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Democracy Is Dying

What will take its place?

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Across the world, democracy is dying. Self-government—once viewed as the ideal of freedom and the only way to fairly administer a country—to the younger generation has become “meh.”

In the United States, only 30 percent of those born in the 1980s say it is “essential” to live in a democracy, according to data from the World Values Survey (1995–2014). Only 19 percent of them say a military takeover, in the case of the government being incompetent or failing to do its job, is not legitimate in a democracy. Only one third of them say civil rights are “absolutely essential.” In 2015, one in six said they were fine with a military coup. (In 1995, that number was one in 16.) A 2011 survey found that nearly a quarter of young people thought democracy was a “bad” or “very bad” way to run the country.

“Three decades ago, most scholars simply assumed that the Soviet Union would remain stable,” wrote Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk—the academics who compiled these statistics—in the *Journal of Democracy*. “This assumption was suddenly proven false. Today, we have even greater confidence in the durability of the world’s affluent, consolidated democracies. But do we have good grounds for our democratic self-confidence?” (July 2016).

“What we find is deeply concerning,” they warned. “Citizens in a number of supposedly consolidated democracies in North America and Western Europe have not only grown more critical of their political leaders. Rather, they have also become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives. The crisis of democratic legitimacy extends across a much wider set of indicators than previously appreciated.”

Similar data shows the same trend forming in Sweden, Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

The death of democracy has already gone beyond the theoretical. It is affecting ballot boxes across the world. Everywhere you look, you clearly see early warning signs of the death of democracy. And biblical prophecy strongly indicates that this trend is going to accelerate.

Pirates

Since World War II, the Western world has come to a consensus on what a democracy should look like: a system of government that has been termed liberal democracy. The West dreamed of spreading this enlightened ideal of representative self-government around the world, pushing back socialism, communism and/or dictatorships and tyrannies and giving everyone worldwide the freedom to govern themselves.

But not only has the West failed to export its prized product, it is rotting on its own shelves. Democracy in Britain, Europe, America and beyond is crumbling. This has been visible in decade-long trends and in recent elections. And it is more than a rejection of certain politicians or parties. It shows a world no longer happy with the way government works, even in free

societies. It shows a world where voters are so dissatisfied with democracy that they are willing to conduct live experiments on themselves with alternative and even radical forms of government.

One alternative is the pirates. On Oct. 29, 2016, pirates came close to taking over Iceland. These were not literal pirates, but the Icelandic Pirate Party.

The pirate movement is one of the newest in politics. It morphed from a protest against restrictive online copyright enforcement to a political movement, promoting the right to privacy, government transparency and free speech.

The party was founded just four years ago, but in October it won 15 percent of the vote, making it the third most popular party in Iceland. That's explosive growth.

Like almost everywhere else in the world, it's easy to see why Icelandic voters have so forcefully rejected politics as usual. Earlier in 2016, the Panama papers revealed massive corruption at the top of Iceland's government, leading to the resignation of the prime minister.

A key platform of the pirate parties in Iceland and across Europe—and the biggest way they reject “liberal democracy”—is their support for direct democracy. Just about all of the West's liberal democracies are *representative* democracies. The people choose a representative; the representative is charged with lawmaking, judging or administering the way that he thinks best within the constitution; and if voters disagree, they vote him out at the end of his term—if not sooner.

But when elected representatives are as corrupt as the Panama papers, Wikileaks and other leaks reveal, it's easy to see why voters want something different. Under direct democracy, citizens vote directly on the policies themselves, cutting out the middleman.

Beppe Grillo, the former comedian who is looking more and more like the future prime minister of Italy, leads a direct democracy group: the Five Star Movement. The Netherlands passed a law last year that allows petitions to trigger referenda on legislation.

Peasants

At the same time the pirates assaulted Iceland, a farmers' party stormed to power in Lithuania in two rounds of elections, held on October 9 and 23. Before the election, the Peasant and Greens Union held just one seat in parliament. Now it is the largest party, with 54.

Once again there is a new party; once again people are fed up with politics as usual. But instead of giving the people more power, this coalition wants to give them less. One of the core policies of the Peasant and Greens Union is to create a technocratic government. Because elected politicians have made a big mess, it reasons, Lithuania needs to appoint experts to deal with it.

This too is an idea that has spread far and is gaining more popularity after America's presidential election. “The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States may have signaled the death of the closest thing we have to a religion in politics,” wrote former British Conservative mp Matthew Parris. “On both sides of the Atlantic, democracy risks being knocked from the high altar as an unmitigated and unquestioned good” (*Spectator*, Nov. 9, 2016).

Jason Brennan, a political philosopher at Georgetown University, has just written a book called *Against Democracy*. He advocates instead for an *epistocracy*—meaning rule by the knowledgeable. “Trump's victory is the victory of the uninformed,” he wrote in *Foreign Policy*. “But, to be fair, Clinton's victory would also have been. Democracy is the rule of the people, but the people are in many ways unfit to rule” (Nov. 10, 2016).

Clearly, it's not just young people souring on democracy. Many of the elites have too.

Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are really part of this same movement. The European Union has followed this approach for decades. In America, politicians from both sides of the aisle have allowed the number of unelected bureaucrats in America to grow to the point that over 2.5 million non-military personnel now work in the executive branch. They are appointed, not elected. Yet this sprawling mass of bureaucrats includes myriad agencies that have the power to pass laws, try cases and enforce punishments. They call these laws “regulations.” And the average citizen has little to no recourse against this bureaucratic state.

The more control these bureaucrats have, the less control the people have. The natural allies of bureaucrats, technocrats, epistocrats and their related synonyms are leftists, because they all want the same solution: big government.

‘Illiberal Democracy’

But not everyone is happy about big government. And the fight-back is leading to another movement: “illiberal democracy.” This was a term used by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to describe those who, like himself and Donald Trump, are democratic but reject many of the norms of the modern Western state. They do things that some consider beyond the pale, things that democratic leaders should never do, no matter how strong their mandate.

These “illiberal” democracies tend to be built around strongmen: leaders who are democratically elected but who greatly emphasize their personal power to solve their nation’s problems.

In many ways, this is the hardest trend to describe, because so much is distorted. The left has gained control of many of the levers of power in liberal democracy. It has used the bureaucracies, the judiciaries, the media, the schools and even central banks to move nations to the left. When leaders on the right want to change their country’s direction, they can only do so by “interfering” with the leftist policies of these bureaucracies, judiciaries, government-owned broadcasters, etc. When they do this, the left screams blue murder.

But all this crying wolf is dangerous. It makes it hard to see where leaders are just pushing back against leftist control, and where they are genuinely altering the government toward illiberalism or oppression. Hungary and Poland are two governments singled out as being “illiberal democracies.” Are they truly illiberal? There is certainly some concerning news. But with all the heated rhetoric, it’s hard to tell what is really going on. A person is not a Nazi because he criticizes the decision-making of a central bank or because he wants to see an out-of-control supreme court reined in. The left’s smears against Poland, Hungary and the Trump administration make it harder to detect if and when these governments do, in fact, take actions that are genuinely dangerous.

Escalation

These movements all feed off each other. The more the elites take power, the more people are determined to take it back, and vice versa.

Italy was forced into a technocratic government from 2011 to 2013. During that time, the direct democracy-supporting Five Star Movement exploded in popularity in a major reaction against technocracy. The first time the Dutch used their new powers of direct democracy, it was to strike down an EU treaty with Ukraine—a strike aimed at the technocrats in the EU. However, the technocrats quickly began working on a method they hope the Dutch government will use to ignore the vote.

Many in Britain hate the EU for its anti-democratic nature and elitism. And when Britain voted to leave in a rare instance reminiscent of direct democracy, this only proved to the elites that the people do not deserve and cannot handle the power to govern themselves.

Direct democracy and illiberal democracy have some common ground. One wants to give power directly to the people, whereas the other trusts a single individual to smash the status quo. But both are quickly opposed by the elites. The elites oppose the “illiberals” or “the people” grabbing power, so they seek to grab more power back—and must become more extreme in order to do so.

These countries are just examples from the most recent elections. They are not rare. A new political party winning support in a European nation has become so common that it barely makes the news. Greece, Lithuania, Iceland, Portugal, Spain, France, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden are all major examples of this trend. That represents a lot of people who are dangerously dissatisfied with the status quo of modern democracy.

It is important to recognize that one can make legitimately strong criticisms about all these alternatives. America’s founders rejected direct democracy for good reasons. Rule by elites concentrates power in the hands of the few; the best-laid plans of expert bureaucrats *gang aft agley*—go often askew. As F. A. Hayek put it, “The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design.” Strongmen can, and often have, become strong dictators.

Still, none of these movements are Nazis. All are supported by well-meaning people, most of whom would protest any suggestion that they are anti-democratic. But their support all rises from some kind of sense that the system is broken, and that we need to make big changes to the way we’re doing things. They share many views of the 25 percent of young people who believe that democracy is “bad,” even if they might reject that conclusion. They are all symptoms of the deep dissatisfaction with the way Western government works, and the sense that democracy has let us down.

Once even a significant minority starts to lose hope in democracy, the trend is hard to stop. It creates its own vicious cycle. In the 1930s, upstart parties rose with similar speed to those that are rising today. Their rise meant the established parties no longer held enough votes to form governments, and the regular coalitions no longer worked. Democracies became even more dysfunctional, more people became convinced of the need for something else, and the spiral worsened.

Furthermore, the problems building in today’s world will only get worse. Europe’s economic crisis continues to rumble on with no sign of a solution. Parts of Europe are stagnating, with Great Depression levels of unemployment. Even Germany, Europe’s engine of growth, seems likely to encounter an economic crisis. America is swimming in debt and is poised for disaster.

If masses are rejecting the system now, how much worse will the situation get when millions more find themselves without work? When millions of families have real worries about whether they’ll be able to keep their home?

Returning to the academics we started with, Public Radio International reported on an interview with Yascha Mounk, writing, “Mounk believes at least part of the explanation for the disenchantment with democracy is economic. Most citizens of established liberal democracies have been contending with stagnant or falling incomes for the past 20 or 30 years. They may believe the system has failed them, while their children face an even more uncertain future” (Nov. 29, 2016).

An economic crash would make that future radically less certain. And the sense that the system has failed would explode into chaos or anarchy.

Why Governments Fail

The global dissatisfaction ties in with a great many forecasts that the *Trumpet* and the *Plain Truth* have made for decades: the breakdown of the political order in the United States; the rise of strongmen in Asia; Europe's turn toward nationalism; the creation of a new, undemocratic European superstate.

Underlying all this is a simple cause: Man simply has no good way of ruling over man. He does not have the capacity. None of man's governments has created or can create peace, stability and order. We are now seeing the latest round of men deciding that yesterday's perfect ideal of a system has failed, and scurrying around to find tomorrow's new ideal.

It is a failure not of politics but of human nature. No system eliminates greed and selfishness.

But that doesn't mean that all systems of government are equally bad. Some do a much better job than others of restraining selfish human nature.

A simple understanding of history should warn of the dangers in rejecting liberal democracy and embracing alternatives. Looking at the broad sweep of history, most people in the West have never had it so good. The vast majority of mankind for the vast majority of history has lacked the freedoms that most of us take for granted.

As Winston Churchill put it, "Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

America's Founding Fathers knew some of the problems with human nature. They designed a system of government that would restrain it. Government in the rest of the English-speaking world and beyond grew out of a similar tradition. After World War II, many of the rest of the world's democracies were founded on similar principles.

All these alternatives to liberal democracy fail to protect from the dangers of human nature. Illiberal democracy concentrates power in one strongman and frees him of checks and balances. That's great if that man has little of the selfish, greedy, corrupt human nature. And what if that power corrupts him? It always does. And what about his successor? Technocracy gives power to a few elites, again, with few checks or balances. They become a gang of heavyweights that is almost impossible to rein in—without resorting to a strongman. Yet these experts still have the same human nature that has given liberal democracy such a bad rap.

Direct democracy is the least tried of all the alternatives. Its experiment in ancient Greece was an absolute disaster. Direct democracy—mob rule—has proven dangerous and volatile. Regardless of how it would work in practice in a modern setting, it certainly would not solve the problems caused by human nature.

History and human nature, then, warn us to beware. Bible prophecy gives us an even more specific reason.

A Dangerous Ending

The Bible prophesied the rise to global power of Britain and America. God promised that these nations would become "the head, and not the tail"; that He would make them "above only, and thou shalt not be beneath" (Deuteronomy 28:13).

That is exactly what history has witnessed. The last two centuries have been Anglo-American centuries. The form of government championed by these nations—a form of government that has at its heart some important biblical principles—has spread throughout the Western world.

But the Bible also says that this time of Pax Britannica, followed by Pax Americana, would end—and that is happening now. The same God who put Britain and America on top is now reversing that. He prophesied that if Britain and America did not obey Him, then strangers would be the head, "and thou shalt be the tail" (verse 44).

This global falling out with the Anglo-American method of government is in tandem with the decline of Britain and America.

Now we are heading for an age of strongmen. All the major power blocs prophesied in the Bible are ruled by strong leaders. Russia will be led by a "Prince of Rosh," Vladimir Putin. Europe will be led by a "king of fierce countenance," who rules as part of an old-fashioned Holy Roman Empire church-state combine. Even America's government is in dire trouble, and possibly deteriorating into the rule of a strongman.

The Bible describes these as "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24). It is a time of unrestrained human nature. Without the trappings of liberal democracies, the constitution or international norms, as Thucydides put it, "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must."

As these strongmen discard representative democracy, the Bible says they will bring the world to the brink of destruction.

But the good news is that man is close to finally learning the lesson God wants him to learn from history.

Right at the beginning of human history, man rejected God's rule over him. Therefore God evicted him from the Garden of Eden, and told man, in effect, "Form your own concepts of what is god, your own religions, your own governments, your own lifestyles and forms of society and civilization" (Herbert W. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*). Now, we are witnessing the final failures of these man-devised governments. Human experiments in government have ultimately failed, every single time. And today's radical experiments on live patients in a world full of terror and weapons of mass destruction will culminate in the ultimate lesson: Human beings actually are incapable of governing themselves.

This final failure will force us to accept that fact. The rise of pirates, peasants and Donald Trump shows that we are desperate for alternatives. We are not yet desperate enough to consider the government of God as an alternative. But when this experiment finally ends, we will be.

A Successful Government

At that point, a new government will be established on Earth—under the perfect rule of the King of kings! Herbert W. Armstrong explained it in his booklet *The Wonderful World Tomorrow—What It Will Be Like*: "Now notice just how the new world government will function! It will not be so-called democracy. It will not be socialism. It will not be communism or fascism. It will not be human monarchy, oligarchy, or plutocracy. It will not be man's government over man. Man has proven his utter incapability of ruling himself.

"It will be divine government—the government of God. It will not be government from the bottom up. The people will have no votes. It will not be government of or by the people—but it will be government for the people. It will be government from the top (God Almighty) down.

"There will be no election campaigns. No campaign fund-raising dinners. No dirty political campaigns, where each candidate attempts to put himself forward in the most favorable light, defaming, denouncing, discrediting his opponents. No time will be wasted in mudslinging campaigns in the lust for power.

"No human will be given any government office. All in government service will then be divine spirit beings, in the Kingdom of God—the God Family.

"All officials will be appointed—and by the divine Christ, who reads and knows men's hearts, their inner character, and abilities or lack of ability. ...

"In short, under the New Covenant which Christ is coming to usher in, what we shall see on Earth is happiness, peace, abundance and justice for all. Did you ever read just what this New Covenant will consist of? Did you suppose it will do away with God's law? Exactly the opposite. 'For this is the covenant [that Christ is coming to establish, you'll read in Hebrews 8:10]; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts'

"When God's laws are in our hearts—when we love God's ways, and in our hearts want to live by them, human nature will be put under subjection—people will want to live the way that is the cause of peace, happiness, abundance, joyful well-being!"