

Democracy's Romantic Alternative

By Herbert London

From Pharaoh's oppression of the Jews to today's dictators, each generation is obliged to fight for freedom and, in our case, understand the relationship between democracy and freedom.

At the moment democracy has enthusiastic advocates, those I call positivists, who embrace democratization as a universal policy and skeptics, who contend democratization is an unrealistic policy goal since so many across the globe do not understand its underlying principles or have the civil institutions for its realization.

My own position is somewhere between the two archetypes; I guess I'm a "positive skeptic."

There is no question in my mind that in a platonic sense culture trumps politics. As a consequence, some nations because of their culture are not predisposed to embrace democracy. For example, is there a cultural disposition for democracy among jihadists intent on violent acts? And are there times when non-democratic regimes, even military governments, are to be preferred to religious dominated democracies?

Suppose, *in arguendo*, that a party of jihadists intent on using democracy to create theocracy is opposed by a military junta with no interest in democratic institutions. Which one is to be preferred? Moreover, as conditions in the developing world evolve, this theoretical case has practical implications. This scenario is far more likely to emerge than democratic parties opposing totalitarians.

The problem associated with democracy's appeal or lack thereof in the Middle East and perhaps elsewhere, is that it is often confused with elections which are only one dimension of democracy. And in this region, as the election in the Palestinian territory indicated, the ballot box has become a tool of authoritarian leaders to claim legitimacy. As a consequence, democracy has lost some of its luster. Rather than serve as a barometer of progress many now regard it as a "technique for misleading people." One scholar at the University of Algiers, Abdel Nasser Djabi, said, "There is a real danger this may lead to the rejection of concepts of democracy."

Electoral politics does get to the nub of an important issue. The technical machinery of democracy such as elections is not enough. As I see it, neither are democracy's critical institutions – important as they are. The rule of law, a respect for private property, individual rights and free markets are a necessary, but insufficient justification for democracy.

For young, largely uneducated people in much of the developing world jihadism offers romance, adventure and a challenge to the status-quo. It is not unlike the misguided dupes who assumed Che Guevara and Castro could provide a secular nirvana.

What democracy can offer is precisely what many seek. Unfortunately what tends to be emphasized are democracy's instrumentalities and processes shorn of its spirit and messianism.

Democracy is in large part a political religion. Abraham Lincoln intentionally employed biblical allusions in drafting the Gettysburg Address. As I see it, we should recall the mystical side of democracy that positivists usually overlook. Democracy is, after all, the "shining city on the hill" or the "new Jerusalem" or the "birthplace of freedom" or "a rendezvous with destiny." President Reagan referred to a "divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage."

While democracy is filled with romantic allusions, its advocates intentionally avoid this sentiment fearing – I think – the romanticism that inspired totalitarian impulses such as Nazism. But in overlooking the spiritual side of democracy, one negates its essential appeal.

As I see it, the human heart yearns for meaning in an often chaotic world, meaning that provides some clarity for the formlessness of life and the vicissitudes of quotidian struggles. Surely totalistic movements such as radical expression of Islam can also provide meaning, but that is the life of violence, sanguinity and destruction that ultimately devours its followers.

Hence I contend that democracy should attempt to capture emotions by being a civic religion of hope, liberation, and human fulfillment, conditions that accompany the spiritual side of democracy. What should be emphasized, to the extent public diplomacy organs can do so, is a culture of democracy based romance and the spiritual dimensions of this form of government.

The hope for mankind, the bright light of freedom which democracy offers, is ultimately far more compelling than the arguments for free elections or parliamentary procedures. A “shining city on the hill” is a vision that grasps human desire and aspiration and, in time, might entice those who assume totalistic options are the only ones that provide romantic experience.