

# Democracy

## IS DEMOCRACY TRULY THAT DESIRABLE?

“Government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” This famous statement from Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address summarizes the common view of America’s government, or at least the ideal. The government known as democracy is seen as the way America does things, and is seen by many as the way everyone should do things. President Woodrow Wilson led the United States into World War I to “make the world safe for democracy,” and while a number of nations had adopted democratic governments after that war, virtually all of these new democracies had given way to tyranny and oppression by the beginning of World War II. I am here to argue that democracy is by no means the only legitimate form of government, and that democracy is not only merely one of many forms, but that in some cases the establishment of a democratic government may be harmful to the nation and to the best interests its people. I am also here to argue that autocracy may be a good form of government if done properly, and may be necessary for some nations. In no way do I wish to cast aspersions on democracy, but on the idea that only democracy can be a legitimate government.

## THE DOWNFALLS OF DEMOCRACY

According to the editors of *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Political Issues*, there are three basic conditions necessary to facilitate democracy. First, there must be a high standard of living (as well as employment to allow for this) so that the populace will be able to be concerned with relatively trivial matters like voting and rights rather than mere things like food, clothing, and shelter. Secondly, literacy is an important factor, because it is necessary for people to understand their “responsibilities and rights in a democratic society.” Finally, there must be enough of a “shared destiny” to promote a “willingness to abide” by the decision of the majority, no matter how much the opposition doesn’t like it. These are factors that cannot be formed after a democratic government is established, but they must be developed to establish that government.

In his article entitled “The Dilemma of Democracy,” Robert J. Samuelson makes a number of good points with respect to problems in a democratic system, even when the

populace is well-educated and comparatively informed of the issues. As he sees it, while a democratic government should work for the best interests and desires of the people, the people oftentimes have no idea what their best interests are and instead seek out their own desires. The founding fathers sought a government where the elected representatives of the people would work for that which would be best for their constituencies and for the nation as a whole, rather than pandering for votes. In Madison's words (as quoted by Samuelson), our governing officials must "refine the public views... [to] discern the [country's] true interest..." Many times the legislators do exactly what the people wish, and often this results badly. Samuelson mentions the various pork projects for which Congress is so well known.

### **FAILED DEMACRACIES**

There are numerous examples of failed democratic systems throughout history. Britain tried to abolish monarchy and set up a Parliament responsive to its people in the 1640s; this ended in a power-hungry Parliament that was overthrown by the military who set up Oliver Cromwell as virtual dictator of England. France tried to turn its system upside-down at the end of the eighteenth century, only to see this experiment in democracy fall to the Reign of Terror, masked autocracy, and the rise of Napoleon. Russia attempted a similar move to revolutionary France in 1917; this government was removed by the Bolsheviks who promised land and bread to the starving peasants, who had only been freed from serfdom a mere five and a half decades before.

The post-WWI era saw the rapid democratization of Europe, but many of those nations fell just as rapidly back from it. Hungary's democracy lasted a mere few weeks before it fell to a communist government, followed by a semi-fascist "kingdom" under Admiral Horthy. Italy fell to Mussolini, Austria fell to Dolfuss, and Spain fell to Franco. The most notorious example of this time is the rise of Adolph Hitler to power in Germany, where he was actually elected by the people to leadership of the German Reich.

Today the trend isn't necessarily better. Though a number of new nations have adopted democratic principles, many of them are regressing against democracy and adopting totalitarian or authoritarian systems. Many of the former Soviet Republics are

now going back to systems of government closer to that of the old USSR. Sub-Saharan Africa is also seeing something of a trend back to personalist rule. Many of the reasons for this have to do with the economic factor that was mentioned before. These states have to choose between fighting for their rights and eating their next meal – which one will most choose?

Russia's democracy almost died due to the shock therapy that it endured in the 1990s, with the economy in shambles and where the communists and nationalists were both feared to be close to power in Parliament while Boris Yeltsin remained in control of the presidency. The accession of Vladimir Putin, himself something of a hybrid of democrat and authoritarian, may perhaps be what is needed to get Russia on a democratic course, even if he has turned back the clock on some democratic institutions.

## **AUTHORITARIANISM**

Before we get into a discussion of benefits of authoritarianism, let us first distinguish authoritarianism from totalitarianism. According to Juan Linz, an authoritarian government has

“...limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate or guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive or intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.”

Authoritarian governments include the old absolute monarchies of Europe, Franco's Spain, and many of the dictatorships of today, which are sometimes called “guided democracies.”

Totalitarianism, on the other hand, is where the government has a totalist ideology, a single party backing the ruler, and total government control over the media, the military, and the economy. Totalitarian governments are also defended by a well-structured and intrusive secret police. Some models that fit this form are the USSR (and other Communist states) and Nazi Germany.

First, it must be noted that an authoritarian government need not be tyrannical or totalitarian; in fact, while a totalitarian form of government stifles intellectual

development, a benevolent autocracy can allow thought to freely develop – one may note that the Enlightenment was just as strong in France (an absolute monarchy) as it was in England (a limited, parliamentary government) – in fact, most of the notables in the Enlightenment (Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu) were French. An authoritarian ruler has total control over the government, but not over other institutions such as the church, the military, or the aristocracy. Pluralism, while limited in scope, does exist in an authoritarian system, though these are usually those tolerated by the government in power. The limited pluralism of an authoritarian regime is usually a semi-opposition that will speak out against problems but will not move too harshly to alter the system.

Authoritarian governments can be friends to democratic development. Spain attempted a fast transition to constitutional government in 1931 when it abolished its monarchy and declared a republic. The Spanish Republic lasted until 1936, when the right wing refused to accept the outcome of an election and, backed by more fascist nations, fought the Russian-backed loyalists. The end of this war in 1939 saw the rise to power of Generalissimo Francisco Franco, who ruled Spain until his death in 1975. Franco's government was moderate fascist, but was authoritarian rather than totalitarian. Franco actually fostered the development of democracy but did so slowly. At his death, Juan Carlos ascended the reconstituted throne and was given more power than most monarchs. When a coup attempted to return the nation to authoritarianism, Juan Carlos intervened and saved democracy. Spain is now a vibrant democracy due to the transition that Franco and Juan Carlos facilitated.

## **CONCLUSION**

Perhaps democratization is inevitable. I will concede this possibility. However, I do not feel that it is up to us to impose democracy on the rest of the world. Our doing so is another example of American imperialism. Some nations need a strong hand governing them to do what's best for their people. I would say that the successful democracies are such because they developed over time or, according to Tocqueville, it has to “adapt its government to time and place, and to modify it according to men and conditions.” Britain's democratization began in 1215 with the signing of *Magna Carta*; women received the vote in the 1920s. The United States began as an agrarian republic where

only the landed were able to vote; blacks received the franchise from 1865 to 1964 and women were enfranchised in 1920. These nations that made the slow transition have become the truly free nations that are the shining examples of how democracy should be. To expect another nation to do in a mere couple of years what we did in many decades is at best naïve, and at worst harmful to them and to us.