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REVOLUTIONS OF OUR TIME: FREEDOM WITHOUT US

— Nancy Lindborg

A number of recent reports paint a grim picture for the future of global democracy. According to watchdog Freedom House, 2018 marked the 13th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. According to the *New York Times*, since 1994, 75 countries have taken steps toward authoritarianism. It is easy to conclude an inevitable and continued decline lies ahead, especially as the US government steps away from its role as global champion of democracy.

But it is important not to overlook an important piece of the global landscape. Though authoritarianism is on the rise, so are the number of people taking to the streets demanding greater freedom, accountability, and transparency from their governments. In far-flung locales, from Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Venezuela, and Algeria to Poland and Sudan, citizens have used nonviolent action to push back against corruption, cronyism, rigid laws, and to overthrow ossified autocrats.

Together, these movements tell a different and deeply encouraging story of a democratic resurgence that probably won't be driven by partner nations, heads of state or US leadership. Instead, it will come from the people themselves, who have imbibed the powerful ideas and values of democracy and are demanding that vision for themselves.

Remarkably, and against great odds, some of these movements are creating transformational change. In Sudan earlier this year, a popular movement challenged an entrenched military junta, prompting accused war criminal Omar al-Bashir to step down, and ushering in a political transition. Massive nonviolent demonstrations in Armenia forced the

country's leader to resign in 2018. The People's Peace Movement in Afghanistan's Helmand province—where efforts culminated in a 300-mile march to Kabul to demand a cease-fire and talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban—ultimately helped jumpstart the recent peace talks. And in Algeria, the country's longest-serving head of state stepped down after tens of thousands of Algerians took to the streets demanding change.

Moreover, research indicates that nonviolent action can be an important indicator that democracy will take hold, bolstered by the very action of civil resistance. *Why Civil Resistance Works*, co-authored by US Institute of Peace Director of Nonviolent Action Maria Stephan, found that political transitions driven by civil resistance led to democratic outcomes 57 percent of the time, versus 6 percent for transitions driven by armed insurgencies. The authors concluded, “the skills associated with nonviolent organizing, negotiating differences, building coalitions, and collective action reinforce democratic norms and behaviors.”

Tunisia is a powerful example of this, where the determined action of civil society groups, human rights activists, labor unions, and lawyers resulted in the only Middle East country that has continued on its pathway to democracy after the tumult of the Arab Spring. A quartet of Tunisian leaders rightfully earned a Nobel Prize in 2015, representing the actions and commitments of tens of thousands who joined together to march, negotiate, and demand democracy.

There are plenty of examples in which nonviolent resistance failed to lead to democracy. It is difficult for movements to maintain the discipline

of nonviolence, and once violence takes hold, movements quickly lose legitimacy and the ability to attract the broadest swath of supporters, from grandmothers to police officers. It is not enough to topple a dictator; citizens need the support and space to resolve conflicts and build more responsible governance for the long-term. The heartbreak of courageous movements that failed, as they did in Egypt, Yemen, and most tragically, Syria, underscores how tenuous gains can be. However, even with these cautionary tales still fresh and potent, the latest wave of movements has not been deterred, illuminating how deeply and broadly the values of democracy and freedom have taken root.

This is where the international community can and should make a difference. Arguably more important than world leaders taking the helm is the international commitment to provide the tools, training, and guidance necessary to support the discipline of nonviolence, capitalize on the determination and energy of these movements, and build in greater systems of accountability.

There is much cause for alarm with the current turn toward authoritarianism. However, if we look more carefully, there is also great inspiration in the nonviolent movements that have risen up, even in deeply repressive environments. The values that are shared throughout the community of democracies, enshrined in the foundation of the US and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are now animating citizens around the world to stand up to corrupt, repressive regimes. The courage and determination of these citizens to attain the promise of a democracy that delivers is carrying forward the vision and filling the void of US global leadership—which is the core of the democratic ideal itself.

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