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# Democracy Is a Family Affair

Despite the latest French carping, freedom needs a helping hand

**Josef Joffe**

**L**EAVE IT TO THE FRENCH TO IMPROVE ON GROUCHO MARX, who famously proclaimed that he would not join any club that took in people like himself. The most recent French dispensation runs like this: "Even if you agree, never concur with anything formulated by somebody else—least of all by the United States." And so they didn't.

Co-sponsored by the U.S., this particular club, a "community of democracies," as Madeleine Albright put it, had gathered in Warsaw last week. More than a hundred nations signed the final declaration affirming human rights and democratic governance. Yet Hubert Védrine, the French Foreign Minister, demurred. One should eschew "sweeping generalizations" and resist "lecturing others." Democracy, he added, had to do with evolution, not with exportation.

This is true, but not the whole truth. First of all, democracy *can* be delivered—recall the examples of postwar Germany, Italy and Japan to which democracy was indeed exported, on the tracks American, British and, yes, French tanks. Even today, murderous violations of human rights, as in Kosovo, have provoked intervention, including, as Védrine might recall, the participation of French warplanes.

Second, democracy can—and sometimes must—be protected from the outside. Emerging from dictatorship in the 1970s, would Spain and Portugal have made such a smooth transition to democracy without the shelter afforded by NATO and the E.U.? And what about Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary today? Extending NATO eastward was not just a matter of security. It was also about cooing the tender shoots of East European democracy against threats from within and without.

Finally, there is backsliding and recidivism that need to be monitored and exposed. The most instructive case is Russia, where President Putin is none too tenderfooted about squelching dissent and reimposing the Kremlin's supremacy over the republics. Indifference soon brings injury to young democratic institutions, as Haiti's manipulated May election demonstrates. Or take Zimbabwe, a democracy only in name where Mugabe has used all the tools of despotism to preserve his autocratic rule. Apart from Britain, no Western government has really raised its voice in defense of the opposition and the white minority. More protests, especially if uttered in unison, might have intimidated the intimidator.

What is so great about the democratic system Winston Churchill celebrated as the least bad of all alternatives?

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Democracy is more than just ballot boxes; the critical qualifier is the add-on "liberal." Liberal governance means limited governance. It requires the protection of minority and property rights. It entails freedom of speech, press and assembly. It depends on the rule of law, hence on an independent judiciary.

If these are absent, you get Mugabe, Mahathir's Malaysia or the Mexico of yore—formal rather than vibrant democracies. Nor should one argue, as do so many autocrats and their defenders in the West, that freedom from material want is more important than freedom as such. A prison inmate may be well-fed and well-housed—so what? More important, it is precisely liberal democracy that beats authoritarianism any time when it comes to the production of wealth (Singapore notwithstanding).

Recall Uganda, once the "pearl of the British empire." Under Idi Amin, it turned into a basket case. Or right now, Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Collectivize the farms, and you get empty granaries. Terrorize your enemies, and you drive out the tourists.

It is no accident, as they used to say in the Soviet Union—the most vivid instance of the despotism-destitution link—that democracy outperforms its illiberal competitors. Where property is safe and state-power is constrained, where information flows freely while people can work and invest as they choose, resources burgeon into riches. Amartya Sen, the economics Nobel laureate, has illustrated the point amply: freedom is not some quaint luxury of the haves, but the very condition of development.

So the "community of the democracies" is not such a bad idea after all—especially for those that are still young, frail or unsure of themselves. Poland, Chile et al. do want in, and for good reasons. As Polish Foreign Minister Bronislaw Geresmek, the host of the Warsaw parley, put it: "This club is the bridge between national sovereignty and international solidarity." Hard to gainsay, least of all for the French. Back in 1789, they would have been ecstatic if their democratic revolution had faced like-minded nations rather than a reactionary alliance. ■

**TALKING IT UP: U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said the intention is not to impose democracy**