

What Happens When People Suddenly Have Choices?
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The very notion that people have choices in their lives is so new that much of world is still reeling from this idea. For the millennia since the emergence of homo sapiens, choices have been limited. Survival depended upon families, tribes, and later kingdoms, where individual choice was inconceivable, except for the leader, whether father, clan chief, or king. Bad decisions could bring disaster on them all, and leaders were always challenged by others who would then make decisions. Dictatorships have inherited this culture.

As we have evolved from simpler to more complex societies, more choices have evolved with us. The hallmark of modern western society is how far freedom (choice) has spread. In America, we even have the choice to change our name, religion, and sometimes gender. We rarely think about the choices that our ancestors did not have:

\225 Slavery. Slaves, by the nature of the institution, had no choices.

\225 Women. With the exception of a few ancient tribes in which women determined the membership of the tribe, women have in general been slaves with little range of choice. They certainly had no choice over their mates or childbearing. The few women who, through luck, became reigning queens, were treated like surrogate males; their authority did not devolve to other women.

\225 Religion. Until the 16th century, only princes or chiefs had the right to choose the religion of their people. Changing religious affiliation could happen only under forced conversion, or under the duress of an Inquisition or unending persecution.

\225 The Reformation. During the power struggle between the Catholic Church and the Protestant spinoffs, only in England did people make personal choices\227often at great cost to themselves. In Germany and Scandinavia, Protestantism prevailed because that was the choice of princes. In Catholic Europe, conversion to Protestantism was severely persecuted.

\225 Jews. The Jewish population living amidst Christian Europe, Muslim Spain, and North Africa was decimated during the 2,000 years of diaspora. For many, it was easier to convert than to live under continual duress and humiliation. The remaining observant Jews, however, never had any other choices until the Protestant Reformation freed them to reform as well, which many did, which finally permitted Jews to assimilate into their larger populations.

\225 Politics. Until the 16th century, nobody had choices about how their societies would be governed. The process of extending this power occurred only in Europe and its spawn, America and British colonies, in which all men of property could vote. That power was gradually extended to all men, and finally (and reluctantly) to women.

Today, as dictatorships fall, people who have never had choice are eagerly embracing it. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the smothering autocracy gave way to anarchy and criminal organizations. They are doing better today, largely because they are modern and literate. However, Russian culture has always preferred the devil they know to anarchy, and their democracy is pretty thin. Over time, it will probably improve.

But the fall of dictatorships in the Muslim world is promising choices for people who have never had choice before. Their only models of choice are those of the West\227embraced only by the minority with western-type educations and travel. The vast majority has no understanding of what real political choice is. It is more than holding an election, it is a system that protects minorities and balances the institutions of power.

The majority has no choice under their family structure (particularly women), which is patriarchal and oppressive; and none in their religion or governance. The political choices that these people are making seem to be turning toward Islam, which they still imagine is benign (watch Libya). Even \223moderate\224 Islam does not support

equality for women and for non-believers. Living under Shariah Law is the opposite of the modern culture of freedom of choice. To get rid of it, they will need another revolution. Iran chose an Islamic Revolution in 1979, and has not yet gotten out from under.

We all love having choice. But with choice comes the responsibility to make it a good choice. Easier said than done.

677 words

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