

The universals of democracy and despotism

When we talk about Freedom and democracy we mean the whole shebang: free and fair elections, rule of law, independent judiciaries and of course respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. We here believe these are universal. As do most countries in theory in their constitutions.

Unfortunately, ever since the beginning of the Cold War and earlier, countries violating these fundamentals of freedom have disputed this universality, and argue there are cultural, civilizational or even economic specificities; that some civilizations, say the Confucian or the post-communist don't consider these values important. That some societies don't need freedom of speech or free and fair elections.

If that weren't bad enough, the apparent economic success of some authoritarian societies has added fuel to the argument.

First economy then democracy, goes the authoritarian capitalism argument, or the Pinochet Principle, curiously espoused in practice most vehemently by once communist countries that have realized that crony capitalism is indeed more enriching than crony communism. They also realize that crony capitalism can be sustained only by falsified or pseudo-elections, a secret police that squelches opposition, punishes transparency, maintains a state controlled media and manages even the internet.

I believe Francis Fukuyama was right when he said the ideological battle between liberal democracy and authoritarian communism was won. Capitalism won, democracy made a real advance. But then the authoritarians refined their technique and started winning the rematches. No one wants to be a communist, (indeed a decade before Fukuyama, one communist leader famously declared it was "glorious to get rich"). Authoritarians today, meanwhile, all claim to be democrats, they just say they are doing it their way.

Moreover, after the collapse of communist despotisms in 1989-91, too many of those we

assumed would grab at the chance to live in liberty have failed to do so.

The facts don't look good. Plagued by corruption and kleptocratic rule, it is a depressing empirical truth that most citizens of countries that escaped communist totalitarianism today remain under some kind of undemocratic rule. Indeed, of those 400 million (400 million!) people living in countries that comprised the audience of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, three quarters live today under rule rated by Freedom House as "Un-free" or "Partially free". In other words the promise of 1989-91 has soured. Many are unconvinced that democracy was the right choice, some realize as well that what the revolutions of a generation ago resulted in often was not democracy. The only free ex-communist countries today are all in the EU today or in the queue for membership in the near future.

More broadly, if we look at recurring re-lapses in liberal democracy in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia there is plenty of reason for pessimism.

This all feeds into the argument that democracy is a cultural construct. That freedom, respect for fundamental freedoms depends on your culture, your economic system, your history, etc; that democracy is not a universal but rather a peculiar special case.

The USSR always took the position that it guaranteed social not individual rights. Russia, China, Iran today repeat the argument advanced by Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, that democracy and freedom are "Western" constructs, never mind that Taiwan, Japan and South Korea have all proved this false.

II

It is of course comforting to maintain that freedom is a civilizational notion, that human rights, rule of law and free and fair elections are a Huntingtonian peculiarity of the West, not a Universal. Or, as we hear in the justifications for so-called "managed" or "sovereign" democracy, that if you lived under communist rule, democracy without the adjectival modifiers doesn't work.

The empirical data do not bear this out. To the argument that countries lived under soviet oppression cannot be democratic in a "Western" sense, or that "Managed" or "Sovereign" democracy is a better fit for the former Soviet Union, the success of the Baltic countries, Poland, the Czech republic etc, show this to be ridiculous. Indeed the most problematic cases for the "managers of democracy" are Estonia, Lithuania & Latvia, precisely because their success, be it in terms of the Freedom House Index or, as a matter of fact, their Gini Index of economic stratification directly contradict the authoritarians' arguments. Which is one reason, I suspect, why we three are treated as toxic elements. But freedom is toxic to its opposite.

III

Even more curious is that while unfree regimes maintain the civilizational or cultural unsuitability of what they call Western democracy, they themselves are all spectacularly similar as if there existed a global civilization of thuggery.

Be they ruled by a single party, a strongman, a junta or an interlocking directorate of clans from the secret services, or the mafia and petro-chemical industry, unfree societies are all characterized, in the words of Richard Sawka, by a deep distrust of competitive politics as a means to achieve rational decisions. Only the permanent regime knows what needs to be done. This, in turn, always means poor governance. It means that only those well-connected to, or indeed running the government, are enriched. Which results in lack of investment in healthcare, education, welfare and infrastructure. It means things don't work. The old joke that if the Sahara had communism there would soon be a shortage of sand is a lot less funny when we read that Venezuela under its supreme leader has, believe it or not, a coffee shortage.

As Amartya Sen has noted, in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press.

Lacking democracy's other great advantage, a mechanism for peaceful transfer of power, regimes of this sort are always inherently unstable. The rulers suffer from a permanent, gnawing fear that one day it will all be lost in the course of a shoot-out in the palace corridors, a modern form of the bloody transfers of the purple robe of the Emperors of the Roman Empire, as described by Edward Gibbon. Without a mechanism for orderly transfer, you can't really retire. Like the Pope, you are there for life, but without the legitimizing grace of God.

Which also means undemocratic regimes are inherently ruthless, because recognizing your own lawlessness, you fear the Kantian categorical imperative, that they, those you oppress, will treat you as you have treated them. Ruthlessness increases as citizens become more disenchanting; or they engage in spectacle. Is it any wonder that bread and circuses - panem et circensis - characterized the rule of the most despotic of Roman Emperors...all in the name of maintaining one's privileges and legitimizing them.

Thus, despotic regimes are inherently neurotic, paranoid and must depend on so-called power ministries to monitor and manage and manipulate if not manacle or murder the competition. Throughout history, be they the Praetorian Guard, Oprichniki, Savak, KGB, Gestapo, Stasi, Securitate or Mukhabarat, brutalization is an inherent aspect of such regimes.

Which is also why they all ultimately fail. You can't be an alpha ape forever. You get old, the instincts and responses no longer work and one day a new alpha ape -- or dog -- comes along. Or they all rise up against you.

That, however, is the long run. In the short run, i.e. in our lifetimes, I think here of the 50 years of my compatriots' lives spent under despotic Soviet occupation, this is of little solace, made even worse when those living liberty urge you not to "rock the boat" as all too many, some even here in the US, said to Solidarność and later to the Baltic countries.

In brief, then, while despotisms refuse to accept the universality of the human impulse toward liberty and democracy, they themselves are remarkably alike; the transcultural commonalities of oppressive regimes, know no Huntingtonian civilizational or ideological lines.

This is why Freedom House is important. To keep us vigilant, to stand up against complacency, the urge of people and often governments to opt in their foreign relations for that chimera known as "stability", all those Mussolinis who made the trains run on time, the Brezhnevs who always delivered the natural gas, those who said the efforts of Estonians to re-establish independence was not in their comfortable national interest.

Which brings me to the events in Northern Africa in the past year and a half. As we should have

learned already from the experience of Eastern Europe and South Africa, from Taiwan and South Korea, freedom does not spring like Athena from the head of Zeus after the despots have fled and the central square has emptied. What we usually get is Chaos. Jockeying for power among many competing factions, not all of whom we would find to be friends of freedom. A strong impulse for revenge. Criminal abuse of the loss of public order. As Peter Townsend of the Who wrote, echoing Orwell's Animal Farm, Here comes the new boss, same as the old boss.

In other words, Freedom must be built. It is not the default option. And take it from the Estonians, it takes hard work.

We can summarize the democratization experience of the post-communist world with a paraphrase from Lev Tolstoy's Anna Karenina: "All successful post-despotic countries reform alike. Each unsuccessful country finds its own excuse."

"Regime change" is not enough. That is the quick, and deceptively often, the easy part. Everything else that we consider to be the essence of creating a democracy: institution building, establishment of rule of law, development of civic society, fundamental rights and freedoms, economic growth, low corruption, has turned out to take years and a lot of effort and political capital and will. The success rate is not too good, the number of A-s is small, a few more B-s, too many C-s, a lot of F-s.

Today, after the world watched fascinated — and now increasingly watches horrified — at popular rebellions against authoritarian rule in Northern Africa and the Arab world, we in the post-communist world sensed first and foremost *deja vu*. We recognized ourselves just a generation ago. The feeling of now or never, the sense that at long last there is a chance to throw off the stagnant and thuggish rule that has held us back or been on our back for decades. An exhilaration at success, bewilderment at how weak tyranny turned out to be and how quickly the despotic clique that for decades had brutalized the citizenry collapsed, gave up or fled.

Then, however, comes the shock at having suddenly to take over responsibility for running the country. Mail needs to be delivered, healthcare managed, payrolls met. Alliances of like-minded colleagues and comrades crumble, factions emerge, politics emerges from the furtive *sub rosa* world of dissident meetings. No one any longer taps your phone, you are now in charge and now you wonder if those long-time employees working in the ministry you run are trustworthy. You pinch yourself and wonder is this real, after all this time. Yes, it is. Now put away those

childish toys, bewilderment time is over. Time to get to work.

This is where freedom so often fails. Because freedom ultimately is rather boring, in some ways even psychologically distressing. It's about work, it's about doing things yourself, without having the benefit of a despot to blame for the way things are run or the fact that the weather is bad. Which is hard, witness how in so many countries in the past month, it's suddenly the U.S, the world's default option villain.

This, I would submit is one of the causes of the failure of so many revolutions: the fear of responsibility. The failure to admit that from now on I am to blame, not the Mukhabarat, not the Great Satan, not U.S. Fruit or the KGB. This too, I fear, is a universal, the universal of failed revolutions.

Whatever the individual cause for failure, one can always find a justification. Each failed democracy finds its own excuse.. And every country where overthrowing a repressive regime does not result in a democracy is a failure.

IV

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'd like to conclude by turning to us, citizens of the world wide web of democracies, connected by optical cables, computers, but far more importantly, connected by values and the belief in the sanctity of the individual human spirit and freedom.

When it comes down to it, promotion of freedom in the world has been directed against the authoritarians' usurpation of the Westphalian argument of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries. The basis of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia was Cuius regio, eius religio, whose realm, his religion, or that the ruler determined the ideology of the country.

Up to the internet age, the Westphalian system, cuius regio, eius religio and the principle of the inviolability of borders protected regimes. A ruler could do as he wished, so long as he stayed within his own borders.

In cyberspace, these countries are faced with the import of potentially disruptive liberal aspects of open societies. The means of expression, transparency and accountability empowered by a Google search, a YouTube video, or a tweet are direct threats to a restrictive political system; the World Wide Web turns them into domestic threats to the regime. So, these regimes must rely on filtering and blocking, using sophisticated monitoring and filtering software while co-opting internet companies to identify and round up dissidents tweeting or posting on Facebook. When these methods fail, they cut off the internet wholesale, as the Mubarak regime did in Egypt.

We must choose between two paths – either we can change the nature of the internet by acceding to a Westphalian regulatory structure of internet governance, or we can change the world.

The enemies of open society prefer the former, the imposition of a regulatory system. Authoritarian regimes fear the West is attempting to orchestrate an Arab Spring or an Orange Revolution. This is why illiberal states want to develop new regulations for the internet, to put another brick in the wall (or is it another wall in the BRICs?), expanding their own Westphalian space to our common World Wide Web. This would be sovereignty on their terms, disabling the freedom and sovereignty of our citizens.

This December, in Dubai, the International Telecoms Union will hold its first world conference since 1988. The outcome of this conference, and related processes, will help determine the topography of the web for the next generation. While this conference may fall into the domain of ministries of commerce and communications, make no mistake, there will be major ramifications with calls to limit free expression as we know it on the web today.

The authoritarians will again present proposals that would undermine the current multi-stakeholder model of the internet, replacing it with a scheme that would allow them to expand their control of their own populations and economies, extending their control to undermine the freedom and openness we value today. They will claim that sovereignty in cyberspace is necessary to rein in cyber-crime and cyber-terrorism.

The ITU will come up with new regulations. The Freedom Online coalition, to which my country, as the #1 in Freedom House' rating of freedom on the internet, belongs, opposes all attempts to

limit free expression in any, but especially in digital form.

We and other defenders of internet freedom will be at the ITU meeting but the authoritarians will be there in force too. They want to encroach on the territory of the free. They want to make their values truly universal. They will want to force their authoritarianism on us. Let's not let them do it.