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The Fourth Wave

The outskirts of Blantyre, the commercial capital of Malawi, are some of the most forlorn suburbs on earth. Years of on-and-off drought and famine in the countryside have gradually destroyed Malawi's farming families, driving many people to settle in Blantyre, where the men take odd jobs as guards at stores or as part-time bus drivers. Rows of shacks made from scraps of metal and scavenged wood cover the denuded hills outside the city, and, at night, if you are brave enough to walk in these neighborhoods, you can see young men posted as guards in front of the families' tiny dwellings, since Malawi's urbanization and deep poverty—GDP per capita is roughly $800—have sparked a rise in violent crime. In wealthier parts of the city, residents employ private security companies and equip their houses with "panic rooms," which don't always work—home invasions remain common, and the thieves often seem to be in cahoots with the security guards assigned to watch the properties.

In the early morning, the sides of the rutted roads are so thick with people walking to their jobs from the shantytowns that cars can find these routes difficult to negotiate. Nearly all the land outside Blantyre has been ripped up. Wood has been stripped for houses, and edible plants taken for food on the formerly lush hills above the green valleys of Thyolo, the traditional tea-growing region north of the city. In senior housing in Thyolo, elderly planters, who settled in Malawi from Britain when it was still a colony, still take afternoon tea and tiny British-style finger cakes. But outside of the carefully tended gardens of these residences, and beyond the lush tea plantations owned by large companies, across Thyolo one can see only arid scrub, razed buildings, and fruit plants ripped apart in search of food.

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Women with babies tied on their backs with brightly colored *chitenge* cloths jostle for space on the sides of the road with sickly vendors carrying battered trays of avocados and bananas.

Children are everywhere. Malawi has one of the highest birthrates in the world, and its fifteen million people are jammed into a country the size of Pennsylvania, with cities that resemble the packed metropolises of South Asia more than the archetypical open landscapes of Africa. It also has a staggeringly high rate of HIV/AIDS infection. The United Nations' AIDS program estimates that 14 percent of Malawians are infected, an epidemic that, even in the era of antiretrovirals, has orphaned many kids, leaving them to be cared for by grandparents, or by no one.[1] At intersections in Blantyre proper, packs of orphans clad in torn clothes and with matted hair often waylay stopped or slow-moving cars to beg for food or a few kwacha, the nearly worthless Malawian currency that piles up in stacks in merchants' shops.

And yet, for all its destitution Malawi was, until recently, a democratic success story. After the country's longtime dictator stepped down in the early 1990s, the country held free, multiparty elections. The first democratically elected president, Bakili Muluzi, was later accused of massive corruption—but after Malawi's top court upheld the constitution and barred him from seeking a third term in the 2009 presidential election, he complied with its ruling. His former protégé, Bingu wa Mutharika, now leading an opposition party, won the presidency.

Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Malawi also developed a culture of largely peaceful, vigorous political campaigning. The presidential election of 2009 exemplified this trend. At one point during the winter campaign a large crowd dressed in red, the color of John Tembo, was hollering wildly for their candidate in front of an overgrown soccer field next to a divided highway. Across the road a smaller group of Mutharika backers, all dressed in his party color, blue, had taken position, screaming into the sky, clapping and singing, and thrusting massive posters of their candidate's face at passing cars, nearly causing an accident. After a while some Mutharika supporters crossed the street toward the Tembo group, yet they didn't make any effort to stir up violence—a common occurrence during

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election campaigns in neighboring nations like Zimbabwe and Zambia. Instead, several of the younger men dropped their Mutharika posters, pulled out a ragged soccer ball, and started an impromptu dribbling exhibition with two Tembo men. Later that year, Malawi would hold a relatively peaceful presidential election, marking another seeming transition to stable democracy. The campaign was covered extensively in the local newspapers, which suffered from lack of resources—reporters were paid little, and the papers themselves often looked like they had been printed on rags—but which reported on the candidates with boldness and style, chronicling nearly every political battle that went on across the country. Despite some threats from angry politicians, reporters rarely backed down, and each day's paper usually contained a scandal sheet rapping all the major politicians' foibles.

Even as Malawi welcomed democracy, its leaders, and its citizens, also came to associate political change with promises of economic prosperity. Throughout the fourth wave of democratization, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, foreign donors and many local leaders who pushed the "Washington Consensus" prescriptions of open markets and open societies, increasingly made this association. But it was a dangerous link. No evidence had really shown that open societies were more likely to create economic growth. In fact, Kevin Hassett of the American Enterprise Institute has shown that, in recent years, many authoritarian nations have outperformed freer countries.[2] But in the late 1980s and 1990s, many developing world leaders—and their advocates in the West—linked the two.

In the late 1980s, Malawi might have seemed a remote prospect for democracy, but it was joined by many other democratizing nations from similar levels of development. The fourth wave of global democratization, which built on the gains of the third wave, began to crest in the late 1990s and continued into the early 2000s. While the third wave had swept through Southern Europe and parts of Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia, the fourth wave included much of sub-Saharan Africa and many other countries that were poorer, more prone to conflict, and, often, more remote, than those in the third wave: East Timor, Cambodia, Mexico, Mozambique, and Malawi, among many others.

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In many ways, the uprisings in the Middle East in 2011 seemed to fit in with that fourth wave. The Middle East revolts took place in countries like Yemen or Egypt—nations that were often as poor, authoritarian, or conflict-ridden—or all three—as those in the fourth wave nations. Before the Arab Spring, just as in sub-Saharan Africa before the 1990s, many observers, and indeed many Arabs, had all but written off the prospect of real change in the Middle East for generations.

Just as in the third wave, a kind of positive diffusion effect took place in which democratic change—sometimes backed by powerful advocacy by established democracies, as in East Timor—in one fourth wave country spilled over to neighboring nations. The revolts in Tunisia in December 2010, broadcast on satellite television and social media, inspired reformers first in Egypt, and then in Bahrain, Syria, Libya, and other nations in the Middle East. The dramatic end of apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s, as well as liberalization in neighboring nations like Mozambique and Zambia, helped create currents of change that autocratic leaders like Malawian dictator Hastings Banda ultimately could not ignore. Throwing off most of the remaining postcolonial dictators, many other poor African nations, like Benin, held multiple free and fair elections.

In the former Soviet sphere, the progress toward democracy of former communist states like Poland and Kyrgyzstan began to spill over into harder cases, like Ukraine, Central Asian nations, and Georgia. New states carved from the Soviet Central Asian republics, some of the poorest and most ethnically heterogeneous parts of the former Soviet Union, held elections. After the vicious Balkan wars of the 1990s, nearly every part of the former Yugoslavia held real, competitive elections, with several, like Slovenia, approaching Western European standards of stable democracy. Overall, by the early 2000s, nearly half of the world's population lived in countries that were either full or partial democracies, up from less than half in the mid-1970s.[3]

Sub-Saharan Africa made perhaps the greatest democratic gains in the 1990s and early 2000s, seemingly disproving arguments, sometimes made by African leaders, that the region was too poor, too ethnically divided, and too uneducated to make democracy work. From Malawi to postapartheid

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South Africa, the continent disposed of so-called big men, held elections, and paid lip service to new democratic norms. Long-ruling parties in many countries finally lost elections and willingly transferred power. Western leaders, including President Bill Clinton, touted a "new generation" of African leaders, men like Uganda's Yoweri Museveni and Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi, who would commit themselves to reform and to priorities that the first postcolonial generation had often ignored.[4]

In Kenya, the era following Daniel arap Moi had begun exuberantly in 2002 with the frenzied inauguration of former longtime opposition leader Mwai Kibaki, who vowed to clean up, and open up, Kenyan politics. At Kibaki's inauguration, where the new president declared, "The era of anything goes is now gone forever: Government will no longer be run on the whims of individuals." Africa journalist Michela Wrong tried to pay a small bribe to a local driver, but he refused her money, saying that a new, cleaner era had come to Kenya.[5] Kibaki appointed John Githongo, a prominent, outspoken local journalist who had bitterly criticized Moi's autocratic and venal style, as his anticorruption czar.

Like Kibaki, Olusegun Obasanjo, a former general with a relatively clean reputation who won the Nigerian presidency in 1999 after the dictator Sani Abacha died, took office amid a wave of optimism. Obasanjo touted himself as a reformer after the predation and outright thuggery of the Abacha era; the day of his inauguration was called "Democracy Day," and a national holiday was declared.[6] In the following months U. S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called for greater American aid to Nigeria, praising Obasanjo for launching a democratic revolution that could rival "the Czechoslovak 'Velvet Revolution' and South Africa's long walk to freedom" in its power and influence.[7]

The fourth wave of democratization, which had seemed so improbable just a decade earlier, cemented in many Western leaders' minds the idea that democracy eventually would come to every country. If a place as poor and as conflict-ridden as Malawi or Mozambique could build a viable democratic system, what nation could not? Critical international developments, including the rapid expansion of communications technology, the end of the Cold War, and the birth of Western democracy promotion, also seemed to

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foster the global spread of democracy. By the beginning of the 2000s, this belief in the essential triumph of democracy had become a kind of religion among Western leaders.

The color revolutions of the early 2000s capped off the fourth wave, and only added to Western leaders' democratic triumphalism. Beginning with the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 (some would add the protests in Serbia in 2000), the term "color revolutions" came to mean peaceful, popular movements for democratic change, initially in the former Soviet Union and old Eastern bloc.

To be sure, some fourth wave nations seemed, even in their best moments, to be the "illiberal democracies" that prominent intellectual and writer Fareed Zakaria has described—places like Cambodia, whose leaders never really upheld what Zakaria calls "constitutional liberalism," meaning protections of individual autonomy and dignity against coercion, including the potential tyranny of a democratic majority.[8] As Zakaria outlined in his book *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad,* many young democracies, led by popularly elected leaders who had little interest in creating democratic institutions, trampled on minority rights, religious freedoms, and economic rights. "In many developing countries, the experience of democracy over the past few decades has been one in which majorities have—often quietly, sometimes noisily—eroded separations of power, undermined human rights, and corrupted longstanding traditions of tolerance and fairness. . . . Democratization and illiberalism are directly related," he wrote.[9] In India, where Zakaria was born, the mid-1990s BJP government, popularly elected and supported by many Hindus, fostered pogroms against Muslims, a religious minority, in states like Gujarat, and apparently set back India's commitment to liberalism, which had been enshrined at the time of independence by unelected Indian elites or by leaders, like Jawaharlal Nehru, who were far more tolerant than most Indians. In Indonesia, where for thirty years relative interreligious and interethnic peace had prevailed under Suharto's iron grip (though, when he came to power in the mid-1960s, Suharto unleashed massive bloodshed), democratic change in the late 1990s led to new waves of violence between Muslims and Christians, Javanese and non-Javanese, and many other groups within In-

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donesian society.[10] Unlike leaders like Suharto or Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, who could "make shrewd choices for the long term," democratic leaders also would inherently be pulled into populist economic policies focused on short-term gains at the expense of development.[11]

Zakaria argued further that the problem with these "illiberal democracies" was not that they were insufficiently democratic—that their institutions and political cultures needed to continue to mature, like those in the West that had developed for decades. This was a critique that had been made by many democratization specialists, and even by democrats in many developing nations themselves. Instead, he argued that they had too much democracy, and that the only solution was authoritarian rule, or at least a kind of oligarchic rule by the "best people"—the elites, like Nehru and other Indian founding fathers, who had attended English boarding schools and then Oxford or Cambridge. He celebrated leaders like Indonesia's Suharto and Pervez Musharraf, the military ruler of Pakistan throughout most of the 2000s who, by Zakaria's reckoning, instilled greater tolerance of religious and ethnic diversity than any civilian politician in that country could or would have done.[12] He seemed to even suggest that no Muslim-majority nation was capable of real democracy, since illiberal Islamists would always dominate an election and crush people's freedoms—thus, a "liberal" dictator like Musharraf or Tunisia's Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali was the best alternative. He longed for earlier periods even in American history, when politics was essentially decided by a small group of men who came from the "right" background, attended the "right" universities, and then governed together at the State Department, CIA, and the White House.

Some of Zakaria's argument about illiberalism made inherent sense, such as the critical observation that democracy means more than simply elections; U.S. policy too often has focused on one relatively free election in a developing nation while ignoring other signs suggesting that democratic institutions are not being put into place. As we will see later, some "elected autocrats"—popularly elected leaders in fragile democracies like Russia or Thailand—have shown little commitment to the rule of law or to freedoms of association, press, or religion, and a democracy promotion policy focused primarily on elections, or a one-size-fits-all type of process, can hardly be successful. And in some instances, development-minded dictators like Suharto

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or Augusto Pinochet of Chile were able to pass economic reforms that set the stage for sustained growth.

Yet a wide range of comprehensive studies has shown that it is impossible to find a clear link between autocracy and growth. These dictators also usually did little to set the stage for any democratic transition, since the foundation of their rule was a desire to stay in power for life—when Suharto was overthrown, he was focused on concentrating more wealth and power into the hands of his family, not liberalizing the political environment or opening up Indonesia's cartelized markets. More important, these elected autocrats alone, whom Zakaria despises, did not undermine these democracies; as we will see, when this fourth wave crested these nations were neutered by a combination of poor leadership, weak institutions, a complacent middle class, slow growth, and corruption. This fourth wave also was not helped by Western democracy promotion strategies heavy on rhetoric, elections, and process, and it was light on actual funding on the ground, or an understanding of how to make democracy more attractive to both middle classes and working classes in the developing world.

But despite Zakaria's legitimate concerns about young democracies, some of which are echoed in this book, and even though many of these elected autocrats often took their countries' democracies backward, they almost never left their nations more repressive than they had been under previous true dictatorships. In Thailand, for instance, Thaksin Shinawatra did set the rule of law back during his prime ministership between 2001 and 2006: he intimidated the Thai media, bent the court system to his priorities, and essentially sacked supposedly independent bureaucrats who defied his policies. But only someone with no historical memory would argue that Thaksin's period as prime minister even began to compare to the bloodiest days of Thailand's past dictatorships, such as the late 1940s, when dictator Phibul Songkram disappeared or simply murdered political opponents, or the mid-1970s, when under a series of right-wing regimes state-backed vigilantes attacked Thammasat University, the Thai equivalent of Harvard, where they raped female students and then doused students with gasoline and immolated them, leaving their charred bodies swinging from trees.[13]

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Indeed, even if they were incomplete democracies, all of the fourth wave nations that later regressed were freer in every respect during their more democratic periods than they had been earlier, during their truly authoritarian periods. Vladimir Putin, in the 2000s, did indeed set back Russian democracy, often with the consent of many Russians; its scores on Freedom House rankings fell compared to the Yeltsin era during the 1990s. But the country hardly had reverted to the terrors of the Soviet Union, in which none of Zakaria's individual liberal rights received any protections.

Zakaria's notion of illiberal democracy is inherently flawed in other ways. He chooses many examples in his book that do not even fit the definition of democracy at all, countries like Kazakhstan that, according to the international monitoring organization Freedom House and other ranking organizations, are simply autocracies. For every Pinochet or Lee Kuan Yew, there were tens of Mobutus or Malawi's Hastings Banda, who used their cults of personality to significantly restrain personal freedoms and individual liberties. In nearly every country he surveyed, many of the problems he outlined were indeed a result of not enough, rather than too much, democracy. As Harvard's Sabeel Rahman writes in an analysis of Zakaria's book, "On closer inspection, one finds that the culprits [in illiberal democracies] are not the public, who are the supposed beneficiaries of democratic empowerment, but rather special interest groups"—groups that could be minimized through greater, not lesser, democracy.[14]

Meanwhile, as they have become more autocratic, the fourth wave nations have not developed any of the supposed positive attributes of authoritarian rule that Zakaria writes about: benign dictators promoting liberal social and economic freedoms that would have been impossible in a popular democracy, or making farsighted economic decisions, since they are not accountable to the broader public. Instead, after the coup in 2006 Thailand's new military leaders badly bungled economic policy, sparking panic among investors and leading to runs on the Thai currency. In Cambodia, where the prime minister has suffocated the democratic reforms of the 1990s, the government has done little to promote sustained economic growth, instead turning into a kind of mafia state designed to enrich senior government officials and their allies.[15] Overall, a comprehensive study of fourth wave

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nations by Council on Foreign Relations researchers found that economic growth did not improve as they veered back toward autocracy, and that protection of these types of liberal freedoms also did not improve, even under supposedly "enlightened" autocracies like the Thai generals who deposed the elected autocrat Thaksin, or Musharraf.

In earlier democratic waves, countries had pursued a wide range of development strategies. Many third wave nations, especially those in East Asia, actually pursued highly state-directed strategies of economic growth, which some economists later would call the East Asian model. Eventually, these countries, like Taiwan and South Korea, also built vibrant democracies. While participating in global trading regimes, nations like Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea, and, earlier, Japan protected critical industries until they were more internationally competitive, invested heavily in primary education, and directed banks and other financial institutions, including citizens' pension plans, to support certain sectors of the economy. Some of these high-powered economies, like Malaysia (and later China), used capital controls to protect themselves from international capital markets. In Thailand, a small cadre of government bureaucrats in the Bank of Thailand and Ministry of Finance oversaw these government economic plans; in Japan, the powerful bureaucrats of the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry played this role. In Thailand, import substitution and protections of critical industries would ultimately be responsible for nearly half the growth in the export manufacturing sector, while in South Korea such supports and protections nurtured a generation of companies that would become world-beaters, including automaker Hyundai and technology giant Samsung.

These state-directed measures were actually not so different from those employed by earlier, first wave democracies in North America and Western Europe when they, too, were developing economies. During the early years of its existence, the United States, for example, used high tariffs and other import restrictions to protect many of the young country's industries from competition with European firms.

Other second and third wave nations pursued different strategies of growth, with less success, yet managed at the same time to build solid democracies. After independence, India created a highly protected economy,

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using a wide range of tariffs and nontariff barriers to keep out foreign investment in most sectors, and to actually hinder domestic companies from growing too large. Many other postcolonial states also adhered to a socialist economic strategy, with highly mixed economic results—India grew by around 3–4 percent most years, and many African nations barely grew at all in the 1970s and early 1980s. Yet some of these nations, such as Greece and India, still managed to consolidate their democracies. Very few nations in the second or third waves adopted wholly free market policies—even countries later championed by free market advocates, like Chile, still used a sizable degree of state planning and support to buttress certain sectors. The one place often cited by free market advocates as an example of the power of economic liberalization, Hong Kong—annually ranked as the "freest" economy in the world in the Heritage Foundation think tank's Index of Economic Freedom—was neither a country nor a democracy, and its prosperity actually depended, in no small measure, on a massively inflated local property market tightly controlled by the government.

But in the fourth wave Western leaders, policy makers, and institutions like the World Bank were caught up in a kind of post–Cold War hysteria. The West's triumph over communism was proof, as Francis Fukuyama famously argued in *The End of History,* that liberal democracy, combined with market economics, represented the direction in which the world would inevitably evolve. The hard sell of democracy barely took account of the uncertainty about the actual conditions for growth in developing nations. It did not seem to matter that earlier wave nations had employed many different economic models of growth, or that many of the governments that collapsed in 1989 and in the early 1990s did so not because of economic liberalization but for a variety of reasons, ranging from international pressure (apartheid South Africa) to internal leadership dynamics that spiraled out of control (the Soviet Union under Gorbachev). At the time, this nuance was ignored: economic change was linked to political change, and a program of free markets and free politics was the only item on the menu. As candidate George W. Bush declared in 2000 on the presidential campaign trail, "Economic freedom creates habits of liberty. And habits of liberty create expectations of democracy."[16] The man he was hoping to replace, Bill Clinton, made essentially the same point many times. In one typical phrase from his book-length

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vision for America, *Between Hope and History,* he wrote, "Just as democracy helps make the world safe for commerce, commerce helps make the world safe for democracy."[17]

By the 1990s a large cadre of development experts, housed at the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, ministries of Western governments, and universities and think tanks, were ready to dispense advice about the proper route to political and economic liberalization. The model advocated by many of these experts became known as the "Washington Consensus."[18] Its author, economist John Williamson, originally intended it to mean a discrete and limited set of economic initiatives particularly developed to address many of the economic problems facing Latin American nations in the late 1980s and in the 1990s, including fiscal discipline, tax reform, liberalizing exchange rates, privatization, and trade liberalization, among other changes. But the term soon took on a far broader meaning among many development experts and world leaders: it came to signify broad reforms, promoted not only for Latin America but for the entire developing world, and designed to open markets, increase financial transparency, and reduce government intervention in the economy, along with political reforms that would also foster freedom by shrinking the role of the state.[19] Proponents of the Washington Consensus made swaggering boasts about the potential results, and brooked little criticism of their proposals. In perhaps the most famous example, World Bank officials throughout the 1990s promised that these policy reforms, if implemented throughout the developing world, would slash global poverty in half.[20] Later, in an internal assessment of its policies during this decade, the Bank admitted that it still didn't know "how to improve institutional performance [i.e., how to promote economic growth]" and that the Washington Consensus had been "the dominant view, making it difficult for others to be heard," even though these proposed reforms actually had had a mixed impact on growth and political change.[21] Another retrospective comprehensive analysis of the Washington Consensus, by former World Bank chief economist Joseph Stiglitz, found that proponents of its reforms made little effort to tailor its prescriptions to individual countries and, even if it produced growth, actually paid little attention to whether that growth alleviated poverty or really addressed inequality at all. Worse, Stiglitz also concluded that the Washington

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Consensus failed to even promote significant growth in most of the nations where it was applied, even as it ignored the balanced, important role that a state can play in development.

The lack of another obvious alternative model in the late 1990s and early 2000s only emboldened advocates of free markets linked with free politics. Compared with the Cold War, no major powers now dissented loudly from this new orthodoxy. After the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, China adopted a more modest public approach to foreign policy and spent most of the 1990s and early 2000s wooing foreign investment, building its own industries (using many of the statist models pioneered by other Asian nations), and refusing to publicly offer any alternative to the Washington Consensus. Russia, decimated economically by the fall of the Soviet Union, and nearly bankrupt in the mid-1990s, also was in no position to offer any alternative.

The sheer number and diversity of countries in the fourth wave of democratization, as compared with earlier waves that took place mostly in the West, also added to pressure among many leaders and donors to develop a single model that could be applied in developing nations. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, many leaders, both in the former Soviet states and in the West, feared that if radical measures were not taken rapidly in the old Soviet bloc, these states would be unable to jettison the legacy of communist economic planning, and might wind up with hyperinflation and highly uncompetitive economies, which could lead to a stalling, or even a reversal, of political reforms and potential links to the West. These countries, many economists and donor agencies believed, needed to embark on quick transformations. Led by economists such as Jeffrey Sachs, many IMF and Bank officials promoted a kind of economic shock therapy, consisting of rapid freeing of the economies of countries like Poland.

The Bank was hardly alone in its hard sell of free markets and free politics. Sub-Saharan Africa and much of Latin America had suffered badly in the 1980s, a period of capital flight and economic policies that too often saddled Latin American and African nations with greater debts. In the worst years of the 1980s, sub-Saharan Africa's total GDP actually shrank, and even in the best years overall growth in Africa barely topped 4 percent; many Latin nations also ended the decade of the 1980s poorer than they'd begun.[22] By the early 1990s, most African and Latin leaders were

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looking for any solutions that would halt a death spiral of underdevelopment and isolation from the global economy. Many had failed with the socialist economic planning and import-substitution strategies of the postcolonial era, and at the time few understood the potential of the gradualist approach of the East Asian nations, which slowly weaned themselves off of many of the state subsidies and protections they had used in the 1960s and 1970s. (Later, as we will see, as China became a major world power again, and began highlighting its growth model, many other developing nations would try to copy the gradualist approach.) Compared with the weak growth and stasis of the 1960s and 1970s, and facing balance of payments problems, weak growth, and high unemployment, many developing nations assumed that the Washington Consensus could not help but improve their economies.

The savviest leaders of developing nations also realized that decent growth rates could bring stability to a young democracy. Growth, after all, would mollify members of the old regime—friends of the old dictator, the military, senior civil servants used to comfortable lifestyles, local traditional leaders—by expanding the pool of potential spoils and, possibly, convincing the most recalcitrant former regime insiders to support a democratic transition.

Malawi, like many sub-Saharan African nations, received the full measure of Washington Consensus advocacy. Stephen Carr, an economist, worked for the World Bank for years, and then retired to Malawi, where he lived on a small mountain outside of Blantyre. He had worked at the Bank during the height of the Washington Consensus era and then watched, even after he had left, as Bank specialists continued to descend upon the country. "You'd have economists come in here, never been to Malawi, knew nothing about how the country worked, and they'd make predictions, projections. . . . No follow-through, but if anyone disagreed with them, well, you just couldn't," he said. "It would be put that there was no other choice, really."[23]

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Malawi was confronted with one crisis after another: declining world prices for its staple crops of tea, coffee, and tobacco, and growing competition from new producers like Vietnam. Between 1980 and 2000, global prices for eighteen major commodities plunged by

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nearly one-quarter. Several times in the 1990s, droughts in the maize-planting regions, possibly caused by shifting global climate patterns, caused famines. Many Malawian families were left without enough maize even to feed themselves the staple porridge of *nsima,* much less enough maize or any other crop to sell; the ever-present deep-fried potatoes sold by street vendors throughout the country were luxuries they could not afford.

The World Bank's specialists proposed that Malawi privatize its agricultural sector, slashing state subsidies for fertilizer and feed. These policy recommendations came on the heels of Bank- and International Monetary Fund–led structural adjustment policies for Malawi, begun in the late 1980s, and they have launched a wave of privatization and macroeconomic liberalization in the country. Some Malawian government officials wanted to tell the Bank, politely, to shove off. They worried that, with even less of a government cushion of maize surplus and seeds, a drought would leave average Malawians in an even more precarious position. But Malawi relies on donors for more than half of its annual budget, and so the Bank, and other Western donors, wield enormous influence over government policy. "There was not much [of a] way they [the Malawian government] could really stand up to the donors," said Carr. In the late 1990s, the government did begin to implement many of the Bank's recommendations. As it did so, both Bank officials and many Malawians politicians who realized that strong growth was needed to maintain social stability aggressively advertised these policies.

Then, in the 2000s, disaster struck. Each season seemed to bring a drought worse than the previous one. Malawi's farms withered, and the country had to start importing food from neighboring nations. Maize production dropped by nearly half between 1998 and 2004, and in October 2005 Malawi's president declared that the famine was a "national disaster." Malnutrition soared in a country where many people already could not obtain enough food, and in the early 2000s hundreds died every year from starvation. But the government had sold off much of its grain reserves, and so it could do little to help its suffering farmers; it had to rely even more heavily on handouts from aid agencies and other African nations. Private traders who had amassed stocks of grain jacked up prices, and farmers complained bitterly. Malawi's economy contracted by nearly 5 percent in 2001, and by another 4.4 percent in 2002.

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Eventually, the devastating famine forced the Malawian government to reassess its strategies. Defying the Bank's recommendation, the government instead launched a program in which roughly half of Malawi's small farmers were given coupons that allowed them to buy fertilizer and seed at a rate far below the market price. World Bank experts initially disdained the Malawian government's strategy, and the Bank may even have threatened to cut assistance if Malawi went forward with its plan.[24] Still, the Malawian government insisted on its strategy and ultimately was seemingly proven correct. The subsidized fertilizer and seeds helped Malawian farmers produce some of their best harvests in the late 2000s. Once the farmers produced, the Malawian government created funds designed to buy a percentage of the maize crop and store it for future emergencies, thereby averting the threat of empty grain silos in a future famine. Leaders from other African nations, and even from some Latin American countries like Costa Rica, began traveling to Malawi to study its turnaround. At one point, Malawi's farmers became so productive that some government officials worried whether they might be producing too much, and thereby driving down the price of their crops. Eventually, by the late 2000s the World Bank's own internal watchdog concluded that the demands by the Bank and other aid donors to privatize agriculture in countries like Malawi had actually hurt African nations. The Bank, and other Western donors, decided to cautiously back the Malawian subsidies.[25]

But by the time of the Bank's reevaluation, donors already had pursued more than a decade of ineffective and dangerous policies in Malawi, despite many warnings by local specialists that the donors were actually making the situation worse.[26] And even with the new subsidy policies, years of privatization, combined with changing climate patterns and new competitors for coffee, tea, and tobacco, weakened the country's economy and led to far greater fluctuations in unemployment than that in the 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s. As the economy stalled and hunger grew, further worsening the HIV/AIDS situation in the country, many Malawians began to wonder whether democracy, which had been promoted as part of the new economic model, was not also to blame.

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