

Democracy Can Have a Dark Underbelly
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As much as I love democracy, Western Liberal Democracy, this institution has a dark side. There are problems with our own American democracy; even more troubling are democracies such as that of Russia, and worse, democracy in the Muslim world. Why is democracy so under assault?

Liberal Democracy is a system in which people do have choices, but there are also rules that keep the "people" will from becoming tyranny. Voting is the last step of building a democracy, with other institutions coming first: a genuinely free press, independent judiciary not cowed by public opinion, separation of the dominant church from the state, and law enforcing the equality of men and women. If all of these factors are in place, the final thing to guarantee is a free and fair election process with no intimidation at the polls.

United States. As our democracy becomes ever more populist, we will lose the liberal part of our republic. When judges are voted for in popular elections, the independent judiciary is harmed. When the public puts initiatives on the ballot without either vetting by an elected legislature nor provision for funding, we substitute popular for representative in government. Our forefathers wisely opted for a republic after watching the popular democracy of the French Revolution lynching opponents at will. Our presidents and representatives (and some judges) need so much money to run for office that corruption is inevitable. And as we move toward pushbutton democracy (voting from home on line), we may find our democracy ruined beyond repair.

Russia. Although Vladimir Putin tries to take over the reins of Russia (again) for the next 12 years, we can see that the brief glimmer of democracy following the collapse of the Soviet Union is still alive. People are in the streets and a new candidate has surfaced. Despite Putin's seeming advantage in the election, he still found it necessary to win this election through blatant fraud and ballot box stuffing. To his surprise, voter support has dropped from 64% to 49%. Sadly, the vibrant free press (the first that Russia has ever had) is melting away. Russia may take the prize for murder of journalists, along with Mexico. But in Mexico, the drug cartel is doing it, not the government.

Middle East. As secular dictatorships fall, we are watching the rise of future new dictatorships: this time, Islamic theocracies. Although the educated elites and the small Christian populations are afraid, they are outvoted by the illiterate masses who feel more comfortable with a religious dictatorship. When the overwhelming popular culture is authoritarian at home, authoritarian at school, and authoritarian in the mosque, and hostile toward granting equality to women, why would they not want their kind of authoritarianism at the top?

In all these cases, there is a problem that all elections today must have universal suffrage. Universal adult suffrage arose in the west gradually, each new group of voters added over a long time. But today, only such a country as Finland can have genuine liberal democracy because everybody is well educated, everybody shares the same cultural values, and their system has produced an overwhelmingly middle class population. Not so for the rest of us. We have a huge gulf between thinkers and the ignorant.

Today, the really educated are few in number compared with the masses of essentially conservative populations that fear change, distrust science, and want somebody to rule that can make them feel safe and superior. Both ancient Greece and Rome lost their democracy because of corruption. In both countries, elections were increasingly bought by the wealthy. As for the Muslim world, voting in Islamists will destroy their freedoms. Even Turkey, the one country that had a pretty good democracy for 75 years, may well be losing their democracy to creeping Islamism. The Economist is wrong-headed in calling Turkey's Islamist government mildly Islamist. There

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no such thing.

Democracy is a fragile flower that will not bloom everywhere in today's world. We are delusional to think so, and had better see to our own.

673 words

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