



Don't Blame Democracy

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Colaboraciones n° 824

27 de febrero de 2006

Democracy is getting a bum rap. President Bush's insistence on promoting democracy abroad, critics chide, has now brought Hamas, a Militant Islamist terrorist organization, to power in the West Bank and Gaza. If this is democracy, they say, who needs it?

But what has taken root in the Palestinian territories isn't democracy. Or, more precisely, it isn't liberal democracy -- which presupposes freedom of speech and the press, the rule of law, an independent judiciary and guarantees of rights for minorities and women.

If elections were all it required to qualify as a democracy, the Soviet Union would have been one, since Soviet citizens regularly went to the polls to elect whichever candidates the Communist Party chose.

In Iran, too, people cast ballots. But Militant Islamist mullahs decide who runs and who wins. And in the West Bank and Gaza, while elections have been held occasionally since the 1993 Oslo Accords first awarded power to Yassir Arafat's political machine, democratic values have not been seriously encouraged and democratic institutions have not been constructed.

At best, these are all examples of what political scientists call "electoral authoritarian" regimes or "illiberal democracies" or, more generously, "electoral democracies." What determines whether they evolve into liberal democracies? Can freedom be given -- or must it be earned? Can dissidents spread liberal democratic values even in police states? Do liberal democratic institutions create democrats?

Contrary to popular belief, President Bush and his “neo-conservative” supporters were not the first to ask such questions. Nor were they the first to involve the United States in the business of promoting freedom and democracy abroad. Beginning in 1983, a Democratic congress, backed by President Reagan, began appropriating funds to something called the National Endowment for the Democracies (NED), a private, non-profit organization “guided by the belief that freedom is a universal human aspiration that can be realized through the development of democratic institutions, procedures, and values.”

Last week, NED's International Forum for Democratic Studies, in association with the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, held a workshop on “Democracy and Terrorism.” Among those participating were liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats, government officials, academics and journalists.

Also taking part were such leading Arab and Muslim democrats as Iraqi author Kanan Makiya; scholar Husain Haqqani; Zainah Anwar, executive director of Sisters in Islam; Rola Dashti, chairwoman of the Kuwait Economic Society; and Saad Eddin Ibrahim, chairman of the Ibn Khaldun Center in Cairo.

If this diverse group reached consensus on anything it was this: No, democracy is not the antidote to terrorism. But yes, democracy must be part of the treatment. Backing oppressive regimes to maintain “stabil-

ity” is a policy that has been tried and which has failed -- rather spectacularly.

Those who argue that there are few examples of democracy being exported to foreign lands have a point. But there are plenty of examples of democrats being supported in foreign lands.

In the 20th century, Americans expended vast resources on behalf of pro-democracy dissidents living under authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe. Until recently, there has been virtually no support for pro-democracy dissidents living under authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Even today, the assistance we provide to those in the Middle East who share our values is a trickle compared to the river of funds that flow from Iran and Saudi Arabia to their allies around the world. Iranian and Saudi rulers expect big returns on these investments.

It was not inevitable that Nazism, Fascism and Communism would fail in their attempts to destroy the democratic experiment. Nor can we be certain that the free peoples of the world will survive the war now being waged against them by Militant Islamism.

The trends are not encouraging. Unless America and its European allies show more grit than they have to date, the most radical regime in the Middle East will soon have nuclear weapons. The House of Sa'ud is being enriched as never before. It is unlikely that the most devastating

terrorist attack of the 21st century is behind us.

In the long run, freedom will advance or retreat depending largely on who is more determined -- its enemies or its defenders. Maintaining the international status quo -- liberty for those who consume gasoline, repression for those who pump it -- may be the least realistic option of all.

“Advancing democracy is a struggle,” NED president Carl Gershman has written, “not a process of social engineering undertaken by bureaucrats.” And it requires much more than an occasional election in a place where government-controlled media, mosques and schools have glorified hate and celebrated suicide-bombers for years.



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