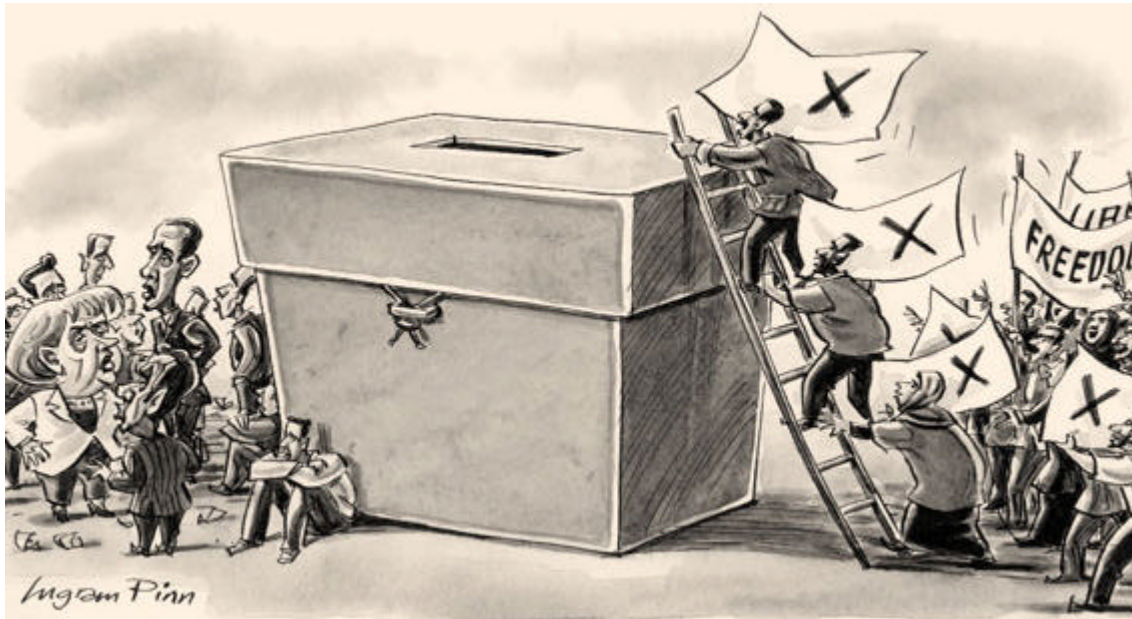


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## The highs and lows of democracy



By Philip Stephens



The story of 2011 has been of the advance of democracy and the failure of democracies. In the Arab world, tyrants have fallen on [the region's political awakening](#). In rich nations, elected leaders have been frozen in crisis. Welcome to another of the paradoxes of the new global disorder.

I do not recall the advance predictions that the good news this year would come from the Arab street; nor that the bad news would see a [Greek debt crisis](#) turn into an existential threat to half a century of European integration. We are in an age that habitually defies the easy assumptions of the old order. The passing of two centuries of western hegemony will be an unpredictable and uncomfortable experience.

The tyranny many assumed to have been the natural state of affairs in the Middle East is crumbling. Successful uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have confounded the self-styled foreign policy realists.

With a little help from demography, the visceral desire for individual freedom and human dignity has upended once impregnable regimes. For all the violence of his resistance, [Syria's Bashar al-Assad](#) will probably be next. Autocratic leaders everywhere are now obliged to look anxiously over their shoulders.

Inevitably, real life disappoints those who imagined that the young [protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square](#) could build overnight a shiny liberal democracy. Some are already lamenting how quickly spring has turned to winter. The Egyptian military is reluctant to surrender power and, given a chance, voters have preferred Muslim conservatives to twittering liberals.

The road to democracy will be uneven. Americans and Europeans will not like some of the choices made by newly-emancipated citizens. But then the west still clings to its own double standards, cheering the uprisings in the Maghreb while hoping the autocrats cling on in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

History is on the side of political pluralism. Policymakers and commentators once proclaimed the world's rising powers offered a new paradigm – capitalism would prosper alongside authoritarian politics. But the impulse for change is reaching beyond the Arab world. Chinese leaders are visibly anxious, their fear of social and political disorder heightened by the images of Tahrir and by a slowing world economy.

The more strident the language from Tehran, the more apparent it is that the Iranian regime feels particularly vulnerable. The fall of Mr Assad would rob the mullahs of their most vital strategic ally. The green revolutionaries could return to the streets. Something fundamental has also [changed in Russia's political dynamic](#). Vladimir Putin's tsarist ambitions were always hubristic. Now they may invite nemesis.

Elections, of course, do not make democracies. Newly-enfranchised citizens in the Arab world face the task of building institutions to entrench the rule of law. What is required of Europe and the US is patience, aid and a willingness to accept there are other models of political pluralism.

Of course, the west would be more comfortable if the new leaders combined social conservatism with secular political institutions. Turkey is not a bad model. It would be a better one if its prime minister, [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), did not hanker, like Mr Putin, for a freehold on power. Indonesia can also offer some useful lessons in how democracy can be married to Islam. The

important point is that the choices belong to Arabs. The big mistake for the west would be to define political Islam as an enemy.

In any event, Europeans and Americans are in no position to offer lectures. Their own political systems are being strained to breaking point by economic adversity and the shifting balance of global power.

The [crisis engulfing Europe's single currency](#) now promises to drag the continent into depression. I have lost count of the number of [summits called to save the euro](#). A week or so ago I was almost convinced that Germany's Angela Merkel and France's Nicolas Sarkozy were about to come up with a decisive plan. But Europeans have turned hesitation into an art form.

The continent's politicians have been imprisoned by a failure of nerve. By running scared of their electorates, leaders have denied themselves the space to identify their shared interests. It goes without saying that governments have to deal with deficits. It is equally obvious that they need growth.

The thread that runs across the Atlantic is one of popular disenchantment with political establishments. Whether it is fear of the bond markets or competition from rising economies, governments are trapped between global economics and local politics.

Some blame the system. The single currency was always flawed; Washington has been paralysed by congressional gerrymandering. But you cannot leave out the personalities. Europe is governed by followers. [Barack Obama](#) once looked different. In the event, a big orator has turned out a small president.

Europe next year holds the prospect of depressed living standards, rising unemployment and penny-pinching public services. The likely beneficiaries are populists of the right and left. This week I heard one senior politician remark that the organising forces in democratic politics may soon be fear and xenophobia. Europeans should know well enough the dark forces that can be unleashed by depressions.

It is no good blaming democracy. As the well-worn saying goes, it is the worst of political systems save for all the others. If there is a bright spot in the sea of bleakness it is that autocrats everywhere have even more to fear from 2012.