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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe greeted by President Donald Trump at the White House in February 2017. Photo credit: Melina Mara/The Washington Post via Getty Images

Will ‘Democracy’ Survive, and in What Form? Hard Questions in Dark Times

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As demagogic leaders with popular approval or at least acquiescence currently dominate the political process of several important ‘democratic’ states, questions need to be asked about the core or indispensable content of democracy. Many states seek the imprimatur of ‘democracy’ but limit drastically the choices open to the citizenry or proclaim themselves ‘a Jewish state’ or ‘an Islamic Republic,’ which means they would be more accurately regarded as an *ethnocracy* (Israel) or *theocracy* (Iran). The legitimating imprimatur of democracy should be based on something more objective than the language of self-identification—that is, claiming that we are a democracy because we describe our governing arrangements as a democracy, nothing more, nothing less. Instead, we should delineate the particular institutions, values, and practices that identify the distinctive features of democratic forms of governance.

Procedural and Republican Democracy

The idea of ‘free elections’ is certainly a prerequisite. It is not possible to think of a political system as democratic if it does not allow its citizens to select, without fear or interference, among a wide range of candidates of their choice, even if the process is filtered through political parties or primaries or otherwise. What qualifies as a free election can be debated endlessly, but it seems enough to suggest that candidates should represent significantly divergent societal viewpoints that compete for support, and that votes are counted honestly. A state should not necessarily lose

its democratic credentials if it disqualifies candidates and parties that deny basic human rights to segments of the citizenry or espouse fascist agendas, or if rights are somewhat abridged during periods of national emergency as during wartime. This dimension of democratic governance can be discussed in relation to specific instances by reference to the acceptable limits on the practice of *procedural democracy*. Such a form of government is sensitive to the dangers of abuses and corruptions of power, invoking ‘checks and balances’ and ‘separation of powers’ as institutional bulwarks of restraint on ‘the tyranny of the mob’ or the predatory behavior of the tyrant, and can be better identified as *republican democracy*.

Such restraints on the capricious exercise of power tend to be challenged, however, by technological legerdemain and excessive government classification procedures that seriously undermine political transparency and the constitutional constraints on war making by leaders (if present), leaving weighty decisions in the hands of an unaccountable few. Without democratic accountability in such instances, democracies lose legitimacy, especially considering the risks and dangers of the nuclear age. It may be that only the elimination of nuclear weapons from the arsenals of *all* countries can restore a semblance of substantive reality to a procedural or republican understanding of democracy, and the primacy that it accords ‘checks and balances’ and ‘separation of powers.’

In its liberal versions, democracy—in its republican form—almost always includes a guaranty and judicial protection of civil and political rights, especially freedom of expression and the right of assembly, but not necessarily (and likely not at all) social and economic rights. In this sense, the tensions between neoliberal versions of capitalism and political democracy are of paramount importance in many societies widely regarded as ‘democratic.’

Normative Democracy

To achieve an inclusive political order a substantive commitment to deal with basic social and economic rights is essential, although infrequently acknowledged. This raises questions about the compatibility of real democracy with contemporary forms of capitalism. The protection of social and economic rights are necessary so as to satisfy the material needs of all people under sovereign control, especially with respect to food, health, shelter, education, environmental protection, responsibility to future generations. Yet a market-driven ethos is not challenged in principle by

large-scale homelessness or extreme poverty so long as the gates of opportunity are available to all. This dimension of democratic governance is rarely realized, and is best considered by reference to values-driven, inclusive, and *normative democracy*. A society should also be protected against war-prone leadership that defies transparency by relying on claims of secrecy and national security.

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Somewhere in between selecting leaders, upholding rights, and ensuring a minimal standard of living that entrenches human dignity and enables a humane society are considerations of internal and external security. Meeting the threats from within and without while avoiding hysteria, paranoia, and different forms of suppression is a fundamental responsibility of every legitimate state, including those that claim a democratic pedigree. There is no satisfactory label, but since a state unable to protect sovereign rights and political order loses the respect and allegiance of its citizenry, the security dimension can be associated with *effective democracy*. For without political order, and a capability to address external threats and internal disorder, no form of governance can avoid chaos and foreign penetration, although assessments of this kind involve subjective appreciations of capabilities and political will.

There are increasing critiques of democratic states for having weakened the bonds between what citizens seek and what the government does. In the United States, for instance, special interests inflate the prices of pharmaceutical products to astronomical heights, insulate gun control from public opinion to absurd degrees, and allow corporations and banks to contribute unlimited amounts to (mis)shape political campaigns. Markets are further distorted by corruption of various kinds that undermine the capabilities of government to serve the people. This dimension of democratic governance can be considered under the rubric of *responsive democracy* . Without a high degree of responsiveness on central policy issues, a governing process will steadily lose legitimacy, especially if seen as deferring to special interests.

Majoritarian Democracy

It becomes increasingly evident that in some political systems free elections occur, demagogues participate—and sometimes prevail—and a majority of the citizenry is either submissive or supportive. In this kind of atmosphere toxic, win/lose polarizations develop, with extremist and paranoid rhetoric justifying suppression and demonization of undocumented immigrants, refugees, and even asylum seekers. Walls are proposed and built, borders are militarized, and exclusionary ideas of political community gain traction in the marketplace of ideas. One result is that the values, views, and security of vulnerable and oppositional populations are ignored or even condemned. Genuine news is dismissed as fake news, and vice versa, creating fact-free political leadership. This kind of political order can be termed *majoritarian democracy*.

Indian election rally, 2014

This form tends to rest its claims on passion and a perversion of Rousseau's 'general will' rather than on reason and evidence, and is contemptuous of limits on the exercise of state power on behalf of the nation, especially if directed against foreign or domestic 'enemies.' As a result, the rule of law and, especially, respect for international law and the authority of the United Nations are weakened, while

deference to the ruler increases in conjunction with claims of indefinite tenure atop the political pyramid, ratified by periodic votes of approval. Such leaders as Putin, Xi, Trump, Erdoğan, Modi, and Abe manifest the trend towards treating ‘citizens’ as if they were ‘subjects’, thereby blurring the distinction between democracy and monarchy when it comes to state/society relations.

Aspirational Democracy

In opposition are more humanistic concerns that focus attention on the protection of human rights, especially of those who are vulnerable and poor. The idea of ‘democracy to come’ as depicted by the deceased French philosopher Jacques Derrida, and recently developed further by Fred Dallmayr, is being taken more seriously. This idea centers on the belief that democracy in all its manifestations, even at its best, remains an unfinished project with unfulfilled normative potential. It represents a call to work toward an inclusive democracy based on the serious implementation of ‘the spirit of equality’ (Dallmayr), the goal of humane governance associated with Montesquieu. Such a political order goes beyond upholding the rule of law by seeking to promote justice within and beyond sovereign borders. Such a democratic political order would now subordinate *national* interests to *human* and *global* interests as necessary in relation to climate change, nuclear weaponry, migration, disease control, peace and security, and the regulation of the world economy. No democracy of this kind has so far existed, but as a goal and ideal this political possibility can be identified as *aspirational democracy*.

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Concluding Comments

These different forms of democracy overlap and are matters of degree, but do call attention to the various and variable features of political life that rest on the shared proposition that ‘the people’ should be regarded as the source of political authority and legitimacy. Yet such a mandate for democracy as flowing upwards from the people, superseding God-given authority figures anointed by ritual and reinforced by claims of a monarchical or divine aura of absolutism, is in many societies again

being scrutinized. Many informed and concerned persons are asking whether democracy is any longer the least bad system of governance, yet seem at a loss to propose an alternative. In this setting, the question posed for many of us is whether democracy, as it is now practiced and constituted, can be revitalized by legitimating reforms. As engaged citizens we must accept this challenge in ways that are sensitive to the particularities of time, place, challenge, and opportunities.

Because of globalization in its manifest forms, it is no longer tenable to confine the ambitions of democracy to national spaces. Global democracy has become, is becoming, a matter of ultimate concern. Issues raised concern transparency, accountability, participation, and responsiveness of global policy processes, and of course, how the global is to be linked with the regional and national so as to pursue the goal of global humane governance: equitable, stable, sustainable, peaceful, compassionate, and above all, animated by a spirit of mindfulness.

For more of Richard Falk's commentary, visit *Global Justice in the 21st Century*.

References

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