the book is a lucid and persuasive analysis of the current eclipse of liberal democracy, it focuses almost entirely on its Western variant. There are

only passing references to non-Western democracies, though one may argue that the future of the liberal democracy will probably be determined by how sustainable it proves to be in countries in Asia — India in particular — Africa and Latin America. In the one reference to India, Mr Mounk puts Prime Minister Modi in the category of "authoritarian populists" and argues that, if he is re-elected, "all bets are off" as to the future of democracy in the country. This is too sweeping and simplistic an assessment of a deeply complex polity. For example, Mr Mounk links the success of liberal democracy in the West to ethnic homogeneity. In India, on the contrary, it is multi-ethnicity and plurality that has sustained liberal democracy. No authoritarian leader can put a monochromatic political or religious frame on what is one of the most diverse countries in the world.

Mr Mounk's prescriptions on what may be required to deal with the crisis in liberal democracies follow from his diagnosis, but disappoint in being largely exhortatory in nature. Of course, those who value democracy must stand up and be counted. We must make our political

institutions more responsive to popular will. We must use public policy to reduce economic inequalities. But how do we respond to the current wave of populism that is sweeping over us? One would have also liked to see Mr Mounk address the challenge of China, the seductiveness of its model of political authoritarianism and market capitalism. China's success and continuing ascendancy does pose an alternative to liberal democracy and it is not an accident that we see "dictator envy" in democratic states, India included.

Despite these limitations, *The People Vs Democracy* is an important book and a serious analysis of the existential crisis that liberal democracies are traversing. But there are no easy answers, and the future of liberal democracy hangs in the balance.

(The reviewer is a former Foreign Secretary and currently Senior Fellow at CPR)

THE PEOPLE VS. DEMOCRACY

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