

In a Democracy, Some Decisions Are Agonizing.
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For most of human existence, leaders and priests made decisions and ordinary people either obeyed or suffered the consequences. For almost everyone, tradition left a very small range of independent decisions.

Today, certainly in the developed world, we all have to confront decisions every day, and for our elected leaders, the process is often difficult. The following is a small list of terrible decisions facing both democracies and autocracies today.

\225 The United States. Confronted with the horrors of Muammar Gaddafi\222s government slaughtering civilian dissidents right before our eyes on TV, our instincts were to give the rebels help. But why Libya and not Yemen? The President noted that we do the things we can, although we cannot do everything.

He worried that speaking up for the Libyan dissidents without protecting them, at least from a no-fly zone, would be like the first President Bush after the Gulf War urging Iraqis to rebel against Saddam Hussein and when they did, never came to their aid when Saddam crushed them.

In our enthusiasm for what looks like an \223Arab democracy\224 movement, do we know that it will result in democracy? We don\222t know. The president was condemned by conservatives for not acting sooner and by liberals for getting us into another quagmire. I think he made the only choices he could.

\225 Europeans. Dealing with Libya is even more problematic for some in Europe. France leaped right in to help the dissidents\227perhaps in part because the French Foreign Minister had disgraced herself by accepting gifts from Gaddafi. The Italians, fat with Libyan investments, had a tough decision to join the coalition too. They feel guilt about having been a monstrous colonial power when they ruled Libya, and worry about being overwhelmed by Muslim refugees if Libya is not stabilized soon.

\225 The Arab League. Although none of these states are democracies, decision making on what to do about Gaddafi is no picnic for them either. They were pressed by the US and EU to join the coalition. Although they universally detest Gaddafi, does supporting dissidents threaten their own futures? This goes beyond rallying their masses to yell \223Death to the US and Israel.\224 The US is not leading this one\227and Israel has nothing to do with it. It comes down to their own survival as autocracies\227and the accusations of hypocrisy when they support the overthrow of Gaddafi but will resist permitting their own subjects to have a voice.

\225 Israel. Negotiating peace with the neighbors can be done if both sides are making political decisions, such as Jordan and Egypt. But how does one negotiate when one side is political and the other religious? How can one negotiate \223land for peace\224 if one of the players, Militant Islamists, believe it is their religious duty to retake every land that was once ruled by Islam? What about those who lived there before Islam? Radical Zionists believe that the land was theirs long before it was under Muslim control. And what about Christians who once were the majority? What if they stake their own claims?

Hamas regards a truce as a temporary opportunity to rearm. Their operatives have recently cut the throats of a sleeping family in a Kibbutz, fired 60 rockets into southern Israel, and detonated a bomb at rush hour in Jerusalem. How does Israel handle that? How would the US handle that if rockets were lobbed from Mexico?

Israel can negotiate with a neighboring autocrat who can make political decisions today\227but what happens when he is overturned by revolution? Will political negotiations hold firm or will the new regime cancel it? This worry faces Israel in dealing with Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and others at this very revolutionary moment in Middle East history.

Israeli Palestinians have a problem too. They cannot publicly support Israel, but are privately taking out Israeli citizenship in droves. That is a decision indeed: remain in Israel or take a chance with the Islamists next door.

Decision-making is not for sissies.

665 words

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