Lecture VI

Dystopian Democracy
Or
Popular Authoritarianism

"There will be no democratic system at all," Taliban commander Waheedullah Hashimi said in an interview with Reuters. "We will not discuss what type of political system should we apply in Afghanistan because it is clear. It is sharia law and that is it."

The various authors whose works on democracy we have looked at anticipated in many instances the dangerous moment for democracy we are now living through. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Montesquieu, and de Tocqueville all feared that democratic excess would lead to tyranny, either of a majority or a powerful minority of the population which supports a demagogue because it feels threatened by a wealthy elite or a radical minority. There are few philosophers advocating a form of authoritarian democracy, but we are seeing an increasing number of practitioners of this form of government.

Democracy defined as a system in which freedom and equality are the prevailing features appears to have an ugly step-sister, that thrives instead on censorship and discrimination. These "anti-democracies" enjoy popular support, for the most part, and thrive on a diet of nationalism and xenophobia. Regimes of this nature can carry the label "communist," "authoritarian," or just "nationalist." During the interwar years of the 20th century, such popular authoritarian regimes took power throughout much of Europe, with the most virulent being found in Italy and Germany. Recently, historians and commentators have wrestled with the proposition that such "fascist" regimes could reappear in our own time.

The failure of the Marxist theory of history to work out in reality and the abandonment of the "class struggle" that once seemed to be the motive force of history, has opened the road to post-communist regimes that appear closer to the nationalistic, fascist states of the 1930s and 1940s than to the grim Stalinist "workers' paradise" of that era. While at one time, political thinkers believed a free market system could only operate in a democratic state, and that a democratic state had to have a free market economic system, we have seen over the past few decades that capitalism and a form of authoritarian state are perfectly compatible.

While Marx did not have much to say about the sort of government that would emerge after a communist takeover of the state, Vladimir Lenin did attempt in his little book *The State and Revolution* (1918) to draft a blueprint for the transition from a "bourgeois" democracy (or tsarist autocracy) to a virtually stateless society via a "dictatorship of the proletariat." Of course Lenin died before he could see the creation of Stalin's totalitarian police state, but it is not at all clear that he would have disapproved. I will start this discussion of popular or populist authoritarianism with a few quotations about "democracy" from Lenin's book:

A democratic republic is the best possible political shell for capitalism. (p. 14)

Lenin cites Friedrich Engels in asserting that "universal suffrage" is "an instrument of bourgeois rule." (14)

But it has no application to the "present day" and *it is a "false notion that universal suffrage . . . is capable of expressing the will of the majority of laboring people and securing its implementation."* (15)

And those who criticize Engels, Lenin writes, for saying democracy will cease of itself after the socialist revolution *"have not taken into account that democracy is also a state and that, consequently, democracy will also disappear when the state disappears. "* (18)

In the meantime, however,*"We are in favour of a democratic republic as the best form of the state for the proletariat under capitalism; but we have no right to forget that wage slavery is the lot of the people even in the most democratic bourgeois republic."* (19)

The proliferation of anti-democratic regimes over the past few years raises the question broached by de Tocqueville as to whether it is true that a democratic government grows out of a society that is already democratic, that is, one that has historically developed an ethos in which freedom and equality are already largely in place, even if there is a ruling group, be it an aristocracy or an oligarchy, or even a monarchy, that retains its hold on many aspects of the nation's government. De Tocqueville believed American democracy grew from the grass roots up – the New England town meeting, the other local government bodies, the colonial assemblies that preceded the states formed at the time of the Revolution – all these made the creation of a national democracy perfectly normal and expected. One could go back even further and trace American democracy to its roots in England, where the English people had slowly asserted themselves as rulers of the nation, and where a long history of civil liberties had built up from the Magna Carta of 1215 to the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Other Western democracies have had similar trajectories, many with set-backs such as Bonapartism or Fascism, but ultimately issuing into full-blown democracy of the sort found in all Western European countries and most of the new regimes of Eastern Europe, but not in Russia. De Tocqueville and our modern commentators on democracy raise the question as to whether our democratic system is actually transferable to countries that have not had a democratic development like our own or that of Western Europe.

We can cite a few exceptions, such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and a few other countries that have instituted successful democratic governments, sometimes with and sometimes without American or other Western assistance. Most of Latin America, outside of Cuba and now Nicaragua, have managed to create some semblance of democratic rule, but these countries seem constantly in danger of plunging into some form of authoritarian regime.

Africa has, in general, failed to maintain democratic nations outside of the Republic of South Africa and one or two other countries that have relatively orderly changes of government and guarantees of human rights.

In Asia and the Middle East, we can cite India and Pakistan as relatively stable democracies at this time, although both have exhibited authoritarian tendencies, with either Hindu nationalism or Islamic militarism clouding the democratic picture. The Middle East is, of course, a disaster area for democracy, with Israel standing alone as a functioning democracy there, while Jordan has sunk into a corrupt period and with places like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria totally outside the democratic family of nations. Turkey to the north also seems to be teetering on the edge of authoritarian rule under the heavy hand of the Erdogan government. All in all, not a pretty picture.

We next turn to our long-time adversaries Russia and China to examine what can happen when a communist regime undergoes a total breakdown, as in Russia, or, as in China, a miraculous transformation into a hybrid communist-capitalist system, a seeming oxymoron until one appreciates how well it appears to work. Does democracy have any future in these two giant nations?

In Russia, opposition leader Alexei Novalny says Putin's "regime" is doomed because some 30 per cent of Russians who live in urban areas are unrepresented by the long time leader. In fact, Putin has sought to

project for years a quasi-democratic system in which elections are held on a regular schedule and public opinion is closely followed. However, studies show that his government, or regime, is highly dependent on economic success, which has been rather sparse of late. Volatile oil and gas prices have left the state in an unstable condition – when they are up, the polls show his rule as quite popular, when they are down, his popularity declines drastically. Most Russians, as is the case with populations in all of the post-Soviet states, have little interest in politics and are only or primarily concerned about their own economic prospects. To the extent that the government can provide a widening array of consumer goods and good paying jobs, Russians will support it; but an economic downturn could quickly undercut popular support.

Timothy Frye in his recent book *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (2021) cites numerous surveys and studies by social scientists, both Russian and non-Russian, of Putin's Russia, which he calls a "non-democratic" state, as opposed to "anti-democratic" or even authoritarian. Frye sees Putin as a "personalist autocrat," a sort of ruler whose power is based largely on his own feel for popular opinion and not on his leadership of a military junta or a well-organized authoritarian party. Again and again in the studies cited by Frye, the importance of Russian public opinion as a support for the Putin autocracy comes through. During his first years in power, from 2000 to 2008, Putin relied on the booming oil and gas prices to feed his popularity; then after 2008, he turned to Russian nationalism as a prop, especially his 2014 annexation of the Crimea to Russia. The Crimea had been part of Ukraine since Khrushchev awarded it to the then subject country in the early 1960s and it remained a Ukrainian province after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. But the recent downturn in oil and gas prices and the sanctions imposed for Russia's seizure of Crimea and its aid to separatists in eastern Ukraine have hurt Putin's standing with the Russian electorate. As a result, Putin and the security services that are one of his main sources of support, have turned to strong-arm tactics against the democratic opposition, imprisoning (or poisoning) opposition candidates and driving many dissidents into exile. In other words, when positive appeals to public opinion ceased to provide the kind of electoral results he desired, he reverted to the tried and true system of outright repression.

Frye notes the dilemma Putin and other autocrats face when trying to maintain the façade of democratic government while secretly engineering a fraudulent electoral result: "Like all autocrats, Putin faces a thorny trade-off when choosing to rig elections. Too much fraud and too little fraud both pose risks."

Frye calls Putin a "weak strongman" in part because he has tried to have the appearance of democracy without the danger of an unfavorable election result. "An autocratic ruler who mismanages the trade-off between cheating too much and revealing weakness or cheating too little and actually losing the election puts their position in peril. Fraud is a much blunter tool than many realize," he concludes. (84)

Frye enumerates the many familiar ways in which Putin and his supporters rig elections, from fraudulent counting of results to intimidation or disqualification of candidates seeking to run against the government party, United Russia, or one of its approved surrogates. Similar subverting of free and fair elections has occurred in Hungary and Turkey and, of course, in many other countries outside of Europe where elections are almost uniformly characterized by manipulation by the ruling party. Obviously, the definition of an autocrat is a leader who refuses to be defeated in an election. This is why most autocrats are eventually brought down by street demonstrations and bloody confrontations.

Speaking of the American attempt to bring democracy to Afghanistan, Putin might just as well have been speaking about our attempt to bring democracy to Russia and the other post-Soviet republics after the fall of the Soviet Union. He said, in a press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, that one country should not try to impose its values upon another: "You cannot impose your standards of political behavior or social organization on others, because others have their own religious and cultural specificities." He cited the desire to "build democracy" as one such "value" that could not be imposed successfully from outside, without "taking into account either historical, national or religious

characteristics. . . ." One may well wonder if he was talking about Afghanistan -- or Russia -- as the country upon which the West has tried to "impose" its values.

Turning to China we see much the same process of "personal autocracy" with the ascension of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Xi Jinping to a position of near unquestioned authority. In the early years of China's "opening" under Deng Xiaoping, the West held out the hope that China might in fact abandon its repressive communist regime and evolve into a democratic country. Unfortunately this hope was disappointed in 1989 with the crushing of the pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. Deng had no intention of altering the country's political system, but only its economic system, and that only gradually and partially. In his recent book *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century* (2020), Bruce K. Dickson concludes that we should not expect an authoritarian regime like that in China to evolve into a democracy (Frye made much the same point about Russia). Dickson writes that "Without regime change, there can be no democratization – but even if the party does fall from power, democracy is not guaranteed. In recent decades, most cases of regime change did not result in democracy, but in new forms of authoritarian rule" (10).

In fact, the CCP feels it has developed a certain form of democracy in which the party seeks to both elicit the views of the masses and to impose its own views on the masses, what Chairman Mao called the "mass line." He instructed the party even in the pre-1949 period to make sure its policies had popular support by seeking the views of the masses and shaping its actions based on this popular feedback. Dickson writes that "the mass line is one of the few Maoist traditions that has not been abandoned or discredited by China's post-Mao leaders." But, he goes on, "In theory, the mass line compels party leaders to listen to the masses and shape policies that respond to their concerns. In practice, the mass line is more about going to the masses to sell the policies the leaders have decided upon and less about soliciting mass opinion. The masses have little opportunity to offer feedback, and little incentive to challenge the leaders' decisions directly." (67-68) Without elections and competitive parties, it is hard to see how "the masses" can effectively tell the CCP's leaders at the various levels what they want (and who they want to implement the policies).

The CCP does allow democratic elections on the village level, but these are merely for show and are used more as a way to gauge public opinion. All the more powerful positions from the village level to the national level are filled by appointment from above. There are no opposition parties nor even any "front" parties such as those found in Russia. The CCP numbers some 90 million members, about 6.5 per cent of the population, but to head any significant organization in the country, one must be a party member.

At one time there was some hope that so-called Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) might be able to put pressure on the government to democratize decision making. Amazingly there are some 800,000 NGO's registered with the Chinese government at this time and thousands of others than exist without government registration. Under Xi, there has been a concerted effort to crack down on any NGO that seemed inclined to engage in political activity. Sports clubs, neighborhood clean-up groups, social clubs of any sort, are permitted, but anything the least bit controversial is quickly squelched. NGO's that have any foreign connections are especially subject to government supervision and ties to organizations outside of China have become an excuse to close down such groups, even if their object is as innocuous as protecting migrating butterflies. "Civil society," is the political scientist's term for social groups that are outside government control. Such groups took the form of independent trade unions in communist-era Poland, or Catholic writer's clubs or the church itself in that country, but in China independent trade unions are not allowed and the churches are closely monitored and thoroughly infiltrated by communist party spies. It is hard to see how Chinese society can develop any independent life free of government control with the massive and all-pervasive systems of surveillance the CCP has put in place.

The rapid dismantling of free institutions such as the media or non-communist political parties in Hong Kong shows how determined the CCP is to crush any semblance of free institutions in areas under its control. The notorious "Document No. 9" a secret communiqué issued by the Party in 2012 and leaked by a Chinese dissident in 2013 outlines the challenges facing the Party and its ideology from Western "values," chief among which is "liberal democracy." It is rather disconcerting to read that such things as a free press and free elections are considered almost pornographic, and could cause the total undermining of the Party's ruling ideology of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." The document lists "Seven Noteworthy Problems" starting with the promotion of "Western Constitutional Democracy" including such "heinous" ideas as "the separation of powers, the multi-party system, general elections, and independent judiciaries." The above cited remarks by Putin on the West's arrogant attempt to impose its values on other people doubtless was music to the ears of the CCP's ideologues and places Putin securely in the camp of those who reject – and actually fear – Western values. To the men and women of the authoritarian states, the West's democratic values are a threat to their power and are viewed as apt to corrupt the youth of the country. Social media are fine, as long as they are used exclusively to transmit the party's message; but they must be closely monitored to ensure that Western values are not being promoted.

The exact use made of this communiqué by the party is unclear, but subsequent statements from Xi Jinping make clear that he approves the message it is sending, something he has amply demonstrated by the brutal crackdown in Hong Kong.

Ann Lee, a Chinese-American investment banker and political commentator, wrote in her book *What the U.S. Can Learn From* China (2012) that China is actually a "meritocracy" where the top positions in government and in the private sector are filled by individuals who have proved their competence and honesty in lower level jobs. This, she writes, contrasts sharply with the American system of government, where anyone with the money and political backing can attain a position of power in the public sector. American democracy, she contends, compares unfavorably with the Chinese system because our leaders have not been selected (as in China) through a rigorous process of testing that takes into account their performance in lower-level jobs. To Lee, government is no different from business, and in both sectors the process of selection should be controlled by an elite that has itself arrived at its positions of authority through this meritocratic selection process.

Lee wrote before Xi Jinping engineered his "leader for life" election by the CCP's Politburo. Is Mr. Xi so "competent" that he is irreplaceable? Ms. Lee's argument is not unique and many people in China and elsewhere would prefer a political system that rewards competence over popularity, but somewhere along the line the whole purpose of politics is lost. By many measures, James Buchanan was our most "competent" president: he served as secretary of state and ambassador to Great Britain, before that he served in the House of Representatives and the Senate from Pennsylvania. Based on his resume, he should have been an excellent president, but, according to historians, he was one of the worst presidents in American history. He utterly failed to confront the crisis that arose in the South after the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and essentially abdicated responsibility for saving the Union. The man who replaced him had served as a state legislator in Illinois and one term in Congress. What Ms. Lee and other defenders of the Chinese system fail to appreciate is that political leadership must be renewed from time to time by free and fair elections – not by co-option from above. Without such democratic consultations, even the most competent-seeming leadership can lose touch with the popular will and thereby prove incapable of dealing with the nation's challenges.

A recent book that somewhat supports Ms. Lee's argument, *The WEIRDest People in the World* (2020) by Harvard evolutionary biologist Joseph Henrich, posits a whole series of evolutionary developments over hundreds of years as an explanation for Western democratic institutions. Key to the creation of modern Western democracies, Henrich maintains, was the Catholic and then Protestant churches' gradual

replacement of "kinship ties" with a legal and cultural regime that treated each person as an individual rather than a member of a group – whether it be one based on family-ties, professional associations, or religious affiliation. The development of the modern, Western state, in other words, was part and parcel of the evolution of Western society from the late Middle Ages into the 1700s, when the American and French Revolutions signaled the final break with the West's medieval past. Thomas Jefferson's ringing declaration that "all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights" (based on the works of John Locke, among others) was just the culmination of centuries of European history. Although European and American influences followed Western conquest of the non-Western world, the belief that Western religious and political practices could be grafted onto non-Western societies has generally failed to hold up in practice. If Henrich's explanation is accepted, then the WEIRD people (i.e., Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) are likely to remain an exception in a world where traditional kinship ties and religious beliefs continue to control most peoples' lives.

At the same time, urging Americans to be more like the Chinese, as Ms. Lee does, is also unlikely to have any effect. If, as Henrich argues, our democratic way of life is the result of hundreds (if not thousands) of years of cultural development, it is hardly likely that we can quickly abandon our current political system and substitute a Chinese-style one-party state for it. But Henrich may also be somewhat naïve regarding the deep roots of our democratic way of life – witness the abandonment of democratic norms in Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. One of the birth places of modern democracy, France, essentially jettisoned its parliamentary system and accepted an authoritarian strongman in the form of the 80-year-old Marshall Philip Petain following the Nazi conquest in 1940. Similar failures of democracy are found in today's post-communist states like Poland and Hungary, although neither of these countries has a long tradition of democratic rule. Poland was an authoritarian state in 1939 when Hitler unleashed his attack and Hungary joined the Nazi alliance in 1940 under the titular leadership of Admiral Horthy. Even supposedly democratic Norway produced a proto-fascist leader by the name of Quisling during the war. In fact, within every democratic state there probably lurks a small group of ambitious men who would willingly cooperate with and loudly support a fascist demagogue. Democracy, then, is a delicate plant. It is not a way of life that is somehow implanted in our DNA. It must be nurtured and practiced on a daily basis or it is possible it will succumb to anti-democratic forces that always lurk in the recesses of society.