

Pluralist Democracy and the Third World

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In a century of unexampled economic and technological progress, with the most educated and sophisticated population ever known, much of the world still writhes under the torture, brutality, and forced labor exacted by tyrants of both Right and Left. In more than half the world's nations governments are masters and people are subjects, and to seriously criticize the masters is dangerous to both life and limb. This world needs a great many things, including a more adequate distribution of food, energy, and medical care, but surely a high priority must be given to the eradication of tyranny. The opinion leaders of the democracies must strive as dedicatedly to end public enslavement in the twentieth century as their predecessors strove to end private enslavement in the nineteenth.

Some government leaders would have us stand aside. In criticizing recent human rights initiatives America's former United Nations Ambassador Charles Yost has written: "The American position focuses almost all of its attention on political and civil rights, where its own traditions are clear and its performance, at least recently, excellent, while minimizing economic and social rights, which, to a large part of mankind that is never sure where its next meal is coming from, are more urgent." An Iranian official urges that we respect those nations "where certain political niceties are sacrificed, and certain libertarian corners are cut, in order to ensure maximum economic growth." A Chilean official rejects American criticisms by asserting that the overriding concern of the Pinochet government is with fundamental human rights, such as improving the living conditions of those in extreme poverty. Brazil's President Geisel sums up the spirit of this criticism of America's human rights policies when he warns the Brazilian people to guard against "hypocritical, irresponsible, and demagogic populism and the utopias of full democracy and outdated liberalism."

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of pluralist or liberal democracy in the Third World, where other goals may be primary?

Because no one wants to be accused of promoting the ethnocentric Western concept of freedom popularized during the cold war, it is easy for us to be lulled into believing that Third World peoples prefer alternatives to pluralist or liberal democracy, at least for the present. A survey of the world suggests that the available government models are communism; one-party socialism; militant, traditional, and modified authoritarianism; and liberal democracy.

In the Third World, communism is represented by the Indochinese states, Cuba, perhaps South Yemen, Angola and Mozambique, and at a slight remove from the Third World by China, North Korea, Mongolia, and Albania. Leaders of these states are tough-minded authoritarians backed in most cases by small, highly disciplined Communist parties. There is no legitimate opposition; political imprisonment is common. In theory Communist leaders seek to benefit the people, but in practice increasing national and party power takes priority over individual and public welfare. One advantage of communism is that Communist leaders benefit because poor Communist nations can claim military and economic aid from wealthier Communist states. By justifying absolute government control and ruthlessness, communism can create great capital savings that could allow relatively rapid economic growth. The poor may also benefit from the redistribution of wealth and services from the upper and middle classes. These gains are accompanied by the oppression of everyone, the destruction of many, and new inequalities of power and wealth. Military forces in these states tend to be more powerful than those of their less organized neighbors. Thus, except where Soviet troops are in occupation, communism may be selected as a shortcut to national power and recognition.

One-party socialist states imitate many Communist methods but vary significantly from the model. Tanzania, Libya, Algeria, Iraq, and Burma are good examples. Party organizations are generally less developed and

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reliable—several states in this group are, in fact, more accurately described as coming under the rule of the military than of the single party.

Ideology in one-party socialist states is much less encompassing than in Communist states. Such states generally offer greater freedom of thought outside of the specific political sphere. One-party socialist states remain very far from allowing open discussion of political policy, and most hold large numbers of political prisoners. Yet they are more sensitive to international public opinion on human rights than Communist states. They are also relatively inefficient—one-party socialist states do not make the trains run on time. They are less securely established: Opposition is not as ruthlessly removed, they have no automatic overseas allies, their security services are not as effective, there are fewer true believers.

Militant authoritarian states such as Iran, North Yemen, Afghanistan, Zaire, Malawi, Uganda, Chile, Uruguay, or Haiti form a more diverse grouping. They have in common domination by naked force with little supporting legitimacy, relatively weak party or ideological structures, and, generally, governmental interest in the activities of their citizens that is less than totalitarian. Some leaders in these countries simply want to stay in power and enrich themselves and their friends in the process; all claim the desire to discipline, unify, purify, develop, or otherwise improve their society. Some systems claim philosophical ties to an ethnic base, such as Zaire's "Bantu Humanism," but in general militant authoritarian governments have little in common with the past history or ancient institutions of their peoples. For example, in setting aside Iran's ruling dynasty in the 1920's, the present Shah's father wished to copy the iconoclast Ataturk. Although for political reasons he then turned around and established a new dynasty, both father and son have striven to eliminate the influence of Iranian religious leaders and the landed aristocracy, and in the process have unavoidably attacked the values they represent. The military rulers of Chile and Uruguay have thought nothing of destroying the arduously established democratic traditions that had become the proudest part of their national histories. The people as a whole gain very little from systems of this kind. Some states in this group have developed rapidly, but this is probably unrelated to the political system. Iranian economic development, for example, has been almost entirely the result of a fortunate supply of oil. In neighboring Afghanistan a similar regime achieved little more than Haiti's dismal performance.

The traditional authoritarian states such as Saudi Arabia try to preserve ancient traditions, which in the case of Saudi Arabia includes unquestioning obedience and great inequalities along class and sexual lines. As in the militant authoritarian states, superior economic performance is due to oil or other windfall profits: economic development lags in traditional states such as Bhutan or Nepal. Few Third World states still have the choice of emulating the traditional states.

The modified authoritarian states allow more freedom than the militant states. This group includes Brazil, Egypt, Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia

(at least until recently), Malaysia, Morocco, and Kenya, and, toward the left, Singapore, Mexico, and possibly Nigeria. Such states permit considerable diversity of public expression and even challenges to the regime, but challenges are kept within circumscribed limits. These modified authoritarian states have a better economic performance than the foregoing groups, with the possible exception of the Communist. In preserving a higher level of political and civil rights, these states have not lost out economically. On the other hand a recent symposium in *Asian Survey* (April, 1978) on the recent performance of South Korea, the Philippines, and India under "emergency regimes" concludes that infringements of these rights to tighten social discipline cannot be shown to have aided economic development or distribution.

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The final alternative available to the Third World is liberal, pluralist democracy, represented by India, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea, Gambia, Botswana, Venezuela, Costa Rica, and, marginally, Colombia, Turkey, Spain, and Portugal. Liberal democracies also thrive in several Caribbean states, as well as Surinam—and in islands of the South Pacific, especially Fiji. These states treat their people as adult citizens able to influence the affairs of the nation. Opponents of the government develop political alternatives fully and publicly and organize effective campaigns for office. Given the preindependence experience and the resources and traditions common to each cultural area, the economic performance of liberal democracies in the Third World stands up well with that of the other models we have considered. The authoritarian political systems of Burma, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Nepal have not resulted in economic performance superior to that of democratic India or Sri Lanka. The argument that oppression helps the poor is equally unprovable in Latin America and Africa. As development anthropologist Michael Horowitz says: "The lot of the Voltaic poor is not worsening because the Ouagadougou government is edging from military control to civilian politics. Can one say that the Gambian or Botswana poor are hungrier or more illiterate than they would be if their governments were to abandon parliamentary processes?" Except for the traditional autocracies, the liberal democracies of the Third World are more likely than alternative systems to preserve traditional values. The political

models that dominate the world today are all based on Western ideas, but the liberal democracies are the most likely to employ these ideas in defense of their national heritages.

The need for authoritarian rule to prevent anarchy has often been used to justify the subversion of democracies. "Anarchy" may mean terrorism, warring factions, runaway inflation, inability to govern, or the threat of Communist takeover. South Korea, Brazil, the Philippines, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, Afghanistan, and Thailand are just a few of the states that have been "saved from democracy" by authoritarian, usually military, government.

There are times when liberties must be sacrificed in the interests of order. However, close examination of actual cases of authoritarian intervention to save the state raises three questions: Were authoritarian solutions really called for in these cases? Did the imposed authoritarian state prevent anarchy? And, if military or authoritarian order was necessary, in what manner and for how long was the intervention legitimate?

Many authoritarian interventions are largely pretexts to cover a desire for power. For example, in 1973 Prince Daud was able with the support of the Afghan army to renounce the constitution, disband parliament, and declare himself ruler. Democracy had failed to solve the nation's problems, he stated, and the country was on the verge of anarchy. Surely Afghanistan had one of the world's weakest democratic systems. And yet what was the "failure"? The incumbent prime minister was popular and economic conditions were improving after some dismal years. There was an unresolved constitutional problem concerning upcoming elections, but it certainly did not call for a drastic intervention. More critical reasons for the move to crush nascent democratic potentials were elite fears of rigorous collection of back taxes and apprehensions about increasing involvement in public affairs by the uneducated populace, together with the belief that defense and foreign policy should be strengthened at a time when neighboring Pakistan was in convulsion.

Although the democratic strengths of the two societies were far different, the reasons for President Marcos's gradual destruction of democratic liberties in the Philippines in the early 1970's appear equally questionable. Problems of disorder were not fundamentally different from those that had been successfully faced within the democratic framework by previous presidents. The fact that some of Marcos's first actions under martial law were to imprison respected journalists and his most popular political opponents casts grave doubts on his good faith.

The dangers of anarchy or revolution that serve as the justification of authoritarian intervention often are not overcome by the interventions. Authoritarian intervention failed in Afghanistan when Prince Daud was overthrown by leftists in 1978. Countries such as Bolivia and Burma have been plagued by continuing disorder after military takeovers. On the other hand military regimes

in Argentina, Brazil, and Uganda have been accompanied by lawlessness stemming from the security services themselves. "Disappearances" have become more characteristic of such regimes than of the regimes of their predecessors. There is no human rights gain in a rule of law that does not apply to the military and police forces or their private allies.

Entrenching a repressive tyranny that will undo the democratic foundations of previous generations, as was the case in Chile and Uruguay, and was attempted in Greece, is hardly a necessary sacrifice of liberty on behalf of order, whatever anarchic conditions may have existed at the time of military takeover in those countries. More acceptable, limited authoritarian interventions are suggested by the recent history of Turkey. In 1960-61, and to a lesser extent in 1971-72, the Turkish military assumed the role of defender of the constitution. Its interventions were short and effective. Power was quickly returned to the politicians, including former antagonists of the military. Turkey remains a tough society with many human rights problems, but the severer repressions of authoritarian states have generally been avoided. Perhaps with similar attitudes the military in Colombia has served to protect a system under great stress. Evidently, military leaders in a number of African countries and perhaps Thailand aspire to the Turkish model of disrupting the people's democratic rights only insofar as it is required by the problems of order.

Military intervention is seldom as necessary as the military thinks. Even if we accept the argument that anarchy may at times be avoided only by the unconstitutional imposition of order, this does not justify the long-term tyrannies that have infected the world in the last few years on the pretext of reestablishing order. It may be necessary to save countries for democracy, but never from democracy.

The pluralist democracies appear on examination to preserve freedoms and traditional values while losing little in efficiency. In the face of anarchy or other severe threats they can be preserved by the use of short and purposeful martial law administrations. Liberal democracies offer a share in power, and they offer every group and individual a chance to increase that share through promoting group or individual ideas and interests. One of the Third World's leading advocates of democracy, B.P. Koirala, the former prime minister of Nepal, in a recent interview in *Worldview* (January-February, 1978) made two important points. First, democracy and development can be seen as complementary. Meaningful development whose priority is improving the economic well-being of the people, rather than improving the productive capacity of the state, depends upon the people being able to determine the process and goals of development through regular democratic consultations. Second, Koirala pointed out that the idea that the poor of the Third World should be made to choose between poverty and democracy is insulting. (Could we ask welfare recipients in America to choose between money and the right to vote?)

Koirala's thinking is similar to that reflected in a statement by the Janata party before the 1977 elections in India:

History is replete with instances when those who conspire against the rights of people attempt to undermine freedom by portraying it as a luxury. They conceal the fact that fundamental freedoms are weapons that the poor need to fight tyranny. Bread cannot be juxtaposed with liberty. The two are inseparable.

Peter Berger in *Pyramids of Sacrifice* emphasizes the burden placed on the poor for the sake of the future in so many societies today. On both the Right and the Left, in Brazil as well as in China, the common people are coerced by the government into setting aside their personal economic and social priorities. Not only is present consumption by the masses deferred for the sake of rapid economic progress, but the demands of economic growth are used as an excuse for attacking religious, cultural, and personal interests.

Imperfect though it is, the only political system that comes even close to matching government policy to these wants is the liberal democratic, for it alone allows expression to the values of the people as they see them.

Most people in most places are not involved in politics, or their involvement is spasmodic. Participation in uncoerced democracies is aroused by issues close to the heart of very particular groups, defined by ethnic, religious, caste, or other ties. Often they are issues that are not conventionally political at all but have been forced by events into this arena. These waves of involvement illustrate to average citizens and their leaders who is the ultimate sovereign, and this realization has a salutary affect on both.

We should support liberal democracy in the Third World only if the people of the Third World want it. Threats to democracy have been rejected recently in India and Sri Lanka, but the inability of people to defend democracy in many newly independent states, or in states such as Chile, Thailand, Indonesia, or Nigeria, may suggest that people in most underdeveloped countries really do not care about political and civil freedoms. The frequent destruction of democracy in the Third World by militants or the military is often cited against democracy, as though the success of a military coup or terrorist movement were equivalent to success at the polls. However, the inability of the people to defend democracy in the Third World is not necessarily due to their preference for nondemocratic alternatives.

First, it is easy to forget that small groups of armed and dedicated men can always rule a society. Recent experience in South Vietnam offers a good example. Successive Saigon regimes never enjoyed wide public support. Repeated polls also suggest that the Communists never had the support of more than 10 to 15 per cent of the population, and postwar actions indicate that Hanoi was quite aware of this. In many Third World countries the military has with a tiny minority taken over the society. People are simply not organized to resist this kind of imposition. It is doubtful that the

population as a whole would be able to resist military or other violent takeovers even in advanced industrialized societies. Military takeovers are infrequent there, primarily because potential military conspirators cannot find sufficient support within the services. It was military leaders that caused the return to democracy in Portugal, and it was loss of nerve among antidemocratic military forces that led to the return of democracy in Greece. In India a miscalculation by the government allowed democracy to return. In each case there was very little proof that democracy was a majority interest *before* the chance came to reestablish democracy, but there was an irresistible outpouring of support for democracy once the chance became apparent. No one now doubts that in these societies the people wanted freedom—but there is considerable doubt that they would have had a chance of attaining it on their own.

Second, the people of Third World societies that fail to maintain democracy are less deeply imbued with democratic ideals than people in the Western democracies. Relative lack of democratic culture affects leaders by making them more willing to rule without democratic support and affects masses by making them more willing to accept tyranny because their lives have led them to expect tyranny. This expectation comes in part from the fact that what imperfect democracy they have known usually has been relatively tyrannous.

Nevertheless, liberal democracy is valued by the poor of many Third World nations, even if they could not necessarily describe it in greater detail than the word "freedom." Were Marcos overthrown tomorrow there would be a vast outpouring of support for liberal democracy among all classes, a result we have seen already in nation after nation when the opportunity arose to restore democracy.

The record of the democracies in the distribution of the national product demonstrates that people need not choose between freedom and equality. Although there is a great deal of variation from country to country, studies indicate that democracies attain a degree of economic equality about equal to that of competing models. Norway, China, Taiwan, and Tanzania appear among the more egalitarian states in the world. Immature or imperfect democracies in which economic power is easily translated into political power, with the result that the poor have a relatively ineffective vote, often allow large inequalities. Mature democracies, such as those in Scandinavia, are probably economically the most egalitarian of all systems. When all classes take a consistent interest in politics, injustice to the majority cannot long be maintained.

But does liberal democracy fit the cultures of Third World peoples? If we focus on the particular institutions of Western European and American governments, liberal democracy must be considered an exotic import for many countries. But if we focus on the principles of liberal democracy, then it may be regarded as a distillation of ancient human experience that can be adopted by almost any people to modern

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conditions. Societies at the band and village level varied between those ruled by adults as a group and those ruled autocratically by an individual. As societies grew in size and complexity, power fell into the hands of individuals or small élites. The people could no longer rule directly, and there were no available institutions that would allow them to rule through representatives. Thus most peoples became inured to tyranny tempered by tradition on the national scale. But national governments in the past generally did little more than provide defense and exact a modest compensation. The great mass of people strove rather successfully to keep their national governments at a distance while the local communities managed their own affairs.

There are very few Third World peoples that have traditional experience of national government that is applicable to contemporary problems. Today governments claim the right to intervene everywhere, to run the village as well as collect their dues, to push aside traditional leaders and practices. Those peoples that do have traditions of periods of centralized government, such as the Mongolians, Zulu, Peruvians, or Chinese, do not cherish these periods as offering administrative models, although they may offer inspiration similar to that of the Napoleonic age for the French. The national experience of most peoples suggests that increased village democracy might be popular almost everywhere, as might a national political system that emulates village democracy as closely as possible. The modern form of this system is liberal democracy.

People everywhere want “freedom,” but many opinion leaders are concerned that confining the meaning of freedom to political and civil freedoms denies other values that have also been labeled freedom and which seem necessary for a high quality of life. They would place freedom from want, fear, and sickness among the essential freedoms. This rhetoric places a heavy and unnecessary load on the otherwise fairly clear concept of freedom. Most people do not understand freedom to include the provision of services. “Let my people go” was not a call for more food or medical care.

Death resulting from poor medical service is not a denial of freedom unless there was a deliberate deprivation. Infant mortality rates vary greatly among nations, but people in poor nations with high rates do not see this

as a lack of freedom. These rates are seen as a fact of life, just as they were accepted as a fact of life by all societies in the nineteenth century. Neither the poor of India nor the English middle class of the nineteenth century were less free because of high infant mortality rates. People want to obtain the vote to improve the quality of their life as they see it.

To make pluralist democracy meaningful the majority must be presented with the widest range of alternatives among which to choose. Thus, for maximum freedom a society must have both political rights—the rights of the majority—and civil liberties—the rights of individuals to expression and organization that goes against the majority of the moment.

Democracy is not desired by people everywhere because of a popular desire to participate in marches and electoral charades as in the “peoples democracies.” Democracy is popular because it enhances the ability of people to affect what society does and thus to enhance the freedom of the largest number.

People in the Third World may be poor and ignorant and their leaders woefully short of time. Democracy often functions erratically in underdeveloped countries. A small élite group might more effectively move their societies into the twentieth century. Perhaps they could consult the people in the best fashion of urban planners, overriding popular wishes only when science and rationality seemed to dictate. But as former Prime Minister Koirala points out, even if such were theoretically the ideal system,

who is to decide who will be that authority who will have dictatorial power to develop? Not professors from Harvard University. They are not going to select them. It will be some man riding on a white charger who will say “I am destined to develop the country, and the powers must belong to me.”

Traditional political freedoms appear to be critical human rights for all peoples. On balance they inhibit economic development no more than their alternatives, especially if we view development from the standpoint of popular priorities. In no society need these rights be denied to avoid anarchy. Political rights and civil liberties provide a spiritual basis for giving value to the preferences of individual human beings that is simply not provided by the authoritarian and totalitarian alternatives to freedom.