

Democracies of the East and the West

By Iqra Anugrah

The export of democracy is no doubt one of the most important items on the Western foreign policy agenda. Nevertheless, the effort seems to bring more failures than successes. Why is that?

AROUND the world, our generation is witnessing the three Ds: deregulation, decentralisation and, ultimately, democratisation. The export of democracy is no doubt one of the most important items on the Western foreign policy agenda. Nevertheless, the effort seems to bring more failures than successes. Why is that?

To the Western mind, liberty and democracy are two sides of the same coin. Without liberty, there can be no democracy, and vice versa. However, in non-Western societies, this is not always true. Just pick an Asian country at random and we find anomalies in democratic practice by the Western point of view. News commentator Fareed Zakaria calls this phenomenon "illiberal democracy", a mixture of authoritarian and conservative practices under the framework of electoral, democratic politics. That's why strong guys remain powerful in some countries, such as Vladimir Putin in Russia and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore.

The Islamic world provides many examples of these illiberal practices. Go to Egypt and you'll see how President Hosni Mubarak and his comrades put so much

effort in getting rid of the Muslim Brotherhood. Go to Indonesia and you'll see how corruption is still rampant and how political Islam and local vigilantes work together in harmony to form the so-called unholy alliance. From those examples, there is one common similarity: the lack or absence of some aspects of civil and political liberty. Elections and change of political leadership may take place, but the ones who take governmental positions

after the breakdown of Yugoslavia. Extreme nationalists, filled with hatred toward one other, got elected in Serbia, which later tried to wipe out the Kosovar Albanian population. In newly democratised Indonesia, we see how Islamic fundamentalist groups misuse the principle of free speech in a democratic society, attacking dissenting opinions while trying to promote an intolerant agenda toward "the other". Responding to this phenomenon,

Instead of fixing the economy, ensuring the rule of law and protecting minorities, they straightaway jump to organising elections. It is true that an election is probably the most visible indicator of a democratic society, but most of us don't want to see the electoral process end up in a "mobocracy" due to the absence of supportive cultural values for democracy. We see the answer to this problem in the Western philosophy of Tocqueville and

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are far from democratic in attitude. Populist autocrats use the democratic mechanism to win political positions and legitimacy from the people.

In reality, they aren't democrats at all. Once they get into power, they abuse it, implement illiberal policies and, even worse, try to get rid of their adversaries. This is exactly what happened

we know that the existence of liberty is the necessary element for democracy. In Zakaria's words, without constitutional liberalism, the rule of law, protection of property and respect for others, it is difficult to build a fully functioning democracy. Western policymakers often forget that to build a democratic society, we need more than an election.

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Machiavelli: Unregulated democracy will undermine people's liberty. Under republican principles, citizens are free when they follow the law. If there is no law, there will be no liberty. Liberal democracy requires the active participation of law-abiding citizens in the political process. This translates not only into rule of the majority but also into respect toward minorities.

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Another important aspect in sustaining democratic politics is justice. This is what Noam Chomsky means when he criticises the gap between rich and poor citizens in the United States. In Chomskian terms, the economic structure is not democratic.

John Rawls also gives the same argument, saying that when certain rules and regulations are not in the line with the public perception of justice values, they should not be called regulations. The Chomskian and Rawlsian mantra of justice provides the solution to how democratic society should work. When economic disparity widens, the state should be prepared to do something about it. Thus, in order to "export" and implement democracy, elections and parties alone won't do. We need effective and efficient institutions, sound public policy, fair laws and regulations, and, above all, a culture of liberty and justice. In the context of non-Western societies, that's why it is important to have liberty and equality before democracy. Radical deregulation and decentralisation might not be the best answer for transforming society. That does not mean the three Ds should be discouraged, but that the much wiser option is to implement a gradual-type of political reform. Western decision makers should take this principle to heart. The failure of Western ways in the Middle East is a clear example of ill-preparation for the democratisation project. Values come first, followed by structures. **COURTESY THE JAPAN TIMES**

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