

Title:

The Democratic Ideal and New Colonialism

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Summary:

"Democracy" is not the rule of the people. It is government by periodically vetted representatives of the people.

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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful concerned individuals can precipitate change in the world ... indeed, it is the only thing that ever has"

(Margaret Mead)

"Democracy" is not the rule of the people. It is government by periodically vetted representatives of the people.

Democracy is not tantamount to a continuous expression of the popular will as it pertains to a range of issues. Functioning and fair democracy is representative and not participatory. Participatory "people power" is mob rule, not democracy.

Granted, "people power" is often required in order to establish democracy where it is unprecedented. Revolutions - velvet, rose, and orange - recently introduced democracy in Eastern Europe, for instance. People power - mass street demonstrations - toppled obnoxious dictatorships from Iran to the Philippines and from Peru to Indonesia.

But once the institutions of democracy are in place and more or less functional, the people can and must rest. They should let their chosen delegates do the job they were elected to do. And they must hold their emissaries responsible and accountable in fair and free ballots once every two or four or five years.

As heads of the state in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and East Europe can attest, these vital lessons are lost on the dozens of "new democracies" the world over. Many of these presidents and prime ministers, though democratically elected (multiply, in some cases), have fallen prey to enraged and vigorous

"people power" movements in their countries.

And these breaches of the democratic tradition are not the only or most egregious ones.

The West boasts of the three waves of democratization that swept across the world 1975. Yet, in most developing countries and nations in transition, "democracy" is an empty word. Granted, the hallmarks of democracy are there: candidate lists, parties, election propaganda, and voting. But its quiddity is absent. It is being consistently hollowed out and rendered mock by election fraud, exclusionary policies, cronyism, corruption, intimidation, and collusion with Western interests, both commercial and political.

The new "democracies" are thinly-disguised and criminalized plutocracies (recall the Russian oligarchs), authoritarian regimes (Central Asia and the Caucasus), or Vichy-like heterarchies (Macedonia, Bosnia, and Iraq, to mention three recent examples).

The new "democracies" suffer from many of the same ills that afflict their veteran role models: murky campaign finances, venal revolving doors between state administration and private enterprise, endemic corruption, self-censoring media, socially, economically, and politically excluded minorities, and so on. But while this malaise does not threaten the foundations of the United States and France - it does imperil the stability and future of the likes of Ukraine, Serbia, and Moldova, Indonesia, Mexico, and Bolivia.

Worse still, the West has transformed the ideal of democracy into an ideology at the service of imposing a new colonial regime on its former colonies. Spearheaded by the United States, the white and Christian nations of the West embarked with missionary zeal on a transformation, willy-nilly, of their erstwhile charges into paragons of democracy and good governance.

And not for the first time. Napoleon justified his gory campaigns by claiming that they served to spread French ideals throughout a barbarous world. Kipling bemoaned the "White Man's (civilizing) burden", referring specifically to Britain's role in India. Hitler believed himself to be the last remaining barrier between the hordes of Bolshevism and the West. The Vatican concurred with him.

This self-righteousness would have been more tolerable had the West actually meant and practiced what it preached, however self-delusionally. Yet, in dozens of cases in the last 60 years alone, Western countries intervened, often by force of arms, to reverse and nullify the outcomes of perfectly legal and

legitimate popular and democratic elections. They did so because of economic and geopolitical interests and they usually installed rabid dictators in place of the deposed elected functionaries.

This hypocrisy cost them dearly. Few in the poor and developing world believe that the United States or any of its allies are out to further the causes of democracy, human rights, and global peace. The nations of the West have sown cynicism and they are reaping strife and terrorism in return.

Moreover, democracy is far from what it is made out to be. Confronted with history, the myth breaks down.

For instance, it is maintained by their chief proponents that democracies are more peaceful than dictatorships. But the two most belligerent countries in the world are, by a wide margin, Israel and the United States (closely followed by the United Kingdom). As of late, China is one of the most tranquil polities.

Democracies are said to be inherently stable (or to successfully incorporate the instability inherent in politics). This, too, is a confabulation. The Weimar Republic gave birth to Adolf Hitler and Italy had almost 50 governments in as many years. The bloodiest civil wars in history erupted in Republican Spain and, seven decades earlier, in the United States. Czechoslovakia, the USSR, and Yugoslavia imploded upon becoming democratic, having survived intact for more than half a century as tyrannies.

Democracies are said to be conducive to economic growth (indeed, to be a prerequisite to such). But the fastest economic growth rates in history go to imperial Rome, Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and post-Mao China.

Finally, how represented is the vox populi even in established democracies?

In a democracy, people can freely protest and make their opinions known, no doubt. Sometimes, they can even change their representatives (though the rate of turnover in the US Congress in the last two decades is lower than it was in the last 20 years of the Politburo).

But is this a sufficient incentive (or deterrent)? The members of the various elites in Western democracies are mobile - they ceaselessly and facilely hop from one lucrative sinecure to another. Lost the elections as a Senator? How about a multi-million dollar book contract, a consultant position with a firm you formerly oversaw or regulated, your own talk show on television, a cushy job in the administration?

The truth is that voters are powerless. The rich and mighty take care of their

own. Malfeasance carries little risk and rarely any sanction. Western democracies are ossified bastions of self-perpetuating interest groups aided and abetted and legitimized by the ritualized spectacle that we call "elections". And don't you think the denizens of Africa and Asia and eastern Europe and the Middle East are blissfully unaware of this charade.