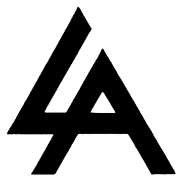


ADVANCING HUMAN RIGHTS



PHILIP VANDER ELST

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND LIBERTY

Political systems can be judged according to two criteria: (a) How *representative* is government? and (b) How much *power* does that government have over its citizens, *regardless* of whether it is representative or not? The second question is more directly relevant to the presence or absence of human rights than the first, because it touches more directly upon the rights of individuals to life, liberty and property. An undemocratic society can still be a free society since there is a difference between liberty and majority rule. The essence of freedom is personal autonomy - it involves the right to be different, to go one's own way without being harassed or persecuted. It is safeguarded by private property, limited government, the rule of law, and economic independence. It is not necessarily destroyed or prejudiced by a restricted voting franchise as long as the functions of the State are suitably restricted - and power decentralised. The opposite is also true: a democracy can be totalitarian if majority rule overrides personal and minority rights within a system of unlimited government.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

The undemocratic aristocratic government of 18th century and early 19th century England had many blemishes by modern standards, but by and large over this period, personal property rights were respected, there was freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment without trial, and a *relatively* widespread degree of religious toleration. The King's Government could be criticised and outvoted in Parliament - men like Burke and Fox could openly side with the rebellious American colonies in 1776 - and Wilberforce could campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. Similarly, in the first half of the 19th century, novelists and writers like Carlyle, Disraeli, Dickens, George Eliot - and many others - could denounce the negative aspects of the Industrial Revolution without being fined, harassed or locked up.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Ancient Athens was for a substantial part of her history ruled by a democratic assembly of all citizens, armed with absolute powers over the lives and property of its members. Minorities were frequently persecuted and individualists like Socrates put to death. Totalitarian democracy also operated in Paris and other large French cities during the Revolutionary Terror of 1793. Political demagogues, supported by bloodthirsty mobs, guillotined 2,800 people in Paris, and 14,000 in the provinces, in a matter of months - according to the French historian, André Maurois.

The early period of Nazi rule in Germany offers a more recent example of a form of totalitarian democracy - given the wide popular support Hitler enjoyed immediately before and after he became Chancellor.

Any foreign policy designed to further the cause of human rights ought to reflect the lessons of this discussion.

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

There is no conflict between human rights and national strategic interests.

The international defence of human rights is inherently bound up with the defence of the strategic and national interests of free societies. A totalitarian world of aggressive and militaristic dictatorships would not provide a safe environment for isolated Western democracies. Tyrannical ideologies and regimes not only feel threatened by societies outside their control. They also have a positive desire to absorb new centres of wealth, population and territory, because their appetite for power is inherently insatiable and craves satisfaction in the absence of sufficiently strong countervailing deterrents. The democracies of the North Atlantic Alliance have therefore good reason to concern themselves with the preservation and advancement of liberty in every continent.

Whereas human rights in their most basic and minimum form can and should be observed across political and cultural boundaries, it is not realistic to believe that Western-style representative government (i.e. one man, one vote) can be exported or implanted anywhere, at any time, regardless of history, culture and tradition. Whereas certain basic moral norms are and have always been universally acknowledged (as the Christian writer C. S. Lewis showed in his book *The Abolition of Man*) representative par-

liamentary government requires certain special conditions without which it cannot begin to flourish, let alone endure.

These conditions are, broadly: (a) a belief in tolerance, (b) a positive and widespread commitment to liberty and to an ethic of personal responsibility and self-restraint, (c) a literate population, (d) an independent judiciary, and (e) a large property-owning class plus some kind of market economy. The last condition is especially important since the possession of property creates a desire for order and stability, while a decentralised economy allows citizens to criticise the State without forfeiting their livelihood in the process.

Historically, representative government has taken centuries to develop and only exists in a minority of countries today. It took Britain, the 'Mother of Parliaments', seven hundred years to develop from a feudal monarchy into a parliamentary democracy based on universal suffrage. Other European countries have taken even longer and suffered more traumas in the process. Germany and Italy, for example, have only been relatively stable parliamentary democracies since 1945. France, to take another example, has experienced absolute monarchy, two revolutions, two empires, and five republics in the last two hundred years alone! If we take our eyes off the past and instead look around us today, we become even more aware of the fragility and rarity of free representative government.

Parliamentary democracy does not exist in China or within the Soviet bloc - and that already accounts for half the world or more. What about the rest of our planet? According to a recent study by Peter Duignan and L. H. Gann of the Hoover Institution, twenty one African states are one party dictatorships and nineteen under military rule - and all of this in a continent in which there have been twenty major wars and 40 coups since 1958.

The worldwide condition of human rights is even worse than that of representative democracy. According to Freedom House, which monitors the situation regularly, the proportion of the world's population deprived of basic freedoms has grown from 64% to 80% since 1973. Amnesty International reports have revealed, in recent years, that something like 100 countries practise imprisonment without trial, political repression and torture. As for freedom of speech and information - the picture is equally bleak. A former Chairman of the BBC, Sir Michael Swann, has pointed out that "of the 144 countries in the United Nations, only 30 or so have a broadcasting system or a Press that can be described as even remotely free."

Given, then, that most of the member states of the United Nations are despotisms of one kind or another, it is hardly surprising to learn that the UN failed to investigate 100,000 complaints against abuses of human rights between 1970 and 1976. Only allegations involving politically isolated countries like South Africa, Chile and Israel were followed up with any promptitude.

AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES PREFERABLE TO TOTALITARIAN ONES.

Given the impossibility of using foreign policy as an instrument for implanting Western-style democracy in unsuitable cultural soils, Western governments must be prepared to recognise the need for choosing between various degrees of

evil if they are going to make any realistic impact on the international condition of human rights. They must be prepared to choose between half a loaf or none at all. This means, above all, that the Western democracies must not destabilise or isolate authoritarian regimes when the only likely alternatives to them are anti-Western totalitarian revolutionary governments.

From a human rights standpoint, authoritarian governments are always infinitely preferable to totalitarian ones - and the reason ought to be obvious. A totalitarian regime, by definition, obliterates *all* human rights because no aspect of individual and social life is allowed to lie outside the control of the State. Communist systems, for example, are not only politically oppressive - they are also ideologically, culturally and socially oppressive. Under them individuals cannot own property (other than a bare minimum), cannot speak or write freely, cannot travel or emigrate without permission, cannot choose their career or place of residence, and cannot talk freely about God to their children - or worship Him without official harassment and persecution. Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, generally leave people alone as long as they refrain from attacking the government.

For instance, take non-Communist South Vietnam under Thieu compared with Communist-ruled Vietnam today. As a former anti-Thieu, anti-war Buddhist monk put it in an interview three years ago: "Under Thieu, we were only protesting corruption. Now, under Communism, we cannot exist at all. Now we are fighting for life or death." Under Thieu, opposition groups were allowed to exist and sit in the South Vietnamese Parliament, and the prison population of South Vietnam totalled about 35,000 in the middle of a war for national survival. Since the Communists took over in 1975, however, we have not only seen the mass exodus of the 'Boat People'; there have also been an estimated quarter of a million executions, and between 400,000 and three quarters of a million Vietnamese are imprisoned in concentration camps.

The movement of refugees in Latin America also emphasises the degree to which ordinary people find the rigours of totalitarian Communist rule harder to bear than the injustices of authoritarian military governments. Whereas Argentina, Brazil and Chile have each provoked the flight of about 35,000 refugees since 1959, Cuba has provoked the exodus of over a million refugees (one refugee for every nine inhabitants since Castro seized power).

Over the last three and a half decades, at least 15 million refugees in all have escaped from China, East Germany, Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam and Angola since 1945.

The containment of Communism is part of the international defence of human rights.

The need to distinguish between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes and support the former against the latter when no other options are available, brings me to the fourth and perhaps the most important truth about the international struggle for human rights: the need to resist Communist imperialism. The nature of Communism and its record on human rights, proves beyond a shadow of doubt that it is the greatest single enemy of human liberty and human dignity in the world today.