

The Age of Autocracy? Not yet

Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Rifkind KCMG KC

2022 has turned into a better year for democracy and the rule of law than might have been expected when it began last January.

It has become fashionable to assert that there has been a global decline in democratic government as a model for the world as a whole. Autocracy had become fashionable, admired by some, and seen as the likely future by a swathe of commentators.

A year ago Vladimir Putin was the undisputed ruler of Russia. He was admired by many in the West, who should have known better, as a wise and successful statesman. He had brought Russia to stability after the relative chaos and economic turmoil of the Yeltsin years. He had shown strategic genius in his peaceful annexation of Crimea. He had re-established Russia's reputation globally, by his intervention in the civil war in Syria, and by the Russian troops invited into several African states to help weak governments suppress dissent.

Likewise, Xi Jinping was able to present himself as the undisputed ruler of 1.3 billion Chinese, and to claim that Chinese totalitarian dictatorship was a model that should be followed by developing countries throughout the world. He declared, and believed, that China had been more successful than any other country in controlling the Covid pandemic. He claimed that Chinese economic growth was the result of Communist Party rule and that he and his Party were loved by the Chinese people.

Other autocrats like Bolsonaro in Venezuela, the Ayatollahs in Iran, Orbán in Hungary and Erdoğan in Turkey despised liberal democracy. Not only was "Western democracy" declining in the eyes of the world; even a stable democracy like the United Kingdom was experiencing unprecedented turmoil with 4 Prime Ministers being forced to resign within 6 years.

These autocrats had their admirers in the West, not least Donald Trump who has never hidden his enthusiasm and envy for leaders who could ignore the rule of law and manipulate their own constitutions to remain in power and enforce their will.

Less than a year later it is all looking rather different.

Putin's reputation has crashed and will never recover. He is despised by much of the world and is treated as a pariah not just in the United States and Europe but across the globe. At the United Nations only 5 states out of 180 vote with Russia in support of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Support for the Ukraine war in Russia has slumped from just under 60% to around 25% of the Russian public according to the Kremlin's own polls.

Even Xi Jinping has become increasingly embarrassed at appearing to be Putin's close friend and ally. He has refused to recognise the Russian annexation of Ukrainian territory and, publicly, scolded Putin for threatening the use of nuclear weapons.

So weakened are Putin's armed forces that he has had to turn to North Korea and Iran, of all countries, for the supply of fresh military weapons and spare parts.

Xi Jinping is not faring well either. During the course of the year his economy slowed down dramatically. The US is now working closely with Japan, India, Vietnam and other Asian states to deter the Chinese from attacking Taiwan and from continuing to claim territory of their neighbours such as India, Japan, South Korea and in the South China Sea.

Most dramatically, the façade of unanimous Chinese support for Xi Jinping and the Communist Party has collapsed with the largest demonstrations against Xi and the Communist Party that China has seen since the Tiananmen massacres a generation ago.

The Iranian regime has been rocked by major demonstrations throughout Iran which have continued for several months. Not only on the issue of women's rights but also non-Persian minorities in Iran, who constitute around 30% of the population have become very hostile to the regime.

In Brazil, Bolsonaro has been voted out of power. Erdogan has lost control of both Istanbul and Ankara, the two main cities, in crucial local elections and may not remain in office after the next Presidential elections. In France, Macron defeated Marine Le Pen and her far right challenge.

Most significant has been the failure of the Republican Party in the United States to win control of the Senate and the serious slump in support for Donald Trump for his renewed Presidential bid for the White House. Nothing is certain but many in the Republican Party are now seeing Trump as a loser and a liability. In Ron De Santis, the Governor of Florida, the Republicans and the American right have a younger and vigorous alternative to Trump. De Santis is a right-winger but has not sought to trash the American constitution and traditional American and Western values.

This rapid decline in the power base of autocrats and dictators, and in the esteem of their own people, should not surprise anyone. Putin has made himself the sole repository of real political power. Russia no longer has even a Politburo that it had in Soviet days and which was able to remove Khrushchev from power peacefully. Xi Jinping has forced through the Communist Party changes that have made him President for life.

That isolates them and their fellow dictators not only from the public as a whole but also from their political colleagues. Putin has himself televised alone at the end of a ridiculously long table with his cabinet cowering at the far end. It is his equivalent to the throne his czarist predecessors once occupied. Xi Jinping is, similarly, isolated from any real dialogue and debate with his senior colleagues on which policy to follow and what pitfalls to avoid.

Thus Putin was, personally, responsible for the disastrous decision to invade Ukraine in the extraordinary belief that his troops would be welcomed by cheering and relieved Ukrainians. Likewise, Xi Jinping refuses to end his anti-Covid zero tolerance policy because to do so would be an admission of his own personal failure.

Democracies, in comparison, do take longer to make important decisions because of the need to try and win essential parliamentary or congressional support and because their decisions can be challenged in the courts presided over by non-political judges.

When I was UK Foreign Secretary I had a meeting, in 1996, in Beijing, with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Qian Qichen about what would happen to the Rule of Law in Hong Kong after they became part of China in 1997. He assured me there would be no problem as China also believed in the Rule of Law. In China, he said "The people must obey the law". I pointed out to him that, in the West, it was not just the people who should obey the law but also the government and, especially, ministers who should be under the law and who should cease carrying out policies which are deemed illegal or unconstitutional by independent judges. The Chinese Foreign Minister not only disagreed with me but could not understand how any government's wishes could be subordinated to the judgments of judges and courts of law.

The reality is that autocracies and dictatorships do not have the Rule of Law. They have Rule by Law. They criminalise even peaceful opposition, as in China and Russia, by making it illegal and, thereby, seeking to justify the imprisonment of their political opponents.

When, as can often happen, there are serious mistakes made by governments in Western or liberal democracies the injustices can be stopped and rectified within weeks or months in a peaceful and constitutional way through genuine parliaments, independent judges, a free

press and media, or through the force of public opinion. Governments in liberal democracies, therefore, have legitimacy in the eyes of their public. Governments in dictatorships fail the test of legitimacy and always revert to greater and greater oppression until they are, eventually, overthrown which can take years at least and, sometimes, decades.

These deep and fundamental flaws in autocracies and dictatorships are, increasingly, being recognised around the world. The events of 2022 have destroyed or are destroying the reputations and credibility of the one-man regimes (they are never women!) around the world.

Leaders in democratic countries often lose the esteem of the public after a period in power. Their unpopularity may drive them from power and make them lose genuine elections. But these leaders share the same values as their people. They do not fear the loss of their own lives, or their liberty, if they lose power.

There are several countries that, sadly, have moved from democracy into autocracy in the last few years. But we should not exaggerate that decline in democracy. After the end of the Cold War in 1989 10 countries which had either been part of the Soviet Union or Soviet satellite states became democratic. All remain democratic with their electorates able to change their government at the ballot box. None are perfect democracies but only Hungary is teetering at the edge of autocracy.

Latin America which, for generations, had military regimes or dictators is now overwhelmingly democratic apart from Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. The Far East has thriving democracies not only in Japan, but in South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia all of which were autocracies or dictatorships in the years after 1945.

Democracy, human rights and the rule of law are not just the privilege of Europe and North America. The world is not divided just into democracies and dictatorships. It would be better to say that it is divided between countries whose people enjoy democracy and liberty, and countries whose people would love to enjoy democracy and liberty but must continue to struggle to achieve it. That will be the challenge for 2023.



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Malcolm is a former British Foreign Minister and Minister of Defence. He was first elected to Parliament in 1974. From 2010 until 2015, he was Chairman of the United Kingdom's Intelligence and Security Committee which provides oversight of Britain's intelligence agencies.