

Democracy or Dictatorship?  
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Thoughtful human beings have pondered on what form of government produces the most orderly and happiest system for public prosperity and happiness. Only thoughtful people think about this; the vast majority of people are too busy surviving to give this much thought, until or unless they are so unhappy that they revolt.

Ancient Greece, 2500 years ago, was unique in its time that it offered a variety of city states that produced different styles of governance. That these people all spoke a common language (Greek) enabled them opportunities to compare the benefits and deficits of these systems. Athens, one of these city states, produced the first political system that tried representative democracy.

They rid themselves of monarchs, dictators, and all-powerful aristocracy, and instead governed themselves by giving each property-owning free citizen (shopkeepers, artisans) a vote, publicly collected, to make decisions regarding the city's governance. This worked for about 80 years, until it collapsed due to some bad decisions and invasion by another city-state, Sparta, a military state ruled by military aristocrats.

Despite the collapse of Athenian democracy, the idea of citizens ruling themselves under laws accepted by voters (tried briefly by Rome also) remained for 2500 years until a group of English educated gentlemen, both land owners (Southern states) and university or self-educated lawyers and business men (Northerners such as John Adams and Benjamin Franklin) created a government based on the Greek and Roman experiments.

Traditional monarchies and dictatorships were not pleased by this new experiment in representative government. They believed that the United States would not survive long, and in case they were wrong, they tried to smother it in its cradle. To everyone's surprise, their efforts failed and the new country thrived, despite its obvious problems. Fortunately, the democracy system was designed to change with the times, extending voting rights from white men of property to all white male citizens, then to former male slaves, and finally to women, white or of color.

This system was not always orderly and peaceful. It was challenged by a devastating civil war that nearly divided the country into two opposing systems: one protecting slavery and the other, the winner, on a better union of free men. It survived years of corrupt governance financed by a handful of robber barons (1865-1905), and challenges by authoritarian systems (fascism and communism) throughout the 20th century.

By the end of the 20th century, American democracy prevailed, and a flurry of new democracies emerged out of collapsed former dictatorships and failed empires. Some historians predicted that history had come to an end, with democracy the winner world-wide.

Alas, now in the first quarter of the 21st century, the ugly struggle between dictatorships and democracies is roiling the world again. Russia has morphed, after the collapse of the Russian Empire and then Communist empire, into a kleptocracy run by a mafia-organized dictator who runs a failing state with nuclear arms.

The Chinese Empire has morphed into a Marxist dictatorship that dominates Asia. India, freed from the British Empire, has morphed into a very flawed democracy that is run by an increasingly dictatorial Hindu religious fascist.

On the democracy front is the United States and all the other English-speaking republics (Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada) and the very well run western and northern European republics (the EU, Scandinavians, and Finland).

In eastern Europe, Africa, and South America are countries that profess democracy but wobble on the edge of authoritarianism once more. We increasingly see elected leaders who cheat their way into fraudulent elections that keep them in life-long power (such as Poland and Hungary), which are considered only partly free by the annual report, Freedom in the World, issued by Freedom House.

Democracies are challenged by attacks on the free press, independent judges, fair election processes, and Russian-financed disinformation campaigns designed to divide populations and promote proto-dictatorships.

The one common element that produces dictators and threatens democracies is the

character of its authorities. Good character is the one indispensable quality of leadership. People will follow such leaders (as they are in Ukraine today).

People are hungry for the decency and good character of their leaders.

687 words

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