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THE SATURDAY ESSAY

China's Challenge to Democracy

The democratic cause is on the defensive today, and China's pragmatic authoritarianism now offers a serious rival model, based on economic progress and national dignity



ILLUSTRATION: RAÚL ALLÉN

By David Runciman

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In his 1992 book “The End of History and the Last Man,” Francis Fukuyama famously declared the triumph of liberal democracy as the model of governance toward which all of humankind was heading. It was a victory on two fronts. The Western democracies held the clear advantage over their

ideological rivals in material terms, thanks to their proven ability to deliver general prosperity and a rising standard of living for most citizens. At the same time, to live in a modern democracy was to be given certain guarantees that you would be respected as a person. Everyone got to have a say, so democracy delivered personal dignity as well.

Results plus respect is a formidable political mix. The word “dignity” appears 118 times in “The End of History,” slightly more often than the words “peace” and “prosperity” combined. For Mr. Fukuyama, that is what made democracy unassailable: Only it could meet the basic human need for material comfort and the basic human desire for what he called “recognition” (a concept borrowed from Hegel, emphasizing the social dimension of respect and dignity). Set against the lumbering, oppressive, impoverished regimes of the Soviet era, it was no contest.

Yet today, barely two decades into the 21st century, the contest has been renewed. It is no longer a clash of ideologies, as during the Cold War. Western democracy is now confronted by a form of authoritarianism that is far more pragmatic than its communist predecessors. A new generation of autocrats, most notably in China, have sought to learn the lessons of the 20th century just like everyone else. They too are in the business of trying to offer results plus respect. It is the familiar package, only now it comes in a nondemocratic form.

Since the 1980s, the Chinese regime has had remarkable success in raising the material condition of its population. Over that period, nondemocratic China has made strikingly greater progress in reducing poverty and increasing life expectancy than democratic India: People in China live on average nearly a decade longer than their Indian counterparts and per capita GDP is four times higher. The poverty rate in China is now well below 10% and still falling fast, whereas in India it remains at around 20%. The benefits of rapid economic growth have been made tangible for many hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens, and the regime understands that its survival depends on the economic success story continuing.

But China's rise has been underpinned by more than just improved living standards. There has been a simultaneous drive for greater dignity for the Chinese people. This is not, however, the dignity of the individual citizen as we've come to know it in the West. It is collective national dignity, and it comes in the form of demanding greater respect for China itself: Make China great again! The self-assertion of the nation, not the individual, is what completes the other half of the pragmatic authoritarian package.

Chinese citizens do not have the same opportunities for democratic self-expression as do citizens in the West or India. Personal political dignity is hard to come by in a society that



Students watched a speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping during the opening ceremony of the 19th Party Congress, Oct. 18, 2017. PHOTO: CHINATOPIX/ASSOCIATED PRESS

stifles freedom of speech and allows for the arbitrary exercise of power. Nationalism is offered as some compensation, but this only works for individuals who are Han Chinese, the majority national group. It does not help in Tibet or among Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang.

'Democracies, because they give everyone a say, are bound to be fickle.'

On the material side of the equation, China's pragmatic authoritarians have

certain advantages. They can target and manage the benefits of breakneck growth to ensure that they are relatively widely shared. Like other developed economies, China is experiencing rising inequality between the very richest and the rest. But the rest are never far from their rulers' minds. The Chinese middle class is continuing to expand at a dramatic pace. In the West, by contrast, it is the middle class, whose wages and standard of living have been squeezed in recent decades, who feel like they are being left behind.

The material benefits of democracy are much more haphazardly distributed. At any given moment, plenty of people feel excluded from them, and the constant changing of course in democratic politics—"We zig and we zag," as Barack Obama said after Donald Trump's victory—is a reflection of these persistent frustrations. Democracies, because they give everyone a say, are bound to be fickle. Pragmatic authoritarianism has shown itself more capable of planning for the long-term.

This is revealed not only by the massive recent Chinese investment in infrastructure projects—in transport, in industrial production, in new cities that spring up seemingly from nowhere—but also by the growing concern of China's rulers with environmental sustainability. China is now the world's leading greenhouse gas emitter, but it is also at the forefront of attempts to tackle the issue. Only in China would it be possible to double solar capacity in a single year, as happened in 2016.



A polling site in Nashua, N.H., during the primary, Feb. 9, 2016. PHOTO: DAVID GOLDMAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Western visitors often come back from China astonished by the pace of change and the lack of obstacles in its path. Things appear to

get done almost overnight. That is what happens when you don't have to worry about the democratic dignity of anyone who might stand in the way.

Beijing's reliance on the continuation of rapid economic growth comes with significant risks. The great long-term strength of modern democracies is precisely their ability to change course

when things go wrong. They are flexible. The danger of the pragmatic authoritarian alternative is that when the immediate benefits start to dry up, it may be difficult to find another basis for political legitimacy. Pragmatism may not be enough. Nor, in the end, will national self-assertion, if it increases the dangers of geopolitical instability.

The central political contests of the 20th century were between rival and bitterly opposed worldviews. In the 21st century, the contest is between competing versions of the same fundamental underlying goals. Both sides promise economic growth and widespread prosperity—tangible results in terms of material well-being. But they differ on the question of dignity: The West offers it to individual citizens, while China offers it more diffusely, to the nation as a whole.

The remarkable rise of China shows that this constitutes a genuine alternative. But is it a genuine rival in the West? Might democratic voters be tempted by this offer?

One of the striking features of the last century's battle of ideologies was that the rivals to liberal democracy always had their vocal supporters within democratic states. Marxism-Leninism had its fellow-travelers right to the bitter end, and such people can still be found in Western politics (Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell, potentially the next prime minister and finance minister of the United Kingdom, have never given up the struggle). By contrast, the Chinese approach has almost no one in the West actively advocating its merits. That does not mean, however, that it is without appeal.

Mr. Trump's electoral pitch in 2016 came straight out of the pragmatic authoritarian playbook. He promised to deliver collective dignity, at least for the majority group of white Americans: Make America great again! Stop letting other people push us around! At the same time, he promised to use the state much more directly and forcefully to improve the material circumstances of his supporters. He would bring the jobs back, triple the growth rate and protect everyone's welfare benefits. What Mr. Trump did not offer was much by way of personal dignity: not in his own conduct, not in his treatment of the people around him, and not in his contemptuous attitude toward the basic democratic values of tolerance and respect.

But there are serious limits in the West to the appeal of the Chinese model. First, unlike his counterparts in Beijing, Mr. Trump has shown little capacity to deliver real benefits to the Americans who elected him. He is hamstrung by his own lack of pragmatism and impulse control. He has also been constrained by the checks and balances that democratic politics puts in his way. For now, he looks more like a familiar type of democratic huckster than a harbinger of future authoritarianism in the U.S.: He has over-promised and under-delivered.

More fundamentally, it is still very hard to imagine the citizens of Western democracies acquiescing in the loss of personal dignity that would come with abandoning their rights of democratic dissent. We are far too attached to our continuing capacity to throw the scoundrels out of office when we get the chance. Voters in Europe and the U.S. have been attracted lately by novel-sounding promises to kick over the traces of mainstream democracy, but they have not endorsed anyone threatening to take away their democratic rights. The authoritarian reflex has been limited to threats to take away the rights of others—people who supposedly “don't belong.”

All of these movements in the West are populist distortions of democracy, not alternatives to it. Democratic authoritarians like the recently re-elected Viktor Orban in Hungary, who describes himself as an “illiberal democrat,” take their inspiration from Vladimir Putin rather than from the Chinese Communist Party. Pragmatism in countries like Hungary and Russia comes a distant second place to scapegoating and elaborate conspiracy theories. Democracy is still talked up, but stripped of its commitment to democratic rights. Elections take place, but the choice is often an empty one.

Chinese politics is far from immune to scapegoating and conspiracy theories. Its leaders pose as strongmen, and Xi Jinping has recently cemented his tight hold on power by being installed as leader for life. But as a viable alternative to democracy, Beijing has something to offer that Moscow and Budapest, to say nothing of today's Washington, can only gesture toward: Consistent, practical results for the majority.

The ongoing appeal of the Chinese model will vary from place to place. It may just stretch to include the edges of our own politics, though it will struggle to reach its heart. It is more immediately appealing in those parts of Africa and Asia where breakneck economic growth is both a realistic prospect and a pressing need. Rapid economic development, coupled with national self-assertion, has an obvious attraction for states that need to deliver results in a relatively short period of time. In these places, democracy often looks like the riskier bet.

'The triumph of liberal democracy appears a lot more contingent than it did three decades ago.'

In Western societies, the Chinese alternative is unlikely to capture voters' imaginations, even as it shows them what they might be missing. Still, the triumph of liberal democracy appears a lot more contingent than it did three decades ago. The temptations to try something different are real, even if the most successful current alternative remains a distant prospect for most voters.

There's reason to worry about the weaknesses of our democracies. The kind of respect they provide may prove insufficient for 21st-century citizens. The premium that democracy places on personal dignity has traditionally been expressed through extensions of the franchise. Giving people the vote is the best way to let them know that they count. But when almost all adults are able to vote—in theory, if not in practice—citizens inevitably look for fresh ways to secure greater respect.

The rise of identity politics in the West is an indication that the right to take part in elections is not enough anymore. Individuals seek the dignity that comes with being recognized for who they are. They don't just want to be listened to; they want to be heard. Social networks have provided a new forum through which these demands can be voiced. Democracies are struggling to work out how to meet them.

Elected politicians increasingly tiptoe around the minefield of identity politics, unsure which way to turn, terrified of giving offense, except when they deliberately court it. At the same time, they have grown dependent on technical knowledge—from bankers, scientists, doctors, software engineers—to deliver continuing practical benefits. As citizens find less personal dignity in politics and politicians become less able to manage prosperity, the attraction that has held democracy together for so long will start to dissipate. Respect plus results is a formidable combination. When they come apart, democracy loses its unique advantage.

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The Chinese model faces serious challenges, too. There, personal dignity remains the unrealized option, and the untried temptation is to extend rights of political expression and choice. The use by the Chinese state of social networks to manage and monitor its citizens represents a concerted attempt to resist the pull of democratic dignity

and to hold fast to the appeal of pragmatic authoritarian control. Just as the strains in the Western trade-off between dignity and material benefits may not be sustainable over time, the same is true of the Chinese version.

That sweet spot, where the two come together, which Mr. Fukuyama identified as the end of history, looks increasingly remote. No one has the monopoly on respect plus results any more.

Mr. Runciman is a professor of politics at Cambridge University. This essay is adapted from his new book, "How Democracy Ends," which will be published in early June by Basic Books.

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