Democracy is not working

Democracy
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BY MARTIN JACQUES

However implausibly, President Bush continues to reiterate his commitment to the early introduction of democracy in Iraq. Indeed, the idea of democratic reform in the Arab world has been central to the Anglo-American position on Iraq. There should be nothing surprising in that.

Democracy has become the universal calling card of the west, the mantra that is chanted at every country that falls short (when politically convenient, of course), the ubiquitous solution to the problems of countries that are not democratic.

The boast about democracy is largely a product of the last half-century, following the defeat of fascism. Before that, a large slice of Europe remained mired in dictatorship, often of an extremely brutal and distasteful kind.

The idea of democracy as a western virtue was blooded during the cold-war struggle against communism, though its use remained highly selective: those many dictatorships that sided with the west were happily awarded membership of the "free world"; "freedom" took precedence over democracy, regimes as inimical to democracy as apartheid South Africa, Diem's South Vietnam and Franco's Spain were welcomed into the fold.

Following the collapse of communism, however, "free markets and democracy" became for the first time - at least in principle - the universal prescription for each and every country.

Democracy is viewed by the west in a strangely a-historical way. It is seen as eternal and unchanging, neither historically nor culturally specific, but a kind of universal truth. But, of course, nothing is eternal. The western model of democracy, like everything else, is a distinct phase in history, which depends upon certain conditions for its existence. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it should not be assumed that it is of universal application, nor that it will always exist.

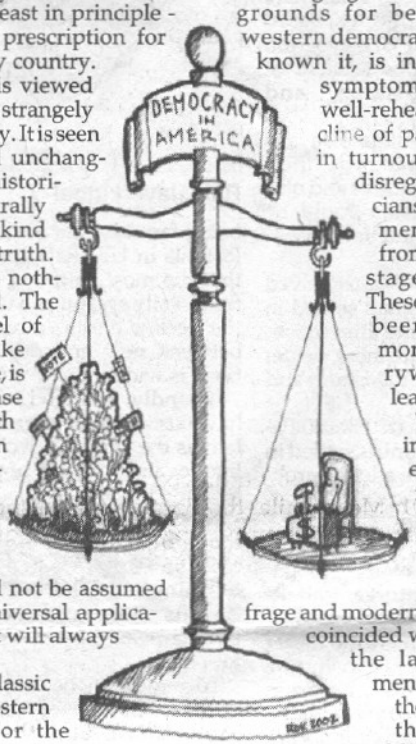
Russia is a classic test of the western shibboleth. For the west, the simple answer rule, of indigenous democratic soil; and far greater ethnic diversity.

The west remains oblivious to the profound difficulties presented by ethnic diversity. As Amy Chua points out in World on Fire, democracy is far from a sufficient condition for benign governance in the kind of multiracial societies that are common in Africa and Asia.

Democracy, the politics of the majority, allows the majority ethnic group to govern, potentially without constraint. Multi-ethnic societies, like Malaysia or Nigeria, require, for their stability, a racial consensus: democracy, resting on majorities and minorities, is deaf to this problem.

Moreover, democracy works very differently in different cultures. In Japan, the Liberal Democrats have formed every government, apart from a brief interruption, since democracy was introduced more than 50 years ago. The political arguments that count take place between unelected factions of the governing party rather than between elected parties. The Japanese model of democracy - or the Korean or Taiwanese - may have the same trappings as western democracy, but there the similarities largely end.

If it is mistaken to regard western democracy as a universal abstraction that is equally applicable across the world, it is also wrong to see it as frozen and unchanging. Indeed, there are grounds for believing that western democracy, as we have known it, is in decline. The symptoms have been well-rehearsed: the decline of parties, the fall in turnout, a growing disregard for politicians, the displacement of politics from the centre-stage of society. These trends have been observable more or less everywhere for at least 15 years.



The underlying reasons are even more disturbing than the symptoms. The emergence of mass suffrage and modern party politics coincided with the rise of the labour movement, which drove the extension of the vote and obliged political

test of the western shibboleth. For the west, the simple answer to Russia's ills after the collapse of communism was a combination of the free market and democracy.

The free market never happened; worse, the attempt to engineer it under Yeltsin produced, with western blessing, the theft of Russia's most valuable natural resources by its leader's cronies. The country is paying a terrible price for following western advice. Meanwhile, democracy has been shaped and constrained by the personal power of Putin, a reminder of the country's long, despotic past. The lessons? History and culture leave an indelible imprint on the nature of any democracy; the market similarly.

The west, in its enthusiasm for democracy, suffers from historical amnesia. Britain has only enjoyed universal suffrage for about 80 years, by which time it was already highly industrialised. For many west European countries it was even later.

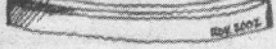
The great majority of countries that have experienced economic takeoff, including Britain, have done so under forms of authoritarian rule. The most successful recent examples of takeoff, those in east Asia, were similarly achieved under authoritarianism: the legitimacy of these regimes has depended on economic growth rather than the ballot box.

Democracy, historical experience suggests, is not that well-suited to achieving the conditions necessary for economic takeoff. Given that democracy is now the universal western prescription for developing countries, this is rather ironic.

It does not mean, of course, that authoritarian rule is necessarily good at achieving takeoff: the Latin American model has proved extremely poor, the East Asian very effective. Nor does it mean that democracy can't deliver economic takeoff: India is a case in point. Clearly, though, democracy is not a universal formula for economic success, irrespective of a society's state of development.

The west is the traditional home of democracy. The fact that western countries share various, usually unspoken characteristics, however, is often ignored. They were the first to industrialise. They colonised a majority of the world, invariably denying their colonies democracy.

They were overwhelmingly ethnically homogeneous. Developing countries, for the most part, have faced the opposite circumstances: takeoff in the context of an economically dominant west; the absence, in the context of colonial



the extension of the vote and obliged political parties to engage in popular mobilisation. The rise of the modern labour movement, moreover, provided societies with real choices: instead of the logic of the market, it offered a different philosophy and a different kind of society.

The decline of traditional social-democratic parties, as illustrated by New Labour, has meant the erosion of choice, at least in any profound sense of the term. The result is that voting has often become less meaningful. Politics has moved on to singular ground: that of the market.

The influence of the market is manifest in multiple ways. The funding of parties now moves solely to its rhythm: big business and the rich are as important to New Labour as they are to the Conservatives.

The same interests fund, and therefore influence, the parties. Big money calls the tune. Nowhere is this truer than in American politics, which has become a plutocracy mediated by democracy, rather than the reverse. As the media has displaced traditional forms of discourse and mobilisation, ownership of the media has become increasingly important in the determination of political choices and electoral results.

The most dangerous example is in Italy, where Silvio Berlusconi's ownership of the bulk of the private media has enabled him to transform Italian democracy into something verging on a mediaocracy, leaving politics and the state besieged by his immense personal power and wealth.

Perhaps these developments point to a deeper problem incipient in western democracies. Far from the free market and democracy enjoying the kind of harmonious relationship beloved of western propaganda, democracy grew in fact as a constraint on the market, holding it at bay and enabling a pluralism of values and imperatives.

What happens when this healthy tension becomes a dangerous imbalance, in which the market is dominant and consumerism is established as the overriding ethos of society, permeating politics just as it has invaded every other nook and cranny of society? Democracy comes under siege. In Italy it is already gasping for breath. In the US it is deeply and increasingly flawed.

Democracy is neither a platitude nor an eternal verity - either for the world or for the west.

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