

Is Democracy Enough?

January 17, 2006

Dear Don Quixote,

Your views shared with us yesterday (1-11-06) through the *Democracy In Lebanon* website (without reference to its inflammatory title) tie the regional with the international on the geopolitical scene, with quite a big stretch of unsubstantiated assumptions requiring a big leap of faith from an uninformed reader. As a result, being uninformed in the face of authoritarian roar, a placid reader may soon develop your serious analysis into deep conviction at a time when utmost sectarian decompression is advised. Be it as it may, I kindly argue the following case for democracy, teasing the mind of a placid reader a bit further. Democracy reached adolescence this century but remains quite controversial. To better define democracy is to place this word within the context of social norm, how it's used and applied (social practice is the cradle of language, nothing else is).

Briefly, the word democracy brings to mind 'free election', 'majority vote', 'power to self-rule and determination', and other consequences thereof. There are flagrant misinterpretations of democracy, or surrogates to democracy, such as 'conditional democracy' and 'evilness of non-democratic alternatives'. Non-democratic alternatives include dictatorship (obviously) but also extend to tribalism and many forms of divine or spiritual leaderships. An example of conditional democracy is when a minority suspends democracy to eliminate or neutralize the majority (by physical violence or even 'unfair' judiciary and legislative means), then reinstates democracy after becoming itself majority, thus proclaiming supreme state power (e.g. colonial conquests, oppression of non-Jewish citizens in Israel, etc.) Accordingly, the following examples echo 'democratic incongruence':

- Castro, Lenin and Hitler publicly pledged democracy
- India (in the 'far East') is the largest non-Western democracy
- Slavery was legitimate in the U.S.A. (a country founded on democratic ideals)
- Iran and Israel are both democratic countries

Notwithstanding ethical considerations, and the genealogy (conditions of birth) of democracy, let us reflect on our deep commitment for democracy not in any other disguised form; shall we or shall we not accept the free will of the majority expressed by universal referendum? Let us carefully look at Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Palestinian territories, Venezuela and, more pertinent, Lebanon and examine the ailments of democracy ranging from oppression, electoral fraud and physical harm against the majority of the masses. Arguably, some of these ailments can be chronically cured by remedying poverty and ignorance. But should we not admit that, even if 'cured', the masses could still willfully, informatively and deliberately choose to be so, to act as such and to believe as they please?

We may have a tough time accepting that one may just favor sour and bitter over sweet, or poverty over worldly riches, or stickiness over cleanliness... But once that flag of democracy is waved, the rules of the game cannot suddenly change! All bets are off when that torch of Lady Liberty is held high and votes cast should be counted immediately without prejudice or delay; that is democracy under the sun! Even if the majority decides to suspend its treatise with the rest of the globe or chew on Qat (stimulant) the whole day, that wish is to be respected. If the majority in Lebanon chooses sectarianism, tribalism and alliance to foreign countries (democratically), shall we forcefully oppress the masses?

But something doesn't click here, does it? Democracy should not be the ultimate goal of a healthy society, may be a requirement or only a minor condition but certainly not a sufficient one. Democracy alone cannot maintain social order. What comes after democracy? What are the guarantees for a functional, non-self destructive society? These are the questions that should be asked and answered fundamentally, sectarian rhetoric aside. I bet the masses in Lebanon and even in larger democracies where oppression shadows democracy deserve a dignified reply to that question.

Perhaps this is one answer; democracy is only a roadmap to social security through fairness, equality and meritocracy. Let's roll back the flag of democracy then if we're not ready to discuss what lies immediately ahead of democracy. Granted Iraqis recently went to vote quasi-freely, but they then returned to their ravaged homes and slept on empty stomachs intoxicated with democratic stupor, only to wake up next day with a democracy hang-over.

Democracy in Lebanon, unfortunately spells sectarianism, which happens to be the default normative order. If we accept that, if we only shout Democracy and stop at that, then your contribution to the *Democracy In Lebanon* website echoes the same voices heard on the evening news in Lebanon. With such a sectarian undertone, we would have miserably failed to lay out a road map for justice and equality.

In the end, even if what you said might be true, some things are better left unspoken, like silent windmills.

Sincerely,

Carl Saab*.

* Carl Saab, born and raised in Lebanon, he graduated from the American University of Beirut (AUB) with B.S. and M.S. degrees. He then traveled to the United States where he obtained his Ph.D. degree from the University of Texas and completed his three-year fellowship at Yale University, Department of Neurology. Dr. Saab was appointed visiting lecturer at AUB, School of Medicine, and currently serves as Assistant Professor of Research at Brown University, Department of Surgery, pursuing basic science research in the field of neuroscience.