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It's no surprise liberal democracy is giving way to authoritarianism

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In recent years, discussion of politics in the west has been peppered with ominous warnings — democratic backsliding, authoritarian populism, neofascist movements and the end of liberal democracy.

This is of particular concern in countries like the US, which spent much of the last century touting itself as the leader of the “free world”. Now, some are warning that the democracy underpinning America’s role in the world is teetering on the brink of far-right authoritarianism.

The history of liberal democracy — the phrase itself and the countries that claim to represent it — is rife with cruelty, slavery and disenfranchisement. These have long undermined states’ claims to be liberal democracies. A turn towards authoritarianism is an unsurprising consequence of so-called western liberal democracy itself.

Influential liberal scholars of international relations Michael W. Doyle and Francis Fukuyama both claim that the US was a “liberal democracy” by the late 18th century. Yet the first US census, in 1790, counted 697,624 enslaved people, while the 1860 census showed this figure had risen to almost 4 million. Women, meanwhile, remained without voting and other civil rights.

Doyle and Fukuyama list Great Britain as a liberal democracy at the height of its imperialist activity in the 19th century. They call Belgium a liberal democracy while it routinely mutilated Congolese children to extort more labour from their enslaved parents as recently as the early 20th century.

What was “liberal” or “democratic” about societies in which half the population had no vote because of their sex, and in which millions faced the indignity and dehumanisation of enslavement? In this sense, as anthropologist Lilith Mahmud put it, in the west “we have never been liberal”.

The myth of liberal democracy

Liberal democracy is what Mahmud calls an “occidental myth”, a way of representing the “west” as a coherent political space. It only entered our popular vocabulary in the 1930s and 1940s, accelerating in use at the height of the second world war. As a concept, it provided a way for Allied countries to define themselves in opposition to the fascism of their Axis enemies.

But fascism – a form of far-right, authoritarian politics often associated with eugenicist racism – is not as alien to these western societies as many of their historians, politicians and citizens suppose. In their imperialist international relations, which were only beginning to wane at the onset of the second world war, self-proclaimed liberal democracies freely practised many of the things that came to be associated with German fascism in the 1930s-40s.

In the societies they colonised, these states exercised authoritarian political control, used arbitrary detention and torture, and pioneered concentration camps and genocidal violence. The poet and anticolonial theorist Aimé Césaire dubbed the rise of fascism in Europe the “boomerang effect”: violent dehumanisation honed in the colonies returning home to Europe.



Anti-racism protests were held around Winston Churchill's statue in London's Parliament Square. Andy Rain / EPA-EFE

Authoritarian tendencies are part of the fabric of the liberal democratic state. This is plain enough to see in our current era, where black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups are regularly subjected to racialised police tactics and brutality.

A society where this happens may be more accurately described as “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”, a term coined by the late feminist critic and social theorist bell hooks. It describes a system that benefits from inequality and exploitation, and privileges wealthy, white men at the expense of other groups.

The neofascist response

Fear about the rise of fascism and decline of democracy in the west is not the effect of “outsider” populist politicians. It is the internal contradictions of liberal democracy reaching a critical moment.



The 'Unite the Right' gathering of white nationalist groups in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 was a wake-up call for many. Mykal McEldowney/IndyStar via USA TODAY NETWORK / Alamy

The actions of neofascist forces are a response to newly-energised progressive social movements that have emerged in recent years. In denouncing “political correctness”, attacking feminist and anti-racist values and defending statues of colonialists and slavers, the new far right demands a return to the very western values that truly underpin liberal democracy. As bell hooks wrote in 1994:

The public figures who speak the most to us about a return to old-fashioned values ... are most committed to maintaining systems of domination -- racism, sexism, class exploitation and imperialism.

These sentiments map squarely onto far-right movements in the US, the UK, Australia, France, Italy and the wider west. Until we can recognise that western liberal democracy itself contains the seeds of fascism, and develop viable alternatives, it remains an ever-present danger.