

Democracy and the g

BY HUMAYUN GAUHAR

Mao Zedong was spot on when he said that power flows from the barrel of a gun. But it is not the only thing power flows out of. Another, and the most powerful source from which power flows is the people, the people as in humanity. And since the people are 'Ashraf ul Makhlooqaat', God's best and greatest creation, He has appointed them His 'Khalifa' or Vicegerents on earth. Thus it can be argued that power that flows from them is the closest one can get to Divine sanction.

When, as happened in the Chinese Revolution of 1949, the power of the people and the power of the gun coincide, they become irresistible. That happens but rarely, but when it does, often fleetingly, it is often based on flawed hopes and misconceptions. They can only coincide when those who have come to power by virtue of the gun reflect the frustrations and aspirations of the people, have a plan to do something about it and go about implementing that plan. That then becomes the greatest form of democracy in its broadest sense, not in the narrow and incomplete sense of a ballot box exercise, which is but one of many tools that is mistakenly taken to be the ideology or creed itself. It then becomes an exercise in 'elect and be damned', regardless of whether it leads to genuine democracy or a civilian dictatorship or a dispensation in which the power elite protects the iniquitous status quo that favours only them and do only so much (or little) for the people as to keep them quiet. Thus, when the power that flows from the barrel of a gun and from the people don't coincide, and is exercised by virtue of the gun alone, it can variously be called totalitarianism, dictatorship, benign dictatorship, quasi dictatorship and so forth. Conversely, when power is acquired by virtue of the ballot box alone and the people and their aspirations are forgotten along the way, it becomes that most insidious form of dictatorship called fascism.

The Reverend Jesse Jackson says that democracy cannot be foisted from top down. It can only come from bottom up. He could also have added that it has to come from within, not from without, as an evolutionary process of increasing political awareness. No one conquered Britain or the USA to bring them democracy. It came from within. He is wrong when he says that it cannot come from top down. In both countries democracy came from top down. American democracy was fashioned by its founding fathers and the seed of British democracy was sowed in 1215 in the deal between King John of England and the barons who represented the landed aristocracy. It was called the Magna Carta and was confirmed by Edward I in 1297. Its catalyst was the fear of the barons that the king was usurping all power and leaving nothing of the cake for them. This led, years later, to a parliament comprising the rapacious feudal lords who would not quit (which is about where we are today). In the end, Lieutenant General Oliver Cromwell, Commander-in-Chief of the Modern Army, using the blade of the sword and the barrel of a gun entered the Long Parliament, threw the Speaker unceremoniously off his chair, sat on it with his boots on the table, and implored the worthy 'democrats':

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"Go, in the name of God, go." The people were joyous. It's a long story, and can be read elsewhere. The point is that without the barrel of Cromwell's gun there would have been no British democracy as we know it today.

Even though the Magna Carta was a deal between king and barons, it laid the foundation of equality in law for a special section of commoners. Thus it contained the heart of democracy and was to later influence the US Bill of Rights in no small measure as it bound the King and all his "heirs, for ever" to grant "to all freemen of our kingdom" the rights and liberties contained in the Magna Carta, thus placing himself and all future English kings in the ambit of the rule of law. But don't forget that these rights were limited only to "freemen", thus consigning most of non-English humanity to the status of bondsmen, in which category straightforward slaves and the later-to-be-colonised natives of British colonies were to fall. Women, non-Christians, poor white male Christians, slaves, blacks and coloured were outside the pale of democracy. It should be remembered too that in the same vein, early US democracy reserved the right to vote only for landowning white Christian males. But they were on their way, evolving from within.

Now consider our own South Asian democracy, such as it is. When the British entered India in the form of a trading firm called the East India Company, there was no democracy there. Neither was it there in Britain, not yet. What we had was hereditary monarchy, just as they did, except that we Muslims have never had crown princes and the many sons of dead kings have always fought it out amongst themselves for the throne, something akin to the law of the jungle where the fittest and craftiest survives. After full conquest in 1857, our natural political evolution stopped and the political process went underground to become a liberation movement. That too was eventually midwifed by the British. The Congress Party was established not just by Indians but by Englishmen too, and the Aga Khan set up the All India Muslim League in Dhaka. The British looked on benignly at both. It is no accident either that the top leaders of the two freedom movements (Jinnah, Gandhi, Nehru etc.) were all educated in Britain and all as lawyers. Why? For when the time came for them to quit, as the British well knew it must, they would have ensured that as far as possible it would be in gentlemanly fashion, legally

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and constitutionally, across the negotiating table.

And so it was. Thus it is no accident either that those killed during and after independence were almost exclusively Indian, while the British got away with hardly any casualties worth mentioning. Very clever. But let us not fool ourselves. A few thousand British ruled India directly for 90 years through the barrel of the gun, later helped by Indians created in their image. They left many things behind, not least of which was our penchant for the Westminster style of parliamentary democracy, which we have been trying to ape since independence with various degrees of success, or failure, depending on your vantage point. But the fact remains: throughout South Asia, the ballot box democracy that exists was given to us through the barrel of the British gun and has not evolved from within, though a number of top down dispensations have been tried and all of which have failed.

In the intervening 58 years, behind the façade of ballot box democracy, the people of South Asia have reverted to what is natural to them, hereditary rule. Thus it is that India has the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty (regardless of nationality or religion), Sri Lanka has the Bandaranayke-Kumaratunga dynasty, Bangladesh has the Zia and Mujib dynasties and Pakistan has the Bhutto-Zardari dynasty, nearly had the Jinnah and Ayub dynasties (if the former's sister and the latter's son had succeeded), not to forget the most popular Sharif dynasty. And that is where we are all trapped, while the power elite gets more powerful and rich and the poor move either towards oblivion or revolution. The choice is theirs, but a lot depends on type and history. Thrice did they rise in Pakistan and thrice were they betrayed. Why would they rise again, except to cause anarchy?

Now look at the that mother of all democracies, the Greek city state of Athens. Greece was then a super-power and did not foist democracy on anyone, only on itself. But they had not only the gun but great philosophers too, as America had its outstanding founding fathers. Where are our philosophers? We only have generals, federal secretaries and corrupt politicians as our ideologues, with a handful of journalists and retired generals and federal secretaries who only see the light when out of power, pontificating on and on about how to successfully ape our old colonisers. When there is a electoral democracy, their cry for the army to "save the country" is the first and the loudest.

Lately, George W. Bush has also demonstrated in Afghanistan and Iraq that 'democracy' flows from the barrel of a gun. But in those countries it has also come from outside and not from the gun of an Iraqi or Afghan Cromwell. It will never work. Instead, the war on terror is eroding democracy in their own lands, Britain and America. Read America's Patriot Act and Britain's Anti-Terrorism Act to confirm that, not to mention what is going on in Guantanamo Bay. This is how fragile democracy is, and that is why it has to be nurtured meticulously and selflessly.

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