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1

The Triumph of Democracy?

In the summer of 1997, I was asked by a leading Japanese newspaper what I thought was the most important thing that had happened in the twentieth century. I found this to be an unusually thought-provoking question, since so many things of gravity have happened over the last hundred years . . . I did not, ultimately, have any difficulty in choosing one as the pre-eminent development of the period: the rise of democracy. This is not to deny that other occurrences have been important, but I would argue that in the distant future, when people look back at what happened in this century, they will find it difficult not to accord primacy to the emergence of democracy as the preeminently acceptable form of governance.¹

Amartya Sen, 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics

Amartya Sen picks out democracy as the crowning achievement of the twentieth century. It has to be admitted that it is possible to think of many other developments in the century worthy of praise, from widespread advances in economic welfare to space travel. But I think the establishment of democracy deserves to be placed at the top of that century's achievements. A powerful wave of democratization closed the twentieth century, and as a result most politics now takes place in mass democracies whose citizens have been given a voice in the processes and institutions that determine how power is exercised and how decisions are made. This chapter shows how democratic governance has become a widely accepted and celebrated guide to how we should make decisions on a collective basis in our societies. It explores the nature of this democratic governance, arguing that democracy is a system worth defending and showing that it is not just a 'western' idea but also a universal value. The chapter continues by examining the spread of democratic practice. It concludes by looking at the 'dark side' of democracy in multiethnic nation states where the arguments of democracy have been distorted to justify the 'cleansing' of one ethnic

group by another. Nevertheless the overall message of this chapter is: hooray for democracy.

The Nature of Democratic Governance

Large-scale democracy, based on voting rights for all adults, is a very new form of governance that got underway in the early decades of the twentieth century, although the concept of democracy has a longer history stretching back at least to the Greek states more than 2,000 years ago. In recent decades, it has become the world's preferred form of governance.

Let us define democratic governance as a political system that meets the following three criteria:

- Universal suffrage – that is, the right to vote in elections for all adults
- Governments chosen by regular, free and competitive election
- The presence of a set of political rights to free speech and freedom to organize in groups.

By these far-from-tough criteria, no nation state in 1900 could be called 'democratic' because none had universal suffrage. By 1950, about a third of all nations could meet all three criteria to a reasonable extent; and in the last quarter of the century, a great wave of change saw democratic governance extended to about two-thirds of all countries.² Democracy now has pole position as the world's preferred form of governance.

The struggle to achieve democracy has often involved inspirational acts both by leaders and by populations at large. The experience of Nelson Mandela and South Africa in the 1990s stands out in our memories, but there have been countless other steps towards democracy taken in difficult and trying circumstances. In the 1980s, there were the long struggles of peoples in Poland and other eastern European countries to establish democracy. Further back, the early years of the twentieth century saw the continuation of a campaign to win votes for women, with the honour of first granting universal women's suffrage going to Finland in 1906.³

There have been a number of key influencing factors behind the spread of democracy in the last quarter of the twentieth century.⁴ The most obvious is the break-up of the earlier colonial arrangements of western powers such as the UK, France and others. A second has been the fall of authoritarian regimes in some parts of western Europe including Spain, Portugal and Greece. A third is the collapse of the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the liberation of an associated group of satellite central and eastern European

(CEE) states held under its influence. Fourth, there has been a resurgence of democracy in Latin America and Asia.

Economic development that in turn supports changes in the social structure – shifting the position of classes, ethnic groups and women – has been a key driver for democratization, as exemplified by the experience of South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil and Mexico. In some cases, the failure of authoritarian regimes to deliver economic performance has opened them to the challenge that democratic forces might do better. Crucially, in order for such a transition to occur a form of compromise between established elites and new political forces has had to emerge. The experience of some parts of Europe, Latin America and Africa can be seen as following this path.

But to an extent, the debate about democratization has changed. Traditional explanations focused on national structures or players to see if they were ready to provide the conditions and context for democracy, with the in-built assumption that democracy was an unusual form of governance and needed the right conditions to become established. More recently, the emphasis has been on global and international factors. Since the end of the Cold War more international pressures have been brought to bear advocating the cause of democracy. Both the USA and the European Union (EU), although not always consistently, have promoted democratization as the right path to follow for other countries. Finally there has been more international pressure to support human rights and democracy as a basic right. Extending democracy is now the stated project of important and powerful global actors.⁵

Democracy as a Universal Value

What exactly is ‘democracy’? Our starting point should be a straightforward definition of democratic governance, identified above as a set of procedures and institutions through which decisions by societies are filtered. As a governance system – that is, as a way of making collective decisions in society – democracy requires free, fair and competitive elections, underwritten by universal suffrage in order to choose government leaders; it is also necessary that the results of those elections be respected. Democracy also entails respect for the freedoms and the basic rights of citizens, a capacity to deliver justice and respect for the rule of the law. It also demands a capacity for free exchange of views among citizens and an uncensored distribution of news and opinion. Democracy, even to achieve what might be regarded by many as these minimum conditions, asks a lot of a society.

Some argue that democracy is about much more than a set of arrangements for making decisions in society, as set out above. The starting concept

of democracy that is used in this book rests firmly in what can be described as the ‘realist camp’, in that its focus is on an *operating system of decision making* rather than some far-off goal. The model is egalitarian, in its emphasis on equal rights to participation and protection, but it does not insist on a wider economic or social equality as a precursor to democracy. What I would say is that, ultimately, democracy must involve citizens in more than simply selecting leaders to govern them. It must be about the capacity of citizens to engage in and influence policy debates and outcomes. Democracy, rather than democratic governance, rests on the idea of those being affected by a decision having a right to a say in that decision. Exactly how much of a say, and what citizens should expect from a system of democratic governance, are matters that are returned to again and again in this book, and most explicitly in Chapter 9.

For the present, it can simply be noted that there are other narratives of democracy, many of them emphasizing to a much greater degree than I do the need for direct participation and the need for egalitarian conditions to be established before democracy can flourish.⁶ Indeed, in the processes that contribute to democratization in different countries there are likely to be different views about what democracy will bring and what it means, and these are in turn a source of inspiration, dispute – and, if undelivered, disappointment.⁷ In some of the newer democracies, for example, the processes of democratization ran alongside other developments such as a shift to a market economy or (in the case of South Africa) the attempt to create a post-apartheid society. If democracy fails to support economic development or a more equal society, it may lose legitimacy and public support. Such matters will be considered later in the book, as will the possibility that more participation might help to revitalize politics in mass democracies.

Democracy, it is sometimes argued, is an exclusively western concept. While it is true that some politicians in the West tend to claim democracy as their own, such claims should be disputed. Some institutions dominated by powerful western countries – such as the World Bank – have pushed western-style democracy as part of a package of good governance from the 1980s onwards, but it would be a mistake to assume that democracy is just another export of the West.

Democracy is better understood as a universal value. As Nobel Prize winning academic Amartya Sen points out:

In any age and social climate, there are some sweeping beliefs that seem to command respect as a kind of general rule – like a ‘default’ setting in a computer program; they are considered right unless their claim is somehow negated. While democracy is not yet universally practiced, nor

indeed uniformly accepted, in the general climate of world opinion, democratic governance has now achieved the status of being taken as generally right.⁸

Democracy is not a universal value because everyone agrees with it. Indeed, any value that achieved such general acclaim would be likely to fall into the 'motherhood and apple pie' category of empty ideas that no one could object to. Democracy is a tougher concept than that. It has been hard fought over, and won respect. What makes it universal is that 'people anywhere may have reason to see it as valuable'.⁹

But, there are still commentators who claim that particular sections of the world's population are culturally or practically incapable of democracy. Samuel Huntington¹⁰ argues that the world has reached a historical period in which it is faced by a fundamental clash of civilizations, with the West versus the rest. The West's power and dominance is a source of antagonism, but fundamentally there is also a clash of *values*. Liberalism, democracy, the rule of law and a range of other 'western' values have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian and other non-western cultures. According to this Harvard professor, the reality is that: 'modern democratic government originated in the West. When it has developed in non-western societies it has usually been the product of western colonialism or imposition'.¹¹ A less academic way of putting it would be to say that 'Arabs or Africans just can't handle democracy'.

Samuel Huntington may well be right to suggest that the West's use of its power to get its own way causes resentment elsewhere in the world, and a brash western commercial and political imperialism of ideas and products are sources of antagonism. Where he is mistaken is in suggesting that democracy is a western preserve. It is, to say the least, wide of the mark historically to suggest that, outside western democracies, democracy exists because of western colonialism or intervention. The people of India or South Africa could explain to him that democracy exists in their countries despite, not because of western input. Since his article about the clash of civilizations was published in 1993, democracy as a form of governance, as noted earlier, has become ever more widely established and present in Islamic, Confucian, African and Latin American regions, and by no means confined largely to the West.

There is a more fundamental reason for objecting to the 'clash of civilizations' thesis: it places a false emphasis on a homogeneity of thought and practice in broad cultures or civilizations. As Amartya Sen points out, 'diversity is a feature of most cultures in the world', so to suggest that western thought has shown 'a historical commitment of the West – over the

millennia – to democracy, and then to contrast it with non-Western traditions (treating each as monolithic) would be a great mistake'.¹² Islamic and other traditions allow scope for democratic practice; western thought is not exclusively democratic. Authoritarianism – the major alternative to democracy – has been a core part of western thought and historical practice.

Democracy is attractive to a great many people for three fundamental reasons. Again following Amartya Sen, we can view democracy as having *intrinsic*, *instrumental* and *constructive* features that make it desirable. The intrinsic value of democracy is something much celebrated by political philosophers and rests on the idea that it is an integral part of being human to share decisions and choices with other humans. Participation in the political life of a community makes us more whole as people and gives us a chance to express ourselves as human beings.

Some may find the intrinsic value argument convincing, and others may not. It seems to rest on a rather romantic or even woolly view of politics, and I for one need some more practical arguments to support the case for democracy. How sustainable is the love of a procedure such as democracy unless it helps you achieve something? It is a better sell for democracy to claim that it will 'help you achieve the outcomes which are the things closest to your heart'.¹³ This is the point where the *instrumental* argument for democracy kicks in. But in this case the marketing of what politics can do needs to be cautious. Democracy cannot guarantee you a happy life, but it can make some disasters of human life less likely to be imposed on you. One study suggests tentatively 'there is a robust correlation between democratic institutions and health, resulting in greater life expectancy in democracies'.¹⁴ Amartya Sen, in part, won his Nobel Prize for showing that major famines generally do not occur in democracies; recent famines in Ethiopia and Somalia occurred under dictatorships, and great historical famines such as those in the Soviet Union in the 1930s or China in 1958–61 took place in authoritarian regimes. The evidence is clear and so, too, is the explanation:

Famines are easy to prevent if there is a serious effort to do so, and a democratic government facing elections and criticisms from opposition parties and independent newspapers, cannot help but make such an effort.¹⁵

When things are going fine, then the instrumental value of democracy may not be missed. It is when things go wrong, as they always will, that democracy is needed, because of the particular incentives it gives governments to behave in way that takes the welfare of citizens into account. Democracy

provides the mechanism to ensure that governments are only able to get away with so much.

Finally, democracy does positively help in the search for solutions to intractable problems and challenges. This is the *constructive* value of democracy. Open dialogue can be the key to resolving many of the most challenging issues we confront; it enables the sharing of ideas, learning and the thinking through of problems. It is that public airing of issues that can make all the difference. Sometimes, however, contrary to the view of some theorists of deliberative democracy, politics does its work through smoke and mirrors. By enabling people who fundamentally disagree to find a way forward by sometimes giving different meanings to the same words, politics does much valuable work. Democracy – more often than we often care to admit – relies on ‘weasel phrases’, hidden compromises or delayed gratification and various other forms of ambiguous construction that enable all sides to claim victory, or at least emerge defeated but with their honour intact.

So democracy deserves its status as a universal value. It is not an exclusive western form of governance, but rather the preferred system of making decisions for people throughout the globe. It does its work in a variety of ways and with a considerable degree of messiness and compromise. It is constrained and limited. But in the last few decades it has become a living practice for the majority of countries on the planet, as the next section will show.

The Triumph of Democracy

Here are five important facts about democracy:

- The most powerful nation in the world, by far, at the beginning of the twenty-first century – the USA – has a system of democratic governance
- India – one of the world’s most populated countries – has had a system of democratic governance for over fifty years and, despite enormous religious, social and ethnic divides, it has survived
- The EU consists of a group of twenty-five countries, each operating a system of democratic governance, and constitutes a powerful bloc in economic, trading and foreign affairs
- Most of the Latin American and Caribbean countries have some form of democratic governance, as do many African and Asian nations
- Democratic governance and human rights are the largely unquestioned international standard for countries.

These facts do not command universal rejoicing. Some people think that the USA is powerful, but also an aggressive and dangerous actor on the global stage. Some citizens of Europe do not like the EU. The strength of the internal democracies of all nations – but particularly those in Africa, Asia and Latin America – are often questioned. Some fear that double standards and national self-interest cloud the rhetoric about international commitment to human rights and democracy: the West favours democracy when it suits its interests and opposes, or at least fails to support, it when it does not; western countries stick up for human rights when trying to put other countries in the dock, but are willing to ignore human rights issues themselves. Democratic governance may be an international standard, but many express doubts about whether democracy can be imposed from the outside. Yet for the first time in human history it is possible to imagine a future in which authoritarian rule might be eliminated within two or three decades.¹⁶ That should be a matter for universal rejoicing.

The rise of democracy is a story that stretches beyond the boundaries of this book. At the beginning of the 1970s – when I first studied politics – writers about the constitutional arrangements of different nation states classified regimes under three headings. First, there was relatively small group of democracies concentrated mostly in advanced industrial nations. Second, there was a larger group of communist states, and finally there were the developing countries, a few of which operated democratic forms of governance but most of which were prone to military or one-party dictatorships, or at least authoritarian rule. At the beginning of the 1970s, there had been no great surge in the growth of democratic governance and as a result the position was similar to that already noted in 1950. In total, around a third of the countries in the world could be classified as meeting the criteria of democratic governance of universal suffrage, regular elections to choose government leaders and basic political rights, in that period.

The great drive to democracy that dominated the last quarter of the twentieth century started with the collapse of the European dictatorships in Portugal, Spain and Greece in the 1970s.¹⁷ Between 1979 and 1985 the military withdrew in favour of civilian governments in nine Latin American countries. In the 1980s and 1990s democratization began to spread to previously untouched parts of Asia. The Philippines saw the end of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 and Taiwan, South Korea, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan all strengthened their democracies or became democracies in this period, although in the last case, democracy did not survive. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union saw the start of a process that spread democracy throughout central and eastern Europe. In Africa, Benin led a move to democracy in 1990, followed by a process that

Table 1.1 Democracies, by region, 2002

Region	Number of countries	Number of democracies (per cent)
Western Europe and Anglophone states	28	28 (100)
Latin American and Caribbean	33	30 (91)
Eastern Europe and the FSU	27	18 (67)
East, South, South East Asia	25	12 (48)
Pacific Islands	12	11 (91)
Africa (sub-Saharan)	48	19 (40)
Middle East and North Africa	19	2 (11)
Total	192	120 (63)

Source: Data extracted from Table 5 in Larry Diamond, 'Can the whole world become democratic? Democracy, development and international politics', Center for the Study of Democracy, paper 03.05, University of California, Irvine, 2003.

led to democracy being established in South Africa in 1994. Other African states also established democratic rule during this period. As a result nearly three in five states had achieved some strong aspects of democratic governance by 1994, and the process has become firmly established, so that by the start of the twenty-first century nearly two-thirds of all countries met the basic criteria. Table 1.1 gives a breakdown by regions of the world.

Of course, the quality of democracy in all countries can be questioned. After all, it was in the 'model' democracy of the USA that the presidential election of 2000 collapsed into an acrimonious dispute over whether George Bush or Al Gore had actually won because of irregularities or uncertainties in vote-counting. A detailed democratic audit of any country is unlikely to produce a clean bill of health.¹⁸ All of the countries included in Table 1.1 meet the minimum requirement that they hold regular, free, fair and competitive elections to fill the positions in their governments. Citizens in these countries all have a secret ballot, fair access to a range of media and basic rights to organize, campaign and solicit votes. But many still suffer from significant human rights abuse, corruption and a weak rule of law.

As Table 1.1 shows, the democratic form of governance has a major foothold, if not a dominant position, in most regions of the world. Democratic governance exists in rich and poor countries and in countries with a range of cultures and traditions. It has been established in small and large countries, although more so in the former than the latter. Yet eight out

of eleven countries with populations greater than 100 million have a form of democratic governance. Democratic governance is practised in countries with every major philosophical and religious tradition: Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu and Muslim. All this suggests that comments about certain cultures not being suited to democracy are difficult to sustain. The region that is the missing link in the spread of democracy is the Middle East and North Africa, where in 2002 only two countries meeting the criteria of democratic governance could be found. But I think that this reflects the politics of the region and the negative impact of past western influences and interventions, rather than a cultural issue for the population.

Public opinion survey evidence backs up this judgement that the idea of democratic governance is popular in all parts of the globe. In particular, the survey research indicates that many Muslims prefer the idea of democracy to authoritarian rule, as do clear majorities of the population in all other parts of the world. The *World Values Survey*, a spectacular public opinion research effort covering over eighty nations, reveals the scale of the support for democratic governance. Table 1.2 provides detailed results: members of the public in many countries appear to agree with the direction of thought offered by Winston Churchill, that democracy may not be a perfect or all-wise form of government, but it is less bad than all the alternatives.¹⁹ Specifically in relation to the issue of Islamic-populated states and democracy, Ronald Inglehart, a key mover behind the *World Values Survey*,

Table 1.2 Support for democracy

Per cent agreeing that 'Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government'		
Region	Highest (per cent agreeing)	Lowest (per cent agreeing)
Western Europe and Anglophone states	Denmark (99)	Britain (78)
Latin America	Uruguay (96)	Mexico (79)
Eastern Europe and FSU	Croatia (96)	Russia (62)
East, South, South East Asia	Japan/India (92)	Indonesia (71)
Africa (sub-Saharan)	Uganda (93)	Nigeria (45)
Middle East and North Africa	Algeria (88)	Iran (69)

Note: No figures are available for Caribbean states and Pacific islands.

Source: Data from the *World Values Survey* (1999–2002) wave for most countries (drawn from a fuller analysis by Ronald Inglehart, 'The worldviews of Islamic publics in global perspective', 2005, available at www.worldvaluessurvey.org).

concludes: 'Islamic publics, including the Arab publics, overwhelmingly view democracy as the best form of government'.²⁰

Although a response to one survey question – the evidence provided in Table 1.2 – is hardly likely to be the last word on the issue of world public opinion and democracy, it does provide support for the view that support is widespread and fairly strongly held in most countries. If you are British – as this author is – it is not too comforting to see the self-proclaimed 'mother of democracy' as the lowest ranked of the 'western' democracies when it comes to support for democracy. The response of citizens in many countries also suggests that they are able to distinguish between the *idea* of democratic governance and its, often less than perfect, *practice*. In short, people may well see failings in their own system of governance, but recognize that democracy is an ideal worth striving towards.

Conclusions: A 'Dark Side' to Democracy?

Broadly, we can be positive at this point. Democratic governance is widely supported in the public opinion expressed by the peoples of the world, regardless of culture, religion or other factors. If we had more time, we could probably identify some significant differences between the perceptions and value placed on democracy in different countries. People in many countries are not so sure that democracy is working for them, and there are substantial portions of many populations who it appears would not take much persuasion to consider a more authoritarian form of rule. In Latin America, East Asia and the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union there is much evidence of people being less than convinced by the development of democracy, as Table 1.2 makes clear. But it would be churlish not to recognize the degree to which the idea of democracy has become a dominant force in world public opinion. Moreover, two-thirds of the countries of the world are attempting to put democracy into practice in some form.

We know that if democracy is to work, it needs more than the establishment of a particular set of institutions. It has to be a lived practice, with at least two key elements.²¹ The maintenance of democracy requires an effective state to regulate society, agree compromises and organize the distribution of public goods. It also requires a civil society of non-state actors that is organized, active and engaged and capable at a minimum of holding the state to account and at a broader level offers the seed bed for the development of democratic ideas and practice.

It is because of these realities that even if the global order now in a formal

sense favours democracy, the arrival of democratic practice in former authoritarian countries cannot be guaranteed. Certainly it is difficult to see how democracy can be imposed from the outside: the active engagement and commitment of key players within a nation state is an essential basis for the reform of the state and the strength of civil society, as exemplified by the struggles in Iraq following the US-led invasion that brought down Saddam Hussein. Establishing democracy in areas that have seen deep internal division is not an impossible task, as shown by the example of South Africa. But democracy is not easy to establish, and even in mature democracies it may not be easy to sustain commitment to it as a form of governance.

The assumption made in the discussion so far is that democracy is something that develops in nation states. We operate with a territorially bound idea of what a political community is, and the community of citizens granted universal suffrage and political rights are seen as delimited by the boundaries of different countries: democracy exists in India or Portugal; the right to have a say means the right to have a say in your own country. One challenge that can be raised to this assumption is the growing impact of global decision making and forces that are taking issues beyond the boundaries of our national political communities. The implications of these developments are explored in Chapter 3. For now, I want to note how democracy can be in trouble when the definition and status of the political community is based on the promotion of one group at the expense of another. Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, Fiji and Rwanda – to pick a range of cases from around the world – exemplify ‘a dark side’ to democracy,²² in the form of ethnic divisions and, most tragically, ethnic cleansing.

The trouble comes when, in ethnically mixed nation states, the demos (the people) becomes defined as one ethnic group (the ethnos). Michael Mann explains:

But if the people is to rule in its own nation-state, and if the people is defined in ethnic terms, then its ethnic unity may outweigh the kind of citizen diversity that is central to democracy. If such a people is to rule, what is to happen to those of different ethnicity? Answers have often been unpleasant . . . Murderous ethnic cleansing is a hazard of the age of democracy since amid multiethnicity the ideal of rule by the people began to entwine the demos with the dominant ethnos, generating organic conceptions of the nation and the state that encouraged the cleansing of minorities.²³

When rule by the people comes to mean rule by a particular ethnic group, then democracy can be a harbinger of brutal attacks on the minorities that

fall foul of the majority. This is not to suggest that ethnic cleansing is justified by democratic ideals, but rather to recognize that the rhetoric of democracy can and has been used to justify barbaric acts. In modern colonies, settler democratic communities have in certain circumstances proved truly murderous. Mann describes in detail some of the activities of settlers in the USA and Australia. The break-up of former authoritarian regimes in Europe has created the conditions for ethnic conflict to flourish under democratic regimes: Mann examines the case of the former Yugoslavia (FYR). In democracy's defence, it can be said that by no means is ethnic cleansing a strategy that emerges from democratic states alone; authoritarian regimes are capable of such atrocities – think of Nazi Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union (both cases documented by Mann). Moreover, at the heart of the main practices of democratic governance is a commitment to formal political rights for all citizens and groups that make the case for the inclusion of all groups in decision making rather than the exclusion of some ethnic groups. Indeed, many democracies have developed quite elaborate mechanisms to enable different ethnic groups to share in decision making, as the cases of South Africa or Canada, in different ways, show.

Democratic governance as discussed in this chapter is about the protection of the rights of the minority, rather than the simple imposition of rule by the majority. So the 'dark side' of democracy, that lends itself in some cases to ethnic cleansing, is a distortion of the democratic ideal, but it reflects a tension in democratic thought that cannot be wished away. Democratic governance, as advocated here, is committed to enshrining freedoms and constitutional protections into a system of collective decision making that opens access to decision making to include all social groups. That is the model of democratic governance that has gained a dominant grip on politics throughout the world, and is the model of democracy that we should be celebrating. Yet as Chapter 2 shows, many citizens in democracies struggle to find much to celebrate about the practice of democratic politics in their countries.

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