Democracy Forges Ahead

"Democracies are like angry dragons," said Kishore Mahbubani, a professor of public policy in Singapore, expressing what emerged, in effect, as the theme of the Athens Democracy Forum here last week convened by The New York Times, the city of Athens and the United Nations. Speaker after speaker talked in fearful terms of the challenges to liberal democracy posed by a widespread backlash to migrants, globalization, social change and other tectonic movements many have found threatening.

Radoslaw Sikorski, a former defense and foreign minister of Poland, declared that between the minute scrutiny of social media and the election in some countries of autocrats, “in Western society leadership is becoming impossible.” The names of President Trump, Jaroslaw Kaczynski of Poland and Viktor Orbán of Hungary were often invoked, and the word “fascism” was used more than once.

Yet just as the dragon is also a symbol of strength and hopefulness, there are solutions to the problems, speakers said: in the rule of law, in technology giants’ learning to better manage their great power and reach, in the diversity of new generations, in more socially conscious businesses.

Democracy is not at a dead end, was a consensus that emerged — though as Professor Mahbubani said, it needs constant attention. The United States is not Trump, Poland is not Kaczynski and Hungary is not Orbán, said Karolina Wigura of Poland’s Kultura Liberalna think tank; even in China, said Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist and activist, change could come at any moment. Dragons, hold your fire.

Serge Schmemann

A call to arms for liberals

Leaders detail how democratic ideals are under attack around the world. But the time has come to fight back.

ATHENS

If we fail to learn from the past, we do so at our peril. That was one of the messages from Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist-activist, speaking at the Athens Democracy Forum here last week.

“There’s a potential to totally forget the past, and not to remember those lessons we have learned,” said Mr. Ai, whose work has often reflected on the plight of refugees. “We have a potential to be very mean, to be hateful, not only to close in but really damage others, and to use some excuse and reason to separate humanity. I think that is part of human nature.”

Mr. Ai, whose recent artwork has been inspired by the plight of refugees, said that all countries needed to unite and assert “global leadership” on the issue of migration, because it was “not going to stop” and might worsen because of environmental disasters, famine and population growth.

Migration was a prominent part of the overall theme of the forum: that liberal democracy is facing perils on multiple fronts and must be defended to prevent the rise of more dictatorships.

Participants at the conference — government officials, lawmakers, academics, business leaders and activists — warned that core components of democracy were being challenged in the United States and Western Europe, but also in Eastern Europe, Turkey, Venezuela, Sweden and India. The rule of law is being eroded, the press is being discredited, if not silenced, and social media is being used to spread illiberal ideas and sway elections.

“The threat we face is very, very real,” said Yascha Mounk, a lecturer on government at Harvard and the author of “The People’s Paradox.”

The Athens Democracy Forum was convened by The New York Times in cooperation with the city of Athens and the United Nations and is in its sixth year.

“What’s corrupting politics in Europe today is the threat of migrants,” said Kishore Mahbubani, former ambassador to the United Nations from Singapore, “and that clearly is shifting the debate in Sweden, Germany and everywhere to the far right.” Mr. Mahbubani, a professor at the National University of Singapore, then suggested that Europe should consider a “strategic pause” on immigration.

“That way the populations can breathe a sigh of relief,” he added, speaking at the panel, “The Allure of the Illiberal.” “Then the political debate will shift to the middle, where you want it to be.” Otherwise, “you’re going to end up with illiberal regimes because of liberal principles.”

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Seeing how democracy will survive

At the Athens Democracy Forum last week, a conference convened by The New York Times in Athens from Sept. 16 to 18, international leaders and policymakers debated a wide range of issues affecting democracy, including its future. Here are some excerpts from the discussions. They have been edited and combined.

When technology collides with citizenship

RICHARD ALLAN

Executive director, Facebook

When we build social media the kind of platform that we and we build them for the world, we are one of the few companies that essentially live in a democracy. People have said that lower barriers to entry is creating something amazing. And we think back over the last few years, there were moments like the Arab Spring when we think a lot of people were celebrating the political con-sumption of power of technology like ever. They brought people together to assert themselves against repressive regimes. They brought people together to assert themselves against repressive regimes. They brought people together to assert themselves against repressive regimes.

We're now seeing the other side of it, which is people who, I guess, people in this room to a global audience. People have used that lowers barriers to entry is creating some amazing things. And we think back over the last few years, there were moments like the Arab Spring when we think a lot of people were celebrating the political con-sumption of power of technology like ever. They brought people together to assert themselves against repressive regimes. They brought people together to assert themselves against repressive regimes. They brought people together to assert themselves against repressive regimes.

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Democracy and socialility in a changing world

BRUNELLO CUCINELLI
C.E.O., Brunello Cucinelli
Fashion business, member of the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leaders

Our business is built on a fragile bridge that one can build between the two. I think this is inclusive or inclusive. If you’re able to find that part of your speech that can be part of the solution, I have no problem. But some of the populists are trying to eliminate the middle class from the economic scene. They’re trying to eliminate the middle class and the middle class is a very vulnerable portion of the population. They’re trying to eliminate the middle class and the middle class is a very vulnerable portion of the population.

We believe that there is a way to reconcile the middle class with the working poor. That’s what we’re trying to do. We’re trying to find a way to make the middle class and the working poor work together. We believe that there is a way to reconcile the middle class with the working poor. That’s what we’re trying to do. We’re trying to find a way to make the middle class and the working poor work together.

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So we need to keep this game in mind in order to make sure that people don’t have romantic hopes about democracy. It will never deliver, and yet, it will do better than the other systems. So the main advantage of democracy is to prevent people against two insecurities. Two insecurities are revolutionary insecurity and power insecurity. So the main advantage of democracy is to prevent people against two insecurities. Two insecurities are revolutionary insecurity and power insecurity.

The allure of the ideological

PHILIPPE ROUSSEAU
Ambassador to the European Union, U.S. representative, Brussels
Senior fellow at the New America Foundation, former president of the United Nations Security Council; professor of public policy, National Defense University; author, “Who’s the West?”

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Saving our future

Only activism and action can restore trust in democracy and our institutions.

John Kerry served as the 65th United States secretary of state, under President Barack Obama, and is the author of “Every Day Is Extra.”

The liberal world order we have relied upon for so long is on the ropes, perhaps never to be the same again. Across the globe, rising authoritarianism; rejection of the international institutions that underpin global peace and prosperity; the toxic brew of nationalism and nostalgia are rearing their ugly heads. Authoritarianism, nationalism, populism and illiberal democracy threaten to unravel the decades of progress we have worked so hard to achieve.

From Europe to Asia to Latin America, we are seeing centrifugal forces at work. Euroskepticism has grown, and Viktor Orban and others have capitalized on it. In the United States, immigration has been an issue. In Europe, it has become an obsession. And around the world, uncertainty has fueled a return to nationalism. Inequality, frustration and alienation are rising to levels that haven’t been seen in generations. In a world that’s changing faster and becoming more complex, we have failed to keep pace. The global economy is accelerating at a dizzying pace, but our systems and politics are stuck in the industrial age. The basic contract at the heart of democratic societies is fraying. Wages are stagnating. Schools are stuck in the industrial age. The basic contract at the heart of democratic societies is fraying.

Our system is being challenged by movements that want to set today’s agitators, from neo-populists to violent extremists, aside. To do so, we need to act. That means making a commitment to democracy. To do so, we need to act.

Sustaining a more open and inclusive global order will require effective leadership. It will require that we do it together. It will require that we work for it. It will require that we embrace activism and action to ensure that neither of those outcomes becomes the norm or empower Americans to compete in a world that’s changing faster and becoming more complex. And it will require that we construct the gridlock that is choking governments everywhere.

A few critical issues must be tackled if we are to make our-liberal order work for people. One of them is the importance of multilateral cooperation. The American experiment didn’t emerge from a policy white paper. They did it because they lived and died the devastating failures of the alternatives, and they wanted peace, freedom and opportunity. We need to make democracy and the international liberal order relevant to people’s lives in actions, not in words. A few critical issues must be tackled if we are to make our liberal order work for people. Nothing can be fixed if we don’t first de-nounce the godfather of anti-government, Michael Moore, in the TV series "This is Not Normal: America Under Siege," that starts by recognizing that healthy democracies rest on the firm foundation of civil discourse and real, let alone irreversible. Otherwise, our influence defense of the liberal order will lose the world’s troubles at bay. Brexit borders and less contact with our neighbors tempted by the promise that walls on our will keep the world’s troubles at bay. Brexit borders and less contact with our neighbors. We need to shore up the global institutions that provide security in the long term. Effective leadership requires that we do more to deter immediate threats even as we shore up the global institutions that provide security in the long term to forces that seek the return of a world less.

We must also create an environment where innovation can flourish and the benefits are widely shared. Education for all ages, combined with apprenticeship programs, makes up the foundations of full, inclusive economic growth. Governments need to support entrepreneurs while also helping them to absorb the disruptions that are reshaping the economy. That means investing in education and training in the fields of artificial intelligence, robotics and 3-D printing. The gig economy is a reality of 21st-century work. We need to make sure workers are protected and empowered to take risks, pursue flexible arrangements and change jobs without losing their benefits.

Efficient and reliable public infrastructure is the beating heart of a modern, dynamic economy. Expanding broadband access and upgrading our roads, bridges and sidewalks will create jobs, expand our economy and protect this fragile planet we share.

The challenges are real, but there are every reason for optimism. History has proved time and again that adapting to big changes in technology and society is stamped in the American DNA. Our global system demands renewal and organized, inclusive, and responsible leadership. If we act as a role model and lead, we will ensure a future generation will pay the prices. Nostalgia won’t defeat neo-populism; progress will.

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