

Authoritarians are on the march

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THE FALL of the Berlin Wall in 1989 held out the promise that growing prosperity would foster freedom and tolerance, which in turn would create more prosperity. Unfortunately, that hope disappointed.

Prosperity certainly rose. In the three decades to 2019, global output increased more than fourfold. Roughly 70% of the 2bn people living in extreme poverty escaped it. But individual freedom and tolerance evolved differently. Many people around the world continue to swear fealty to traditional beliefs, sometimes intolerant ones.

The World Values Survey takes place every five years. The latest results, which go up to 2022, canvassed almost 130,000 people in 90 countries. Some places, such as Russia and Georgia, are not becoming more tolerant as they grow, but more tightly bound to traditional religious values instead. At the same time, young people in Islamic and Orthodox countries are barely more individualistic or secular than their elders. By contrast, the young in northern Europe and America are racing ahead. Countries where burning the Koran is tolerated and those where it is a crime look on each other with growing incomprehension.

On the face of it, all this supports the campaign by China's Communist Party to dismiss universal values as racist neo-imperialism. It argues that white Western elites are imposing their own version of freedom and democracy on people who want security and stability instead.

In fact, the survey suggests something more subtle. China is right that people want security. The survey shows that a sense of threat drives people to seek refuge in family and racial or national groups, while tradition and organised religion offer solace.

This is one way to see America's doomed attempts to establish democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the failure of the Arab spring. Amid lawlessness and upheaval, some people sought safety in their tribe or their sect. Hoping that order would be restored, some welcomed the return of dictators.

However, the Chinese claim that universal values are an imposition is upside down. From Chile to Japan, the World Values Survey provides examples where growing security really does seem to lead to tolerance and greater individual expression. Nothing suggests that Western countries are unique in that. The real question is how to help people feel more secure.

An answer comes from prosperity built on the rule of law. Confident in their savings and the social safety-net, the citizens of rich countries know that they are less vulnerable to the chance events that wreck lives elsewhere.

However, the deepest solution to insecurity lies in how countries cope with change, whether from global warming, artificial intelligence or the growing tensions between China and America. The countries that manage change well will be better at making society feel confident in the future. And that is where universal values come into their own. Tolerance, free expression and individual inquiry help harness change through consensus forged by reasoned debate and reform. There is no better way to bring about progress.

Universal values are much more than a Western piety. They are a mechanism that fortifies societies against insecurity. What the World Values Survey shows is that they are also hard-won.