

Endangered Political Species?

To the Editors: In his article "Human Rights Are Not a Western Discovery" (*Worldview*, October) Raúl Manglapus makes reference to my recent book *The Decline of Democracy*. Attempting to refute one of its general themes, that democratic government is an endangered political species, Mr. Manglapus states that democracy has lately "been making a comeback." Unfortunately his evidence is highly subjective, and the several examples used are only those that he believes support his conclusion.

There are at least an equal number of examples of nations in which democracy has been suspended or terminated within the past two or three years. Among

these are Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Argentina. In addition there has been a trend toward curtailment of democratic impulses within several authoritarian states that had shown some liberalizing tendencies at times during the 1970's. These include Kuwait, Nepal, Yugoslavia, Egypt, and several African nations. Mr. Manglapus does not focus on the implications of these situations.

In fact, even the examples given by Mr. Manglapus illustrate the very fragility of democracy and the ease with which it has been subverted in many of the countries he mentions. This is certainly not proof of its enduring presence nor evidence of any deep-seated mass commitment to this form of government. An analysis of political systems around the world, using three minimal criteria of democracy (regular and free elections, with the possibility of changing administrations by the ballot; the existence of an active and legal opposition and its acceptance by the government; the presence of some elements of free expression) indicates that both democratic government and democratic processes are now at a lower level than at almost any time since the end of World War II. The bulk of the world's people and an increasing number of states live in an environment where political authoritarianism has expanded. This makes it difficult to accept Mr. Manglapus's contention that democracy has not declined in our era.

While disagreeing with this and other historically debatable assertions in his article (such as the claim that initial industrial growth can accelerate in a democratic context), I strongly endorse Mr. Manglapus's statements that human rights are not conceptually or operationally exclusive to Western societies. He correctly criticizes Buckley, Hearst, and Kennan for some of their attitudes on this score. They, and Raúl Manglapus, should remember that a thesis is poorly sustained by facts that are squeezed to fit it.

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WORLDVIEW

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