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## Is Democracy in Decline?

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On Thursday, November 4, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies held a roundtable with Professor Larry Diamond, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. In a talk titled “Is Democracy in Decline?” Prof. Diamond addressed what has been happening to democracy globally, arguing that democracy has been in recession in for most of the last decade (2005-2014). Democratic progress peaked in 2005 at 61.5% of all states, but the world has since experienced nine consecutive years of declining freedom scores (based on Freedom House data), with democratic breakdowns exceeding gains.

In defining democracy, Diamond distinguishes two different levels of democracy: a minimal level of electoral democracy and another higher level of liberal democracy. Electoral democracy at a minimal level basically allows people to choose and replace leaders in meaningful and fair elections. Liberal (high-quality) democracy guarantees “majority rule, minority rights and good governance.” Charts plotting Freedom House data indicate that the global expansion of average freedom levels has been on the rise since the 1980s, rising up to 62% in 2014. However, Diamond warns that this increase is specious as recent numbers have not yet been corrected to reflect true democracy levels (for example, countries such as the Maldives and Kosovo are included as fully democratic nations). Moreover, Diamond highlights a correlation between small country populations and electoral democracies. He points out that smaller countries with under 1 million in population are more than twice as likely to be liberal democracies. Thus, Diamond explains that “if we get rid of countries with less than one million in population and look only at larger countries, we can see clear evidence of a decline in democratic states [and] erosion in liberal democracy.” There has been a rising trend of democratic breakdowns in big, important states such as Russia, Nigeria, Venezuela, and the Philippines, where the rate of democratic breakdown since 2000 has been nearly twice the pace of the preceding 12 years.

Other factors influencing the democratic recession include the incremental erosion of democracy in Latin America, the “Arab Freeze,” and what Diamond identifies as an “Authoritarian resurgence” (through means such as enhanced repression and media/Internet censorship, criminalization of receipt of foreign donor support, cooperation among authoritarian regimes, and authoritarian soft power projection).

Diamond also provides five main reasons why democracy is in danger:

- 1) Weak Rule of Law
- 2) Executive abuse of power
- 3) Severe polarization around ethnic, religious, ideological, class, and identity lines
- 4) Weak and ineffective political institutions
- 5) Poor economic performance (poverty, inequality, and injustice lead to bad governance).

Nonetheless, Diamond remains positive as “we have not seen ‘a third reverse wave.’ The key imperative in the near term is to work to reform and consolidate the democracies that have emerged during the third wave—the majority of which remain illiberal and unstable, if they remain democratic at all. It is vital that democrats in the established

democracies not lose faith... Democracy may be receding somewhat in practice, but it is still globally ascendant in peoples' values and aspirations." He cites the global consolidation of democracy, political reform in the Philippines, electoral reform in India and Indonesia, and the empowerment of civil society in the digital era as some reasons for hope that democracy will be on the rise again. Diamond concluded his presentation with thoughts on how China is currently entering a "political transition zone" where "economic contradictions and corruption is causing its authoritarian regime to shake... There is a need for [China] to adapt to modern times." China's GDP per capita is entering levels similar to when South Korea experienced its period of transition, and Diamond hypothesizes that China cannot maintain its current level of authoritarianism with rising levels of economic and social development, globalization, and international pressure.

**Date/Time:** Thursday, November 4, 2015 / 11:30pm – 2:00pm

**Place:** Conference Room (2F), The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

**Written by:** Rachel Leng

⇒ **Larry Diamond** is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, where he also directs the Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. He is the founding co-editor of the *Journal of Democracy* and also serves as Senior Consultant (and previously was co-director) at the International Forum for Democratic Studies of the National Endowment for Democracy. During 2002–3, he served as a consultant to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and was a contributing author of its report *Foreign Aid in the National Interest*. He has also advised and lectured to the World Bank, the United Nations, the State Department, and other governmental and nongovernmental agencies dealing with governance and development. His latest book, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (Times Books, 2008), explores the sources of global democratic progress and stress and the prospects for future democratic expansion.