Playing at democracy

OP-ED

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IN CALCUTTA, WHEN SOME younger kid came along and insisted on joining the game my friends were playing, we would let the new kid in, but only after whispering into each other's ears the words, *elé belé*. An *elé belé* is a player who thinks he is participating but, in truth, is merely going through the motions. Everybody knew that a goal scored by him was not a real goal.

As a child, mastering the cruel art of *elé belé* was important. When a new kid arrived, accompanied by a doting mother, we could convey to one another with a mere glance that the kid would be an *elé belé*.

The technique of *elé belé* also thrives in the adult world. All of us can recall collective decision-making situations — a selection committee, a team for drafting rules — where some members were *elé belés*. All of us have been *elé belés* at one time or another, though we may not be aware of it.

What's true of children and adults is also true of international institutions. Indeed, organisations that are officially committed to involving all nations in their decision making are often controlled by small groups of powerful nations, while others merely go through the motions of participation. The World Trade Organization (WTO), supposedly run on the principle of one country one vote, actually has its agenda selected behind the stage by a small group of nations.

It is now standard practice for international organisations publishing a report to involve all the 'stakeholders' and to reflect their opinions. So the evolving report is usually put up on a Web site and suggestions are invited from one and all — NGOs, trade unions, and other organisations of civil society. This promotes a sense of participation, but as a friend, seasoned in such matters, informed me, the key in the end is to ignore all the comments received and to write up the report as if there were no Web site and no participation.

Increasingly, free expression of opinion does not influence or restrain how government behaves. Consider the United States. People expressed their opinion freely — in newspapers, on television, in Internet chat rooms — concerning George Bush's planned war on Iraq. Never before was there so much opposition to a war *before* it occurred. Yet the invasion went ahead. The same holds true for Britain and Australia, where public opposition to war counted for naught.

Part of what happened — or, rather what didn't happen — is admirable: almost no effort was made to muzzle criticism of the government, as happens in China and scores of dictatorial countries. But the world's great democracies — the US, India, the UK, and others — are increasingly adept at not allowing freely expressed opinions to constrain what the government does. The current war in Iraq is perhaps the strongest proof of this.

Leaving aside the immorality of this war — and immoral it is — I wish to draw attention to this increasing ability and inclination of democracies to 'deal' with (meaning neutralise) public opinion. They have embraced the *elé belé* strategy: let people *believe* that their opinion counts, that they are participating in their nation's decision making, while keeping them out of the real game.

As democracies mature they become ever more practiced at managing opinion, and in many cases, at shaping opinion. Every time Hans Blix commented on the UN inspections of Iraq that he was conducting, members of the Bush administration would paraphrase what Blix said. The paraphrasing would subtly change Blix's comments to suit America's case for war. By repeating the altered comments, it was hoped, mass opinion would shift in favour of the war.

Overthrowing a totalitarian regime and organising elections may be hard, but the harder task is to go from voting to establishing a true democracy. For people accustomed to living in a totalitarian state, learn what participation means is not easy. Hence the popular belief that democracies, like wine, improve with age.

While this may be true, there is a downside to maturity. Just as citizens in a democracy continuously learn to participate, democratic governments continuously learn how to get their way despite the participation.

It is no use denying that civic participation too often serves only to legitimise a sham. We must recognise and confront this problem to prevent established democracies from atrophying and to help new democracies become more effective. For it is not only morally wrong to leave nations and communities feeling marginalised and without voice; it is a recipe for frustration, rage, and terrorism. —*DT-PS*

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