

Should All Countries Be Democracies?

International declarations of human rights proclaim that all societies, regardless of level of development, should be political democracies. In all societies, however poor and economically backward, public decisions are to be made by citizens expressing their preferences in open and free elections, and the right to participate in the political decision-making process is to be universally respected. Many political theorists and economists argue, however, that developing societies are not fully ready for democracy; democratic institutions presuppose certain economic, social, and political conditions that are simply not present in many poor nations. On their view, democracy may be the ideal against which the governments of the wealthy, industrial nations are to be judged; but it is neither appropriate nor fair to hold the political institutions of developing societies to the same standard.

This debate has considerable importance for contemporary political practice. The conduct of foreign policy by a great power such as the United States may decisively influence the prospects of democratic movements or regimes elsewhere, even when this influence is unintended, and particularly in developing societies whose domestic affairs are especially vulnerable to outside events. Democratic regimes might be destabilized as a result of IMF-imposed austerity measures; authoritarian regimes might be reinforced by favorable aid and credit policies; military assistance intended to strengthen a friendly regime threatened from the outside may provide hardware and training for domestic repression. In morally appraising the consequences of its foreign policy, the United States cannot ignore the question of whether democratic institutions are or are not desirable in all societies.

We can take it as a settled part of our moral outlook that relatively developed industrial societies should be politically democratic. Democratic institutions are justified by appeal to a fundamental principle of political equality: political institutions should be arranged so

that all members are treated as equals. Democracy promotes equality by affirming citizens' respect for themselves and others as persons capable of making and carrying out their own political choices: each individual is regarded by others as a person whose choices deserve to be taken into account. And democratic procedures seem more likely than others to yield policies and practices that take equal account of everyone's legitimate claims. The interests of all are more likely to be furthered under democratic rule.

Such is the traditional justification for democracy in advanced societies. If this justification does not hold for the developing countries of the Third World, the reasons should emerge in a comparison of the social, economic, and political characteristics of developed and developing societies. Do the different circumstances of the world's poorer nations lead to different conclusions about what form of government is morally best for them?

Cultural Differences

Many contemporary developing societies lack certain cultural features that are present in the Western democracies and appear to be related to their political stability and efficiency. These include widely held attitudes on the part of citizens that political decisions are indeed significant determinants of social welfare, and that citizens generally can and should influence these decisions. Strong political cultures encouraging broad citizen participation are not found in most developing societies. On the contrary, active interest and participation in political events is unusual. If a flourishing political culture is a necessary condition for the development of political democracy, these cultural differences tell decisively.

Assuming for the moment that these observations about the political cultures of developing societies are true, what is their relevance? The mere fact that a civic culture is present in democracies and absent in nondemocracies does not show that it is a necessary condition of democracy. But the political culture argument does undercut the traditional justification for democracy. Democracy does not affirm self-respect if political activity is not viewed as an important means of control over one's life prospects. In traditional cultures self-respect is secured in other

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ways, for example, by willingly carrying out one's assigned role in a social hierarchy. Furthermore, democracy is likely to produce legislation that takes account of all interests only if political rights are exercised by all segments of the population. In nonparticipatory societies, democratic institutions are unlikely to ensure that all interests will be taken into account.

Even if the political culture argument is valid, however, it does not follow that authoritarian institutions are to be preferred, from a moral point of view, to democratic ones. The important question is whether a particular authoritarian government will fare any

and developing societies lies in the strength of their political institutions. The political institutions of developing societies tend to be weaker and comparatively inefficient and unreliable. They perform their principal functions poorly and they do so at great cost.

According to Samuel P. Huntington, well-known for his work in this area, the political institutions of developing societies must be strengthened before widespread political participation can be encouraged. Huntington holds that the creation of political institutions is undermined by the premature expansion of opportunities for political participation. On his view,



Courtesy National Archives

Pre-election address to a crowd in Ghana

better at sustaining self-respect and taking account equally of all citizens' interests.

There is controversy as well about whether the political culture analysis of nonparticipation in developing societies is accurate. Peasants struggling along in subsistence agriculture may decline political participation for reasons that have little to do with the presence or absence of a strong political culture. If a peasant's main concern is bare survival, political passivity is simply a risk-minimizing strategy. Lack of political participation need not be a sign that political rights have little value in securing self-respect. It may be merely a rational response to the structure of opportunities and costs grimly presented in day-to-day subsistence.

Institutional Weakness

Another important difference between developed

the costs of democracy at early stages in the process of political modernization are excessive: premature creation of participatory institutions will endanger other human rights, such as the right to security of the person, and reduce the efficiency with which government performs its other functions.

Huntington's position can be questioned on several grounds. One might wonder, for example, if experience bears out the hypothesis that political institutions of prematurely participatory societies tend to decay rather than to develop. More fundamentally, Huntington's view invites the conclusion that institutional stability is to be valued regardless of who wields power within those institutions. As institutions are strengthened, the political power of the underlying coalition of social forces is strengthened as well. Huntington's view might justify a government in suppressing personal liberties in order to protect

the most regressive of underlying social interests.

Thus, even if widespread political participation does hamper institutional development, democratic institutions would be inappropriate in a developing society only if alternative institutions would be more likely to promote the development of eventual social justice. Huntington's claims provide no reason to fall back on uncritical support for authoritarian institutions regardless of their social bases and their tendency to enhance or hinder the prospects of liberty.

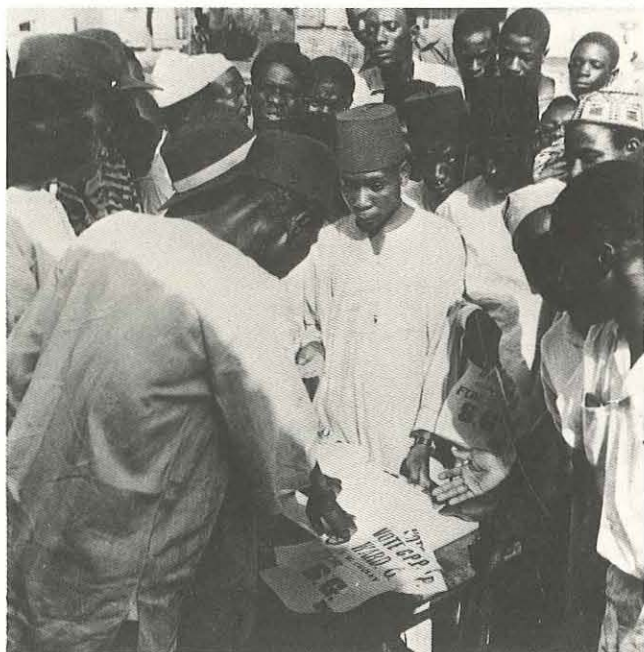
The Dynamics of Growth

By definition, the developing societies have production capabilities vastly below those of developed societies. At the same time, their rates of population growth are comparatively high. For both reasons, economic growth is extremely important. A common view is that democratic politics tends to reduce the rate of growth, both in developed and developing countries. What might be called the "growth first" argument holds that rapid growth is the more urgent goal in developing societies, justifying the suppression of political rights on its behalf.

The argument runs as follows. Growth is primarily a process of capital formation, and the rate of capital formation is a function of the rate of savings. Since the rich have a higher propensity to save, the larger share of national income should be channeled to the wealthy. Democratic institutions tend to work against this pattern of income distribution, depressing the rate of savings below its optimal level. Thus economic growth can best be promoted by authoritarian regimes.

Voter Registration

Courtesy National Archives



This argument may well point to a trade-off between growth and democracy. It is less clear, however, that this trade-off should be resolved in favor of economic growth. It is certainly *not* clear unless the goal of economic growth is qualified by distributive considerations. Development strategies designed to maximize growth have in fact often resulted in absolute declines in the well-being of the poorer half of the population. The "growth first" argument as it stands fails to recognize that what is important is not promoting growth per se, but promoting equitable growth: growth that helps to alleviate and prevent the worst forms of poverty. If the "growth first" argument gives us a reason to reject democracy in developing societies, it must be because authoritarian governments are likely to be more successful in fostering *equitable* growth.

There are two ways in which democratic institutions operating in poor societies can fail to promote the economic interests of the least well-off. First, political rights, even where available to all, benefit some more than others. Inequalities in education and wealth result in unequal abilities to take advantage of such rights in pressing effective claims. Second, electoral mechanisms among uninformed and frequently illiterate peasants are particularly prone to manipulation by traditional elites. In both cases inequalities in social background are reflected in large inequalities of political influence, and those most in need of protection are least able to obtain it through political means. A non-democratic regime may be preferred to a democratic one if (and this is a large "if") it more adequately satisfies the requirements of genuine political equality.

Conclusions

None of the anti-democratic arguments supports the general conclusion that democracy is inappropriate in developing societies. All suffer from an unwarranted a priori belief that authoritarian regimes can be expected to govern more successfully than democratic ones. But all authoritarian governments are not created equal: some are competent and some are incompetent; some respect personal rights and some are ruthlessly repressive; some have the support of disadvantaged groups and some represent privileged interests. Surely these differences matter.

There may be circumstances under which democratic governments may be less likely to treat all their members as equals. Initial inequalities in the distribution of material resources may permit advantaged social groups to exploit the machinery of democracy at the expense of those less advantaged. This could not be a sufficient reason, however, to reject democratic forms of government. There must in addition be some reason to believe that an alternative regime would be more successful in these respects, without being morally deficient in other ways, for example, by turning to brutal and repressive means for securing the compliance of the population. These are both tall orders, and it is, to say the least, most unlikely that very many actual authoritarian regimes would pass these tests.