

3.2.2.3.2.61 Wrong perceptions about democracy

Democracy does not equate freedom, not political freedom and not personal freedom.

Democracy just describes a procedure by which a government is constituted: by a more or less direct vote of a large number of people. The government thus constituted may or may not install or preserve a high degree of personal freedom for its people.

Hitler was elected in a democratic process, and Iran has democracy. In either case, it neither means that the elected government allowed or allows a high degree of personal freedom, nor that, for that matter, it has been or is beneficial for those who have elected it.

In most countries of the world, the average voter is not capable of comprehending what political powers will do him good. And anyway, most people would not vote for political powers that would do them good, even if they could identify them. Rather, people vote for political powers of which they believe that they will be even worse for those with whom they have scores to settle than they will be for themselves.

It's the most basic recipe of populism: play the resentments of a large number of rather uneducated people, and they will vote for you. This is the appeal of campaigning on a wave of hatred towards minorities (as Hitler did in Germany). It's also the appeal of campaigning on a wave of envy towards a country's upper classes, or on a wave of jealousy towards those who are in a position to enjoy life better than the average voter.

The implementation of direct-vote democracy in poor Third World countries often leads to chaos, and sometimes to failed states and civil war. There seldom is legislative efficiency, but if there are legislative stalemates, the most likely laws to be passed anyway are those that target minorities, restrict personal freedom, and satisfy the envy of a large number of people.

Anti-sexual legislation is an example. When the majority of poor people have the say, then the possibly libertine lifestyle of richer people will be criminalized not so much because it would contradict the religion of the land, but because those who can't have it themselves are in no mood to grant it to others. A good number of people who cannot enjoy a libertine lifestyle may even turn religious not because of a genuine conviction of the truth of a religion but because certain religions provide a natural home for those who want the worst for those who can enjoy what they themselves can't. Direct elections may work in the US where the ethnic origins of the voting population are so diverse and melted together in such a degree that these origins become irrelevant. Compared to countries especially in Africa and Asia, there are, in the US, few regional or ethnic loyalties. Californians will not necessarily vote for Californians, and Americans of German origin won't vote for candidates of German origin, but Hutus will definitely vote for Hutus and Tamils for Tamils. There is no crossing of ethnic lines. Furthermore, in Iraq Shiites vote for Shiites and Sunnis for Sunnis. Anyway you turn it in such countries, direct democracy is a recipe for disintegration. This is the case because ethnic politicians who exploit ethnic or religious hatred will be elected, and not those who play a tune of interethnic understanding.

There are alternatives, such as indirect democracies in which rather small groups of people elect delegates who then elect either legislative and executive leaders, or, even better, who then elect again a group of delegates who elect legislative and executive leaders (three tiers).

Neighborhoods can elect delegates who elect city delegates; city delegates then elect legislative delegates, and legislative delegates elect executives. Such a system will strongly reduce the window for populism. In such a system, there is much more incentive to make everything work, and to do so by means of compromise. There is also more incentive to maintain a level of personal freedom that can be enjoyed by those who likely have the means: the delegate class (let this be many thousands; the more the better).

This form of democracy can be further sophisticated by integrating delegates from outside political parties – a system Suharto skilfully established in Indonesia to achieve stability for more than 30 years;

delegates in Suharto's Indonesia were not only from political parties but included traditional ethnic leaders and delegates from religions. Why not, in a modern country, have delegates from universities, the industry, labor unions, and environmental protection groups?

Even though the Suharto era in Indonesia was a dictatorship, and even though Suharto started out as a general, Suharto's power wasn't based on having troops. It was based on a sophisticated integration of many quarters of society. Suharto also did not end like Gaddafi.

The US has a vital interest in promoting its own brand of democracy. For it's strongly destabilizing in many parts of the world, and thus undermines the potential strength of other countries.

But the US realizes that promoting democracy just anywhere isn't in their interest. A democratically elected Islamist government in nuclear weapon-equipped Pakistan would be a nightmare, and from Algeria to Saudi Arabia , the US are better off with what there is now than with what they would get with democracy.

Large segments of the local populations of these countries are thankful. The dictatorships protect them from the potential ill effects of their own envy-based voting attitudes, and anyway, who wants to follow strict religious regulations is free to do so.

Why Democracy Is Not Freedom

Democracy Does Not Ensure Liberty