SUPPLEMENTARY READING FOR BP

TOPIC: Benevolent dictatorship vs. democracy
ARTICLE 1- THE END OF THE BENEVOLENT DICTATOR  
February 7, 2012

In 458 B.C.E., Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus—at the request of high ranking officials—came out of retirement to rule as Roman dictator. The Aequians, who lived in the central Appennines of Italy, were fighting for their independence from Rome. The capital was in danger of losing control.

Cincinnatus, who because of unfortunate familial circumstances had been forced to live a humble life of farming, immediately raised an army, conquered the Aequians, and then resigned his ruling post. His reign lasted sixteen days. Cincinnatus then returned to his farm to live a quiet life.

Or so he thought. Again, in 439, the retired statesman was asked to return to consulship in order to quash a conspiracy to kill the king that, had the assassination been carried out, would have had devastating political consequences. As soon as the plot was destroyed, Cincinnatus once again retired to farming.

In each tenure, Cincinnatus held power only for as long as it took to save his republic. Not one day more. History has judged Cincinnatus to be the epitome of the benevolent dictator. That is, Cincinnatus ruled in order to serve the common good, rather than out of self-interest.

Few true benevolent dictators have existed throughout history. Many consider George Washington, the United States’ first president after the American Revolution, to be a benevolent dictator. Washington resigned his office after two four-year terms (he ran unopposed in 1789 and against John Adams in 1792), despite the fact that he certainly would have been re-elected, and probably re-elected again after that. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who served four presidential terms during the Great Depression and World War II, has also been thought to have been a kind of benevolent dictator. (Being a benevolent dictator in a democracy, by the way, is not necessarily contradictory.)

Often the moniker of benevolent dictator is bestowed not by the people, but is self-imposed by grandiose individuals. Today, the likes of Fidel Castro, Kim Jong-II, Daniel Ortega, Hugo Chávez, and Muammar Gaddafi immediately come to mind. In these instances, the individual sees himself as the man “of the people, for the people,” yet the international community draws a different characterization. Whether or
not the likes of Castro, Chávez, or Gaddafi has the support of their people, they never seem to convince most others (outsiders, foreigners) of their case.

Thanks to the Arab Spring uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, the veneer of benevolent dictatorship is very quickly being wiped away. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, and Gaddafi, respectively, are gone, despite their own inclinations that their service was for the common good, rather than of self-interest. Similar leaderships are being very seriously challenged in Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen, and perhaps it is only a matter of time before the (benevolent) kingdoms of Saudi Arabia and Jordan are also tested.

In this day, when so many dictators are being assayed, if not outright toppled, is there room for another benevolent leader? Who would dare follow in the footsteps of Cincinnatus? Nelson Mandela seems the closest to a modern-day Cincinnatus: after having won his freedom and helped move South Africa toward reconciliation, he served just a single presidential term (1994-1999) before stepping down.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin appears keen to take the mantle. Yet recent demonstrations numbering in the tens of thousands in Moscow and across the vast country indicate that, unlike Cincinnatus, the people aren’t behind the man (much to Putin’s surprise, I think). In Burma, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi seems the next most eligible Cincinnatus: beloved by her countrymen (beyond measure), she is running for parliament and in all likelihood will eventually claim the presidency of the poor, South East Asian state. And just like Mandela (and unlike Putin), Suu Kyi has broad support in the international community.

Troubling, though, is the apparent threat that these peacemongers pose to conservative (status quo) maniacs. Indeed, those whom citizens may support in a benevolent dictatorial role and who may also garner the backing of leaders worldwide never get the chance to lead. Mahatma Gandhi, for one, might have had a chance. Given racial tensions in the U.S., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had less of a chance, but a chance nonetheless. And what about Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan? The problem, however, is that these potential benevolent leaders were taken down by assassins before they had the chance to wear the crown.

SOURCE:
http://www.mantlethought.org/international-affairs/end-benevolent-dictator
Many have pondered this question, in fact, Winston Churchill himself famously said “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.” Since the Greek invented it, democracy have been deemed the liberator of the oppressed, providing prosperity to all. However, when a government adopts the democratic system, often this may not pan out. Some political theorist often points to Nazi Germany, which came to existence when people voted Adolf Hitler into power, as example of a failed democracy. Hence, one is left wondering is democracy really the way to go?

Those who argue against democracy, such as Voltaire who considers it as “idiocy of the masses”, often claimed that a democratic government has a tendency to favor the majority over the minority. Let’s take Indonesia (a secular democratic country) as an example. After decades of independence; religious minorities are still suffering from indirect and sometimes institutionalized racism. In some areas in Java, Christians who intend to build a church in their community are often faced with unnecessary amount of bureaucracy in comparison to Muslims who intend to build a mosque. This is the consequence of the people’s desire to have their cultural identity represented in the government, which is why more often than not, elected government officials belong to and uphold the interest of the majority, as oppose to the minority. This may pose a problem, as it will be very likely that many governmental policies are only design to benefit the majority, thus disregarding the needs and interest of the minority.

Another common argument against democracy is, as social anthropologist Robert Briffault noted (despite his eventual support for this political system), the inefficiency in implementing good policies. Although the term “good policy” is very vague, let’s put aside our opinions on what defines a “good policy”. More often than not, lawmakers have to face fierce oppositions from opposing parties when proposing a policy. Consequently, implementing a “good policy” can be time-consuming at best. At worst, the legislative branch may refuse to implement it in the first place.

Perhaps, out of all the modern world leaders out there, Li Kwan Yew was one of the first to recognize the argument above as a real issue. Unbeknownst to many, Singapore isn’t a democratic country. Even in his early days, Mr. Yew was notorious in eliminating his political enemies to
the point that he was able to take control of virtually all aspect of the government, often ignoring public polls and other’s opinion. The consequence of his method was beyond the prediction of many.

Mr. Yew contradicts popular belief that is often propagated by western states, that democracy will lead to a better economy. Many Singaporeans, strongly believe that Singapore’s economic success is in part due to Mr. Yew’s undemocratic method which allowed him to implement effective policies efficiently without any or minimal opposition.

However, if indeed democracy burdens the government, what is the reason behind its popularity amongst many developed nations? The answer to this question may be seen as subjective, but for once, let’s argue for democracy.

Democracy is a political system that values the idea of equality and transparency. It was designed to guarantee personal freedom and to distribute social powers amongst the people, in order to avoid authoritarianism. Or to put it into simpler terms, democracy allow the people, regardless of who they are, to actually have a say in their own nation and its political discourse. To many, this seems ideal. As a matter of fact when the Greek invented democracy, they envisioned a utopia that unfortunately has not yet turn into a reality.

In my opinion, however, democracy is flawed, but it is definitely the best form of government as it prevents the state from being ruled by a tyrant (although there were exceptions to this), depriving its citizens from basic human freedom, which, according to Nobel Prize Winner and economist Amartya Sen, is fundamental to the prosperity of a society. In his research, he argued, using the famine in Bangladesh under British Colonial rule as a case study, that the lack of democracy allows politicians and policy makers to ignore the concern of those who hold no power in society. Thus, it is naive to say that benevolent authoritarianism will definitely bring economic success which often leads to higher living standard. As in reality, Singapore is a one in a million case. It is the sincerity of their government in improving themselves and its small size that made it easier to promote development. In most cases, undemocratic government often failed, as exemplified by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, North Korea, the former Soviet Union and many more. At the end of the day humans are not perfect and thus no political system is, but some system are better than others.

Nevertheless, democracy, can be very effective under certain conditions. Only when the majority can see the minority as equal and
only when politicians are sincere about their duties, then democracy can truly be effective in improving the lives of its citizen. This vision, however, will not turn into reality overnight, it is a journey on a long and winding road, but like every journey, it begins with one step, it begins with the man in the mirror.

SOURCE: https://socialherald.wordpress.com/2016/01/02/democracy-vs-benevolent-dictatorship/
ARTICLE 3 – THE JOY OF BENEVOLENT DICTATORSHIP
March 14, 2017

morning in 1970, British commandos stormed the royal palace in Oman, captured the sultan, forced him to abdicate, and placed his son on the throne. Violent interventions like this one, aimed at securing the imperial goals of distant hegemons, often have disastrous consequences. The opposite happened in Oman. In the 47 years since Britain intervened to install a new sultan, this country has broken out of feudal isolation and, as I learned on a recent visit, become the geopolitical gem of the Middle East.

Oman is the only country in this benighted region that exports security rather than insecurity. It has consistently supported Arab-Israeli peace initiatives, and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s visit to Oman in 1994 was a landmark in Middle East politics. More recently, Oman brokered behind-the-scenes talks between the United States and Iran that led to the breakthrough 2016 nuclear accord. It has refused to join the devastating war that its much larger neighbor, Saudi Arabia, is waging in Yemen. During the final days of the Obama administration, Oman agreed to accept 10 inmates from the Guantanamo prison who had been cleared of all charges but could not find a country to take them. No Omani has ever been convicted of a terrorist crime. None is known to have joined ISIS or any other radical militia.

Oman has achieved this under an absolute monarchy that blends consensus with dictatorship. Its success shows that no single political system suits all countries in all circumstances. Americans choose democracy because it brings us security, prosperity, and other good things. Other societies seek those same things, but find other ways to achieve them.

An ominous cloud, however, hangs over Oman. By all accounts Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who has held the throne since the British helped him win it in 1970, is both the architect and guarantor of Oman’s success. He is 76 years old and unwell. No one knows what will happen when he is gone.

Oman shares a border with impoverished and war-devastated Yemen. To the west lies Saudi Arabia, which resents Oman’s stubborn neutrality. The failed states of Somalia and Eritrea are nearby. It is in the world’s interest, and the interest of the United States, that Oman remain a vibrantly independent force in the Middle East after the royal transition
that lies ahead. If the United States or other powers force it to begin taking sides in regional disputes, we will lose a valuable peacemaker.

Oman, about the size of Italy with 4.5 million inhabitants, overlooks the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. Its early seafarers mastered astronavigation and became renowned traders. Oman dominated Zanzibar, maintained enclaves in East Africa, and established thriving commerce with the United States, sending cloves and ivory to Salem, Mass., in exchange for cotton fabrics. An 1840 portrait of the first Omani envoy to the United States, resplendent in an embroidered robe and multicolored turban, hangs today in Salem’s Peabody Essex Museum.

Like much of the Middle East, Oman fell under British influence in the 19th century. As late as the 1960s, it was undeveloped and isolated. It maintained no foreign embassies. There were seven miles of paved road. Everything that smacked of modernity, from eyeglasses to bicycles, was forbidden. That suited the British until a communist-backed rebellion broke out. They decided that the immobile sultan was too weak to crush it, and that his British-educated son would be better suited to the job.

Qaboos proceeded to defeat the insurgency, stabilize Oman, and consolidate absolute rule. Besides serving as monarch, he is prime minister, foreign minister, defense minister, finance minister, and central bank president. Under his rule, women’s rights are promoted and all religions are protected. Every citizen is entitled to free health care, free education through college — including tuition for study abroad — and even a plot of land on which to build a home. Oman’s infrastructure is impressive, capped by a dazzling cultural center that reflects the interest of a sultan who composes music, plays the lute, and sponsors a classical orchestra made up entirely of Omani musicians. The economy is stable, anchored by oil and gas reserves that are small by Persian Gulf standards but enough to place Oman among the world’s top two dozen producers. Average income is more than 50 times what it was in 1970.

Most Omanis recognize Qaboos as the father of their country. Their reverence for him seems deeply sincere. His word is law. Dissent is unwelcome. Omanis are taught from childhood that politics is not a suitable topic of interest or discussion.

The long rule of Qaboos has brought Oman into a golden age. Yet the ailing sultan has no wife, no brothers, and no children. He has decreed that when he dies, a family council should convene to pick a successor, and if it fails to agree, it should open an envelope into which he has sealed the name of his favored candidate. This is hardly a system that
inspires confidence — especially since none of the apparent candidates displays the visionary wisdom that has allowed Qaboos to build such a successful a nation in such unpromising circumstances.

One of the British commandos who led the 1970 palace raid that brought Qaboos to power wrote afterward that it had cost one dead, five wounded, and about $120 worth of ammunition. That was a highly successful investment. If not protected, it may be in danger.

**SOURCE: The Boston Globe**

[https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2017/03/14/the-joy-benevolent-dictatorship/hcpbAlrDmZewxiXRZQlgN/story.html](https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2017/03/14/the-joy-benevolent-dictatorship/hcpbAlrDmZewxiXRZQlgN/story.html)
ARTICLE 4 – BENEVOLENT DICTATORSHIP IS NEVER THE ANSWER
March 8, 2014

Viktor Yanukovych is the kind of dictator we love to hate. A kleptocrat who chose a bribe from Russia over his people's future in the EU. A thug who sent other thugs to beat up protesters, until he was finally ousted by his own people. A man who left his country bankrupt while pictures of his palatial estate and private zoo are broadcast around the world. We vilify dictators like this. And, yet, there remains a dream, for far too many development experts, business people and others around the globe that a strong leader with authoritarian powers is needed to move poor countries into the developed world.

I am watching Ukraine implode from a West Africa nation where corruption is perceived to be growing, development is stalled and the economy is heading downhill. From high-level government appointees to members of civil society, I hear: "What we need is a benevolent dictator. ... " The sentiment is generally followed by praise for Paul Kagame, who has created a remarkably clean and efficient Rwanda after that country's genocide, or Lee Kuan Yew, the "father of Singapore," who corralled government corruption and thrust his nation into the first world.

The desire for benevolent dictatorship is not confined to developing nations. I hear it even more often from America's business community and those working on international development - often accompanied by praise for China's ability to "get things done." The problem is that the entire 20th century seems to have produced at most one largely benevolent dictator and one efficient but increasingly repressive leader, both in tiny countries.

Meanwhile, we have seen scores of Yanukovych-like kleptocrats, Pinochet-style military dictatorships that torture dissenters in secret prisons and "disappear" those who disagree, and North Korean-style totalitarians whose gulags and concentration camps starve and murder hundreds of thousands or even millions of their countrymen.

Occasionally, dictators begin benevolently and grow worse. The world is littered with Kwame Nkrumahs, Fidel Castros and Robert Mugabes who rose to power with great popularity, built their nations, then turned their people's hopes to ash through corruption, personality cults and violence. One Lee Kuan Yew and a Kagame teetering from benevolence
toward repression, versus every other dictatorship of the 20th century? Those are not odds to bet your country on.

And yet, the longing for benevolent dictators continues, particularly in California among our technology titans, whose denigration of politics leads to a special Silicon Valley ideology that mixes libertarianism with dictatorship. They seem to want politics to work the way their products do: with elegant, clear solutions implemented by smart, creative doers.

But politics does not have a "right" answer. It is the field where our values compete. Surely, you say, there is a right way to get the job done: to fill in the potholes, build the roads, keep our streets safe, get our kids to learn reading and math. Ah, but look how quickly those issues get contentious.

Whose potholes should get filled first? Do we try to keep our streets safe through community policing or long prison sentences? Should teachers be given merit pay, are small classrooms better, or should we lengthen the school day? These issues engender deep political fights, all - even in the few debates where research provides clear, technocratic answers. That is because the area of politics is an area for values disputes, not technical solutions.

One person's "right" is not another's because people prioritize different values: equity versus excellence, efficiency versus voice and participation, security versus social justice, short-term versus long-term gains.

At a conference I attended recently, a businessman extolled the Chinese government ministers in attendance for "building 100 airport runways while we in the West have failed to add even a single runway to notoriously overburdened Heathrow." That was, of course, because the British have civil liberties and private property, while the Chinese do not have to worry about such niceties. Democracy allows many ideas of "right" to flourish. It is less efficient than dictatorship. It also makes fewer tremendous mistakes.

The longing for a leader who knows what is in her people's best interests, who rules with care and guides the nation on a wise path, was Plato's idea of a philosopher-king. It's a tempting picture, but it's asking the wrong question. In political history, philosophers moved from a preference for such benevolent dictators to the ugly realities of democracy when they switched the question from "who could best rule?" to "what system prevents the worst rule?"
And as problematic as democracy is, the ability to throw the bums out does seem to prevent the worst rule. Corruption, vast inequality and failure to deliver basic goods and services are real problems with democracies in developed and developing nations. These ills are dangerous, leading to anger, stagnation and political violence. But dictatorship is no answer: it's playing roulette where almost every spot on the wheel leads to a Yanukovych or worse.

As Syria burns and Ukraine implodes, Americans tempted by the security or simplicity of dictators, benevolent or otherwise, should give up such simple answers and face the messy realities of politics.

**SOURCE: San Francisco Chronicle**
ARTICLE 4 – LEE KWAN YEW LEAVES A LEGACY OF AUTHORITARIAN PRAGMATISM
March 23, 2015

For some, Lee Kuan Yew’s death marks the passing of a ruthless tyrant. For others, it is the tireless leader’s final reward.

Over the past few days I feel like I’ve grown quite close to the man. I’ve read his memoirs, a couple of his interviews, and re-read Carl Trocki’s account of Singapore’s history. But Lee is still an enigma to me. I doubt I will ever figure him out. “They think they know me, but they only know the public me,” he said in an interview in 2009. Lee was probably right and I imagine he said it with a tinge of sadness.

Of all the benevolent dictators in history, none deserve the title more than Mr Lee. For 31 years, he ruled as prime minister of Singapore, and for two more decades, he held a key position in the cabinet. Firmly entrenched, and with a free hand, Lee moulded Singapore in his own image and made it what it is today – a prosperous city-state with an authoritarianism. Singapore is half the size of London but with two-thirds its population. It has an efficient bureaucracy, a corruption-free government, clean air, safe streets, excellent schools, affordable healthcare, high home ownership, and the third highest per capita income in the world. By most standards, Singapore is the perfect place to do business, a lovely place to call home. And we have Lee to thank for much of that.

But Singapore is also home to a rigid pragmatism, an unyielding commitment to material well-being that is cloaked in anti-ideological garb. And Lee is its foremost practitioner. He is the master and the teacher. His favourite question was not “is this right?”, but “so what?”. What mattered was whether his plan would work – whether it would ensure Singapore’s survival and guarantee its success.

The Cambridge-educated scholar wasn’t interested in heady concepts of liberty. As a lawyer he knew them well, but as a British subject, and later during the Japanese occupation, he had learnt an invaluable lesson – you can’t fill stomachs with liberty, but you can chew up those who use it to oppose you. “I learned how to govern, how you dominate the people, as the British did, and how the Japanese used their power,” he said.
And so he arbitrarily detained hundreds of alleged communists, chauvinists and extremists over the years using the Internal Security Act, a holdover from Singapore’s colonial past. It was detention without trial so concrete evidence wasn’t necessary. All you needed was a firm conviction that the country was under siege and the strategic brilliance to outmanoeuvre the enemy.

It was no coincidence that many of these alleged communists were Lee’s political opponents. In 1963, more than 100 opposition politicians and union leaders were deemed a threat to national security and arbitrarily detained, crippling the Barisan Sosialis, the biggest political threat to Lee’s People’s Action Party (PAP). By 1968, the PAP had won 58 out of 58 seats in parliament. The opposition never recovered and the PAP has never lost an election since.

Despite these methods, it is hard to disagree with Tom Plate, an American journalist who interviewed Lee in 2009. “We in the west may quarrel with the way [Singapore’s prosperity] was achieved, but the achievement somehow seems to dwarf the critique,” he said.

Fast forward to 2015, and the PAP continues to abide by the principles left behind by its indomitable leader. In 2005, Cherian George, director of the Asia Journalism Fellowship, described the PAP’s authoritarianism as a form of “calibrated coercion”, an intelligent way to maintain the hegemony of the state while keeping people happy. Lee’s benevolent authoritarianism has become an art, but the principle remains the same – keep the people well fed and they won’t revolt.

However, what happens when the people aren’t well fed? In the last decade, house prices have increased dramatically, income inequality remains high, intense competition with foreigners has become a perennial source of dissatisfaction, and the younger generation no longer believes in the founding father’s formula for success. As Lee explained: “The ones under 30, who’ve just grown up in stability and growth year by year, I think they think that I’m selling them a line just to make them work harder but they are wrong. The problem is they don’t believe. They think I’m wrong.”

And now the patriarch is gone. What now?

Joseph Liow, a senior fellow who holds the Lee Kuan Yew chair in southeast Asian studies at the Brookings Institution, believes that the PAP will continue to be pragmatic. Although the pace of change will be slow, “it is precisely the pragmatic worldview that Lee has bestowed
upon the Singapore system that tells [the PAP] in order to survive, you have to change.”

“It is a more complicated governance equation now, and the PAP government has sought to rise to the occasion, within limits,” said Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore. “At the level of the party as an organisation, Lee Kuan Yew and his party has always emphasised and operationalised the ideal of leadership planning and smooth succession. And it has been a long time since he handed over the reins in the party and government.”

However, some observers accuse Lee of nepotism, of making his own son, Lee Hsien Loong, prime minister. To this, the elder Lee once replied: “I am not that bereft of satisfaction with my life that I need to live vicariously through him. In fact, if he doesn’t measure up, it is better that he does not show up, because he’ll just besmirch the family reputation.”

Likewise, Song Seng Wun, an independent economist, is confident that “PM Lee remains strong enough to lead the party and to continue to focus on key issues facing the economy”.

In this time of mourning, the temptation to lionise Lee’s achievements will be great. There will even be some selective amnesia about the failures he was responsible for. So it will be good to remind ourselves that Lee was not one who liked to be patronised, neither did he like being surrounded by yes-men. He always preferred it if people cut to the chase, and he liked it when his views were challenged. Hopefully, we may do him this last favour as we honestly review his legacy. Call him the benevolent dictator. That was what made him great.

**SOURCE:** The Guardian
ARTICLE 5 - Anarchy vs. Stability

DICTATORSHIPS AND CHAOS GO HAND IN HAND

The argument that a stable, autocratic state is better than a failed one has become increasingly fashionable. But it misses the fact that autocracies are ultimately the source of that chaos.

October 9, 2014

The fall of dictators is not always a cause for joy, my colleague Christiane Hoffmann wrote in an essay published yesterday on SPIEGEL International. If the citizens of a country were to have the option of choosing between a "functional dictatorship and the chaos of a failing or failed state," she argued, the dictatorship would often be the "lesser evil" because it promises continued stability.

It's a seductive thesis that has gained renewed traction since the outbreak of civil war in Syria. The Arab Spring unleashed exaggerated hope for Middle East democratization -- and now that idealists have been disappointed almost everywhere, the proponents of so-called realpolitik are once again arguing that, although their message of stability may sound unsympathetic and maybe even cynical, it's realistic. But is it really?

Some citizens or members of the international community may understandably want to reminisce about the intermittently prevailing sense of order that existed under a toppled dictator, as gruesome as the leader might have been. But it is also an optical illusion. The mistake lies in even describing a dictatorship as stable: If the dictatorships of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Moammar Gadhafi in Libya or Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia had been stable, they wouldn't have collapsed.

Despite what some may think, the trajectory of the Arab uprisings does not support the argument that dictatorship is a better alternative to chaos. It tells the story of authoritarian regimes that were in part propped up by the West for decades -- using exactly this argument -- and then ultimately fell apart surprisingly quickly. Their foundations had been eaten away by youth unemployment, economic problems or state-instituted degradations.

These regimes had long been rotten at their core. They came to an end because of their inner contradictions and inability to satisfy the basic needs of their citizens. Those needs weren't necessarily freedom of expression and democracy, which are often secondary, but work, food and a dignified existence.
No 'Functional Dictatorship'

The question is not whether democracy is fundamentally, morally preferable to dictatorship -- nobody is seriously questioning that. But even from the perspective of realpolitik, it is erroneous to argue that dictatorships and stability go hand in hand.

Functioning democracies are, in the long term, usually more stable than dictatorships. Dictatorships only appear stable if they are highly repressive or able to provide prosperity to a broad swath of their population.

But dictatorial rule is fundamentally precarious, which is why it must be upheld by force. They usually create the conditions leading to their own collapse, ultimately falling apart as a result of their dearth of social legitimacy. That's another reason why the belief that a "functional dictatorship" is "more tolerable" than chaos, is misleading. The states where chaos emerged and state structures dissolved didn't have a "functional dictatorship," whatever that may mean, in the first place. Dictatorship often merely creates the conditions for later chaos. How absurd is it to wish for the return of a system that was responsible for the instability in the first place?

The only response dictatorships tend to have for popular discontent, social tension or ethnic conflict is repression. The rigidity of these systems of rule makes them unable to smooth out conflicts within society, which means that, although social or political conflicts can be repressed for lengthy periods of times, these problems have the capacity to destabilize the entire state in the long term.

There is no such thing as a benevolent dictator. In authoritarian systems, the regime, military and economy usually combine to form a power-clique that, in turn, fosters cronyism and corruption. If nothing else, these Mafia-like conditions among the leadership are what lead many citizens to revolt. Even in supposedly well-functioning China, these side-effects represent an inside threat to the Communist Party's system of rule.

Inside vs. Outside Regime Change

Once the regime comes to an end, chaos usually follows. That, though, has nothing to do with democracy as such, it is merely a statement of logic. Stability is clearly and fundamentally better than instability, but the crucial question is how that stability can be created. It can't be
created by the West bombing dictatorships out of existence, as we've learned since the disastrous 2003 Iraq War -- an attempt to impose democracy from the outside. Nor can, as the Arab Spring showed, stability be fostered by supporting dictatorial regimes. The Arab Spring also demonstrated that the decisions about the fate of a country aren't made by the West, but within the countries themselves.

In this discussion, it's important to make the distinction between "regime change" from the inside and from the outside. It is now by-and-large undisputed that the United States' decision to topple Saddam Hussein was a mistake. But there is no comparison here to the Arab uprisings, in which the regimes were destabilized from the inside and toppled by their own people.

The West weren't the ones that deposed Ben Ali and Mubarak. Nor was it responsible for the revolts in Libya and Syria. In Tunisia and Egypt the United States and France even tried to prop up the dictators at first. The West only intervened in Libya when Gadhafi threatened to commit mass murder in Benghazi. And while the West has pushed for Assad to step down in Syria, it hasn't yet tried to overthrow him.

Interestingly, the world's current instability tends to stem from countries that were ruled by authoritarian regimes for decades or are still governed by them today.

Changed Interventionism

The Islamist terrorism that has become the world's current source of concern also emerged because of repression carried out in Western-supported Arab dictatorships. Many of the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks came from Saudi Arabia. The Assad regime's repression also spurred the emergence of jihadist fighters in the early 2000s. Many of the donations that built Syria's Jihadist militias into their current positions of prominence came from citizens of authoritarian states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. And it's no coincidence that the originator of the second current global crisis is Russia: an authoritarian regime whose aggressive behavior in the Ukrainian crisis also stems from the fact that it is less domestically stable than it seems.

The current crises in the Arab world are not the consequence of naive Western interventionism. On the contrary: Following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the West appears to have learned its lesson. The US under President Barack Obama has been particularly reluctant to engage in military interventions in recent years. When it does, it is usually to comply with the UN's "Responsibility to Protect" dictum --
and in Syria, it didn't even do that until recently. It is possible to accuse Western governments of inaction in the face of Assad's atrocities. Accusing them of the opposite is absurd.

Who, then, is the target of warnings against the ill-considered toppling of dictators? If it includes the people themselves, those who have risen up against dictators in recent years, the warning appears to be paternalistic: "Think carefully about the chaos you might trigger by overthrowing your dictator."

History Lessons

The people who stormed the Bastille in 1789 and the revolutionaries who ultimately beheaded King Louis XVI certainly didn't entertain such considerations at the time. The French Revolution was also followed by terrible years of terror, then a dictatorship. Six decades would pass before a French democracy would emerge. Would the French, then, have been better advised to skip the revolt?

Revolutions can seldom be controlled externally because their causes are internal. In 18th century France, they were set off by an economic crisis and social tension between the estates. Had there been think tanks producing geopolitical analyses at the time, they likely would have frowned upon the revolution and the beheading of the king and fretted about its consequences for European stability. And it is doubtful that the people of France would have cared.

One country where the toppling of a dictator led to months of chaos, and then another dictatorship is Egypt. For those who favor stability at any price, it may be a desirable outcome. But the case of Egypt is really only effective as a counterexample. Although many Egyptians, in their disappointment with democracy, welcomed the reestablishment of a military dictatorship by General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, that move will, at most, buy a bit of time for the regime.

All of the economic and social problems that led to the end of Mubarak's reign persist and could soon lead to renewed protests and violence. The idea proposed in my colleague's essay, that a military putsch against Assad in Syria would pave the way for stability's return, is erroneous -- conflicts that have already erupted cannot be solved by replacing one authoritarian structure with another.
A Compelling Example

When war broke out in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, some became nostalgic for the former dictator, Tito, in the belief that he had managed to hold together the multi-ethnic state. But they were just as wrong as those who now say that the confessional conflicts between the Alawis and Shiites on the one side and the Sunnis on the other were defused under Assad. A dictatorship can seemingly freeze these kinds of conflicts for decades, even as they worsen beneath the surface. What was the case in Yugoslavia is now the case in Syria: Like a pressure cooker, when the seal breaks, the steam explodes.

What does that teach us? The idea that dictatorships foster stability is a fairy tale; chaos is often the product of the autocratic systems it follows. People themselves make the decision whether to rise up against dictatorships. The only question for the West is when it should intervene in such a rebellion -- and that cannot be answered in the abstract with pleas in favor of, or in opposition to, dictatorships. It can only be decided on a case-by-case basis.

One nation in particular should know that it takes time to create a functioning democracy -- that it is a learning process, but that even people who have a history of authoritarianism can create democratic stability: The Germans. A country that created history's most appalling dictatorship is now an exemplary democracy. It is hard to find a better rebuttal to the theory that there are cultures ill-suited for democracy.

SOURCE: Spiegel
http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/stable-dictatorships-are-not-the-less-evil-a-996278.html
ARTICLE 6 – WHAT’S GONE WRONG WITH DEMOCRACY

Democracy was the most successful political idea of the 20th century. Why has it run into trouble, and what can be done to revive it?

The protesters who have overturned the politics of Ukraine have many aspirations for their country. Their placards called for closer relations with the European Union (EU), an end to Russian intervention in Ukraine’s politics and the establishment of a clean government to replace the kleptocracy of President Viktor Yanukovych. But their fundamental demand is one that has motivated people over many decades to take a stand against corrupt, abusive and autocratic governments. They want a rules-based democracy.

It is easy to understand why. Democracies are on average richer than non-democracies, are less likely to go to war and have a better record of fighting corruption. More fundamentally, democracy lets people speak their minds and shape their own and their children’s futures. That so many people in so many different parts of the world are prepared to risk so much for this idea is testimony to its enduring appeal.

Yet these days the exhilaration generated by events like those in Kiev is mixed with anxiety, for a troubling pattern has repeated itself in capital after capital. The people mass in the main square. Regime-sanctioned thugs try to fight back but lose their nerve in the face of popular intransigence and global news coverage. The world applauds the collapse of the regime and offers to help build a democracy. But turfing out an autocrat turns out to be much easier than setting up a viable democratic government. The new regime stumbles, the economy flounders and the country finds itself in a state at least as bad as it was before. This is what happened in much of the Arab spring, and also in Ukraine’s Orange revolution a decade ago. In 2004 Mr Yanukovych was ousted from office by vast street protests, only to be re-elected to the presidency (with the help of huge amounts of Russian money) in 2010, after the opposition politicians who replaced him turned out to be just as hopeless.

Democracy is going through a difficult time. Where autocrats have been driven out of office, their opponents have mostly failed to create viable democratic regimes. Even in established democracies, flaws in the system have become worryingly visible and disillusion with politics is rife. Yet just a few years ago democracy looked as though it would dominate the world.
In the second half of the 20th century, democracies had taken root in the most difficult circumstances possible—in Germany, which had been traumatised by Nazism, in India, which had the world’s largest population of poor people, and, in the 1990s, in South Africa, which had been disfigured by apartheid. Decolonisation created a host of new democracies in Africa and Asia, and autocratic regimes gave way to democracy in Greece (1974), Spain (1975), Argentina (1983), Brazil (1985) and Chile (1989). The collapse of the Soviet Union created many fledgling democracies in central Europe. By 2000 Freedom House, an American think-tank, classified 120 countries, or 63% of the world total, as democracies.

Representatives of more than 100 countries gathered at the World Forum on Democracy in Warsaw that year to proclaim that “the will of the people” was “the basis of the authority of government”. A report issued by America’s State Department declared that having seen off “failed experiments” with authoritarian and totalitarian forms of government, “it seems that now, at long last, democracy is triumphant.”

Such hubris was surely understandable after such a run of successes. But stand farther back and the triumph of democracy looks rather less inevitable. After the fall of Athens, where it was first developed, the political model had lain dormant until the Enlightenment more than 2,000 years later. In the 18th century only the American revolution produced a sustainable democracy. During the 19th century monarchists fought a prolonged rearguard action against democratic forces. In the first half of the 20th century nascent democracies collapsed in Germany, Spain and Italy. By 1941 there were only 11 democracies left, and Franklin Roosevelt worried that it might not be possible to shield “the great flame of democracy from the blackout of barbarism”.

The progress seen in the late 20th century has stalled in the 21st. Even though around 40% of the world’s population, more people than ever before, live in countries that will hold free and fair elections this year, democracy’s global advance has come to a halt, and may even have gone into reverse. Freedom House reckons that 2013 was the eighth consecutive year in which global freedom declined, and that its forward march peaked around the beginning of the century. Between 1980 and 2000 the cause of democracy experienced only a few setbacks, but since 2000 there have been many. And democracy’s problems run deeper than mere numbers suggest. Many nominal democracies have slid towards autocracy, maintaining the outward appearance of democracy through elections, but without the rights and institutions that are equally important aspects of a functioning democratic system.
Faith in democracy flares up in moments of triumph, such as the overthrow of unpopular regimes in Cairo or Kiev, only to sputter out once again. Outside the West, democracy often advances only to collapse. And within the West, democracy has too often become associated with debt and dysfunction at home and overreach abroad. Democracy has always had its critics, but now old doubts are being treated with renewed respect as the weaknesses of democracy in its Western strongholds, and the fragility of its influence elsewhere, have become increasingly apparent. Why has democracy lost its forward momentum?

The Return of History

The two main reasons are the financial crisis of 2007-08 and the rise of China. The damage the crisis did was psychological as well as financial. It revealed fundamental weaknesses in the West’s political systems, undermining the self-confidence that had been one of their great assets. Governments had steadily extended entitlements over decades, allowing dangerous levels of debt to develop, and politicians came to believe that they had abolished boom-bust cycles and tamed risk. Many people became disillusioned with the workings of their political systems—particularly when governments bailed out bankers with taxpayers’ money and then stood by impotently as financiers continued to pay themselves huge bonuses. The crisis turned the Washington consensus into a term of reproach across the emerging world.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party has broken the democratic world’s monopoly on economic progress. Larry Summers, of Harvard University, observes that when America was growing fastest, it doubled living standards roughly every 30 years. China has been doubling living standards roughly every decade for the past 30 years. The Chinese elite argue that their model—tight control by the Communist Party, coupled with a relentless effort to recruit talented people into its upper ranks—is more efficient than democracy and less susceptible to gridlock. The political leadership changes every decade or so, and there is a constant supply of fresh talent as party cadres are promoted based on their ability to hit targets.

China’s critics rightly condemn the government for controlling public opinion in all sorts of ways, from imprisoning dissidents to censoring internet discussions. Yet the regime’s obsession with control paradoxically means it pays close attention to public opinion. At the same time China’s leaders have been able to tackle some of the big problems of state-building that can take decades to deal with in a democracy. In just two years China has extended pension coverage to
an extra 240m rural dwellers, for example—far more than the total number of people covered by America's public-pension system.

Many Chinese are prepared to put up with their system if it delivers growth. The 2013 Pew Survey of Global Attitudes showed that 85% of Chinese were “very satisfied” with their country’s direction, compared with 31% of Americans. Some Chinese intellectuals have become positively boastful. Zhang Weiwei of Fudan University argues that democracy is destroying the West, and particularly America, because it institutionalises gridlock, trivialises decision-making and throws up second-rate presidents like George Bush junior. Yu Keping of Beijing University argues that democracy makes simple things “overly complicated and frivolous” and allows “certain sweet-talking politicians to mislead the people”. Wang Jisi, also of Beijing University, has observed that “many developing countries that have introduced Western values and political systems are experiencing disorder and chaos” and that China offers an alternative model. Countries from Africa (Rwanda) to the Middle East (Dubai) to South-East Asia (Vietnam) are taking this advice seriously.

China’s advance is all the more potent in the context of a series of disappointments for democrats since 2000. The first great setback was in Russia. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the democratisation of the old Soviet Union seemed inevitable. In the 1990s Russia took a few drunken steps in that direction under Boris Yeltsin. But at the end of 1999 he resigned and handed power to Vladimir Putin, a former KGB operative who has since been both prime minister and president twice. This postmodern tsar has destroyed the substance of democracy in Russia, muzzling the press and imprisoning his opponents, while preserving the show—everyone can vote, so long as Mr Putin wins. Autocratic leaders in Venezuela, Ukraine, Argentina and elsewhere have followed suit, perpetuating a perverted simulacrum of democracy rather than doing away with it altogether, and thus discrediting it further.

The next big setback was the Iraq war. When Saddam Hussein’s fabled weapons of mass destruction failed to materialise after the American-led invasion of 2003, Mr Bush switched instead to justifying the war as a fight for freedom and democracy. “The concerted effort of free nations to promote democracy is a prelude to our enemies’ defeat,” he argued in his second inaugural address. This was more than mere opportunism: Mr Bush sincerely believed that the Middle East would remain a breeding ground for terrorism so long as it was dominated by dictators. But it did the democratic cause great harm. Left-wingers regarded it as proof that democracy was just a figleaf for American imperialism. Foreign-policy realists took Iraq’s growing chaos as proof that
American-led promotion of democratisation was a recipe for instability. And disillusioned neoconservatives such as Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist, saw it as proof that democracy cannot put down roots in stony ground.
Iran
The disputed re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president leads to widespread protests and chants of "where is my vote?". Dozens are killed as the protests are suppressed.

China
China overtakes Japan to become the world's second-largest economy. Its success shows that rapid growth is possible without democracy.

Middle East
The Arab spring seems to herald a new wave of democratisation. Dictators are ousted in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and elections follow.

Europe
Technocratic governments staffed by unelected professionals take over in Italy and Greece to push through unpopular austerity policies.

Pakistan
For the first time in Pakistan's 66-marker history, an elected government completes its term and the country makes a peaceful democratic transition to its successor.

Egypt
Mohammed Morsi, elected president in 2012, is deposed in a coup led by the army.
A third serious setback was Egypt. The collapse of Hosni Mubarak’s regime in 2011, amid giant protests, raised hopes that democracy would spread in the Middle East. But the euphoria soon turned to despair. Egypt’s ensuing elections were won not by liberal activists (who were hopelessly divided into a myriad of Pythonesque parties) but by Muhammad Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood. Mr Morsi treated democracy as a winner-takes-all system, packing the state with Brothers, granting himself almost unlimited powers and creating an upper house with a permanent Islamic majority. In July 2013 the army stepped in, arresting Egypt’s first democratically elected president, imprisoning leading members of the Brotherhood and killing hundreds of demonstrators. Along with war in Syria and anarchy in Libya, this has dashed the hope that the Arab spring would lead to a flowering of democracy across the Middle East.

Meanwhile some recent recruits to the democratic camp have lost their lustre. Since the introduction of democracy in 1994 South Africa has been ruled by the same party, the African National Congress, which has become progressively more self-serving. Turkey, which once seemed to combine moderate Islam with prosperity and democracy, is descending into corruption and autocracy. In Bangladesh, Thailand and Cambodia, opposition parties have boycotted recent elections or refused to accept their results.

All this has demonstrated that building the institutions needed to sustain democracy is very slow work indeed, and has dispelled the once-popular notion that democracy will blossom rapidly and spontaneously once the seed is planted. Although democracy may be a “universal aspiration”, as Mr Bush and Tony Blair insisted, it is a culturally rooted practice. Western countries almost all extended the right to vote long after the establishment of sophisticated political systems, with powerful civil services and entrenched constitutional rights, in societies that cherished the notions of individual rights and independent judiciaries.

Yet in recent years the very institutions that are meant to provide models for new democracies have come to seem outdated and dysfunctional in established ones. The United States has become a byword for gridlock, so obsessed with partisan point-scoring that it has come to the verge of defaulting on its debts twice in the past two years. Its democracy is also corrupted by gerrymandering, the practice of drawing constituency boundaries to entrench the power of incumbents. This encourages extremism, because politicians have to appeal only to the party faithful, and in effect disenfranchises large numbers of voters.
And money talks louder than ever in American politics. Thousands of lobbyists (more than 20 for every member of Congress) add to the length and complexity of legislation, the better to smuggle in special privileges. All this creates the impression that American democracy is for sale and that the rich have more power than the poor, even as lobbyists and donors insist that political expenditure is an exercise in free speech. The result is that America’s image—and by extension that of democracy itself—has taken a terrible battering.

Nor is the EU a paragon of democracy. The decision to introduce the euro in 1999 was taken largely by technocrats; only two countries, Denmark and Sweden, held referendums on the matter (both said no). Efforts to win popular approval for the Lisbon Treaty, which consolidated power in Brussels, were abandoned when people started voting the wrong way. During the darkest days of the euro crisis the euro-elite forced Italy and Greece to replace democratically elected leaders with technocrats. The European Parliament, an unsuccessful attempt to fix Europe’s democratic deficit, is both ignored and despised. The EU has become a breeding ground for populist parties, such as Geert Wilders’s Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and Marine Le Pen’s National Front in France, which claim to defend ordinary people against an arrogant and incompetent elite. Greece’s Golden Dawn is testing how far democracies can tolerate Nazi-style parties. A project designed to tame the beast of European populism is instead poking it back into life.

The democratic distemper

Even in its heartland, democracy is clearly suffering from serious structural problems, rather than a few isolated ailments. Since the dawn of the modern democratic era in the late 19th century, democracy has expressed itself through nation-states and national parliaments. People elect representatives who pull the levers of national power for a fixed period. But this arrangement is now under assault from both above and below.

From above, globalisation has changed national politics profoundly. National politicians have surrendered ever more power, for example over trade and financial flows, to global markets and supranational bodies, and may thus find that they are unable to keep promises they have made to voters. International organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation and the European Union have extended their influence. There is a compelling logic to much of this: how can a single country deal with problems like climate change or tax evasion? National politicians have also responded
to globalisation by limiting their discretion and handing power to unelected technocrats in some areas. The number of countries with independent central banks, for example, has increased from about 20 in 1980 to more than 160 today.

From below come equally powerful challenges: from would-be breakaway nations, such as the Catalans and the Scots, from Indian states, from American city mayors. All are trying to reclaim power from national governments. There are also a host of what Moisés Naim, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, calls “micro-powers”, such as NGOs and lobbyists, which are disrupting traditional politics and making life harder for democratic and autocratic leaders alike. The internet makes it easier to organise and agitate; in a world where people can participate in reality-TV votes every week, or support a petition with the click of a mouse, the machinery and institutions of parliamentary democracy, where elections happen only every few years, look increasingly anachronistic. Douglas Carswell, a British member of parliament, likens traditional politics to HMV, a chain of British record shops that went bust, in a world where people are used to calling up whatever music they want whenever they want via Spotify, a popular digital music-streaming service.

The biggest challenge to democracy, however, comes neither from above nor below but from within—from the voters themselves. Plato's great worry about democracy, that citizens would “live from day to day, indulging the pleasure of the moment”, has proved prescient. Democratic governments got into the habit of running big structural deficits as a matter of course, borrowing to give voters what they wanted in the short term, while neglecting long-term investment. France and Italy have not balanced their budgets for more than 30 years. The financial crisis starkly exposed the unsustainability of such debt-financed democracy.

With the post-crisis stimulus winding down, politicians must now confront the difficult trade-offs they avoided during years of steady growth and easy credit. But persuading voters to adapt to a new age of austerity will not prove popular at the ballot box. Slow growth and tight budgets will provoke conflict as interest groups compete for limited resources. To make matters worse, this competition is taking place as Western populations are ageing. Older people have always been better at getting their voices heard than younger ones, voting in greater numbers and organising pressure groups like America's mighty AARP. They will increasingly have absolute numbers on their side. Many democracies now face a fight between past and future, between inherited entitlements and future investment.
Adjusting to hard times will be made even more difficult by a growing cynicism towards politics. Party membership is declining across the developed world: only 1% of Britons are now members of political parties compared with 20% in 1950. Voter turnout is falling, too: a study of 49 democracies found that it had declined by 10 percentage points between 1980-84 and 2007-13. A survey of seven European countries in 2012 found that more than half of voters “had no trust in government” whatsoever. A YouGov opinion poll of British voters in the same year found that 62% of those polled agreed that “politicians tell lies all the time”.

Meanwhile the border between poking fun and launching protest campaigns is fast eroding. In 2010 Iceland’s Best Party, promising to be openly corrupt, won enough votes to co-run Reykjavik’s city council. And in 2013 a quarter of Italians voted for a party founded by Beppe Grillo, a comedian. All this popular cynicism about politics might be healthy if people demanded little from their governments, but they continue to want a great deal. The result can be a toxic and unstable mixture: dependency on government on the one hand, and disdain for it on the other. The dependency forces government to overexpand and overburden itself, while the disdain robs it of its legitimacy. Democratic dysfunction goes hand in hand with democratic distemper.

Democracy’s problems in its heartland help explain its setbacks elsewhere. Democracy did well in the 20th century in part because of American hegemony: other countries naturally wanted to emulate the world’s leading power. But as China’s influence has grown, America and Europe have lost their appeal as role models and their appetite for spreading democracy. The Obama administration now seems paralysed by the fear that democracy will produce rogue regimes or empower jihadists. And why should developing countries regard democracy as the ideal form of government when the American government cannot even pass a budget, let alone plan for the future? Why should autocrats listen to lectures on democracy from Europe, when the euro-elite sacks elected leaders who get in the way of fiscal orthodoxy?

At the same time, democracies in the emerging world have encountered the same problems as those in the rich world. They too have overindulged in short-term spending rather than long-term investment. Brazil allows public-sector workers to retire at 53 but has done little to create a modern airport system. India pays off vast numbers of client groups but invests too little in infrastructure. Political systems have been captured by interest groups and undermined by anti-democratic habits. Patrick French, a British historian, notes that every member of India’s lower house under the age of 30 is a member of a political
dynasty. Even within the capitalist elite, support for democracy is fraying: Indian business moguls constantly complain that India’s chaotic democracy produces rotten infrastructure while China’s authoritarian system produces highways, gleaming airports and high-speed trains.

Democracy has been on the back foot before. In the 1920s and 1930s communism and fascism looked like the coming things: when Spain temporarily restored its parliamentary government in 1931, Benito Mussolini likened it to returning to oil lamps in the age of electricity. In the mid-1970s Willy Brandt, a former German chancellor, pronounced that “western Europe has only 20 or 30 more years of democracy left in it; after that it will slide, engineless and rudderless, under the surrounding sea of dictatorship”. Things are not that bad these days, but China poses a far more credible threat than communism ever did to the idea that democracy is inherently superior and will eventually prevail.

Yet China’s stunning advances conceal deeper problems. The elite is becoming a self-perpetuating and self-serving clique. The 50 richest members of the China’s National People’s Congress are collectively worth $94.7 billion—60 times as much as the 50 richest members of America’s Congress. China’s growth rate has slowed from 10% to below 8% and is expected to fall further—an enormous challenge for a regime whose legitimacy depends on its ability to deliver consistent growth.

At the same time, as Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in the 19th century, democracies always look weaker than they really are: they are all confusion on the surface but have lots of hidden strengths. Being able to install alternative leaders offering alternative policies makes democracies better than autocracies at finding creative solutions to problems and rising to existential challenges, though they often take a while to zigzag to the right policies. But to succeed, both fledgling and established democracies must ensure they are built on firm foundations.

Getting democracy right

The most striking thing about the founders of modern democracy such as James Madison and John Stuart Mill is how hard-headed they were. They regarded democracy as a powerful but imperfect mechanism: something that needed to be designed carefully, in order to harness human creativity but also to check human perversity, and then kept in good working order, constantly oiled, adjusted and worked upon.
The need for hard-headedness is particularly pressing when establishing a nascent democracy. One reason why so many democratic experiments have failed recently is that they put too much emphasis on elections and too little on the other essential features of democracy. The power of the state needs to be checked, for instance, and individual rights such as freedom of speech and freedom to organise must be guaranteed. The most successful new democracies have all worked in large part because they avoided the temptation of majoritarianism—the notion that winning an election entitles the majority to do whatever it pleases. India has survived as a democracy since 1947 (apart from a couple of years of emergency rule) and Brazil since the mid-1980s for much the same reason: both put limits on the power of the government and provided guarantees for individual rights.

Robust constitutions not only promote long-term stability, reducing the likelihood that disgruntled minorities will take against the regime. They also bolster the struggle against corruption, the bane of developing countries. Conversely, the first sign that a fledgling democracy is heading for the rocks often comes when elected rulers try to erode constraints on their power—often in the name of majority rule. Mr Morsi tried to pack Egypt’s upper house with supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. Mr Yanukovych reduced the power of Ukraine’s parliament. Mr Putin has ridden roughshod over Russia’s independent institutions in the name of the people. Several African leaders are engaging in crude majoritarianism—removing term limits on the presidency or expanding penalties against homosexual behaviour, as Uganda’s president Yoweri Museveni did on February 24th. Foreign leaders should be more willing to speak out when rulers engage in such illiberal behaviour, even if a majority supports it. But the people who most need to learn this lesson are the architects of new democracies: they must recognise that robust checks and balances are just as vital to the establishment of a healthy democracy as the right to vote. Paradoxically even potential dictators have a lot to learn from events in Egypt and Ukraine: Mr Morsi would not be spending his life shuttling between prison and a glass box in an Egyptian court, and Mr Yanukovych would not be fleeing for his life, if they had not enraged their compatriots by accumulating so much power.

Even those lucky enough to live in mature democracies need to pay close attention to the architecture of their political systems. The combination of globalisation and the digital revolution has made some of democracy’s most cherished institutions look outdated. Established democracies need to update their own political systems both to address the problems they face at home, and to revitalise democracy’s image abroad. Some countries have already embarked upon this process.
America’s Senate has made it harder for senators to filibuster appointments. A few states have introduced open primaries and handed redistricting to independent boundary commissions. Other obvious changes would improve matters. Reform of party financing, so that the names of all donors are made public, might reduce the influence of special interests. The European Parliament could require its MPs to present receipts with their expenses. Italy’s parliament has far too many members who are paid too much, and two equally powerful chambers, which makes it difficult to get anything done.

But reformers need to be much more ambitious. The best way to constrain the power of special interests is to limit the number of goodies that the state can hand out. And the best way to address popular disillusion towards politicians is to reduce the number of promises they can make. The key to a healthier democracy, in short, is a narrower state—an idea that dates back to the American revolution. “In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men”, Madison argued, “the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” The notion of limited government was also integral to the relaunch of democracy after the second world war. The United Nations Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) established rights and norms that countries could not breach, even if majorities wanted to do so.

These checks and balances were motivated by fear of tyranny. But today, particularly in the West, the big dangers to democracy are harder to spot. One is the growing size of the state. The relentless expansion of government is reducing liberty and handing ever more power to special interests. The other comes from government’s habit of making promises that it cannot fulfil, either by creating entitlements it cannot pay for or by waging wars that it cannot win, such as that on drugs. Both voters and governments must be persuaded of the merits of accepting restraints on the state’s natural tendency to overreach. Giving control of monetary policy to independent central banks tamed the rampant inflation of the 1980s, for example. It is time to apply the same principle of limited government to a broader range of policies. Mature democracies, just like nascent ones, require appropriate checks and balances on the power of elected government.

Governments can exercise self-restraint in several different ways. They can put on a golden straitjacket by adopting tight fiscal rules—as the Swedes have done by pledging to balance their budget over the economic cycle. They can introduce “sunset clauses” that force politicians to renew laws every ten years, say. They can ask non-partisan
commissions to propose long-term reforms. The Swedes rescued their pension system from collapse when an independent commission suggested pragmatic reforms including greater use of private pensions, and linking the retirement age to life-expectancy. Chile has been particularly successful at managing the combination of the volatility of the copper market and populist pressure to spend the surplus in good times. It has introduced strict rules to ensure that it runs a surplus over the economic cycle, and appointed a commission of experts to determine how to cope with economic volatility.

Isn’t this a recipe for weakening democracy by handing more power to the great and the good? Not necessarily. Self-denying rules can strengthen democracy by preventing people from voting for spending policies that produce bankruptcy and social breakdown and by protecting minorities from persecution. But technocracy can certainly be taken too far. Power must be delegated sparingly, in a few big areas such as monetary policy and entitlement reform, and the process must be open and transparent.

And delegation upwards towards grandees and technocrats must be balanced by delegation downwards, handing some decisions to ordinary people. The trick is to harness the twin forces of globalism and localism, rather than trying to ignore or resist them. With the right balance of these two approaches, the same forces that threaten established democracies from above, through globalisation, and below, through the rise of micro-powers, can reinforce rather than undermine democracy.

Tocqueville argued that local democracy frequently represented democracy at its best: “Town-meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and enjoy it.” City mayors regularly get twice the approval ratings of national politicians. Modern technology can implement a modern version of Tocqueville’s town-hall meetings to promote civic involvement and innovation. An online hyperdemocracy where everything is put to an endless series of public votes would play to the hand of special-interest groups. But technocracy and direct democracy can keep each other in check: independent budget commissions can assess the cost and feasibility of local ballot initiatives, for example.

Several places are making progress towards getting this mixture right. The most encouraging example is California. Its system of direct democracy allowed its citizens to vote for contradictory policies, such as higher spending and lower taxes, while closed primaries and
gerrymandered districts institutionalised extremism. But over the past five years California has introduced a series of reforms, thanks in part to the efforts of Nicolas Berggruen, a philanthropist and investor. The state has introduced a “Think Long” committee to counteract the short-term tendencies of ballot initiatives. It has introduced open primaries and handed power to redraw boundaries to an independent commission. And it has succeeded in balancing its budget—an achievement which Darrell Steinberg, the leader of the California Senate, described as “almost surreal”.

Similarly, the Finnish government has set up a non-partisan commission to produce proposals for the future of its pension system. At the same time it is trying to harness e-democracy: parliament is obliged to consider any citizens’ initiative that gains 50,000 signatures. But many more such experiments are needed—combining technocracy with direct democracy, and upward and downward delegation—if democracy is to zigzag its way back to health.

John Adams, America’s second president, once pronounced that “democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.” He was clearly wrong. Democracy was the great victor of the ideological clashes of the 20th century. But if democracy is to remain as successful in the 21st century as it was in the 20th, it must be both assiduously nurtured when it is young—and carefully maintained when it is mature.

**SOURCE: The Economist**