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Liberal democracy as universal value

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The Current Column

of 14 January 2013

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Bonn, 14 January 2013. Public sovereignty is often seen as the fundamental idea of democracy. In liberal democracy this central idea finds expression in the fact that inclusive participatory rights of all citizens permit contestation for the legislature or executive. Those who govern are thus bound by the preferences of encompassing majorities. Free and fair elections, the freedom of assembly, association, the press as well as the protection of fundamental rights are institutional principles that characterise democratic systems today. After the end of the Cold War, these principles seemed to become accepted as a canon of universal values of legitimate rule.

Two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, this universality is coming in for growing criticism on the ground that western ideas of democracy do not “travel very well” to other cultural environments. As, according to the critics, the emergence of liberal democracy is a product of specifically western experience, the integration of liberal-democratic moral concepts into other cultural contexts is severely restricted. The democratic principles mentioned above would therefore be in no way suitable as a canon of universal values, their range being limited by cultural or cultural-religious boundaries. As deeply embedded Asian and African politico-cultural concepts and practices, for example, are compatible with liberal-democratic concepts to only a limited extent at best, western measures to promote liberal democracy should be considered illegitimate and unfruitful. This line of argument is also reinforced by the current global changes – the rise of emerging powers and the manifest economic problems in Europe and the USA.

On closer examination, however, there is a great deal to be said for the universality of liberal-

democratic values and little for culturally relativistic scepticism.

The principles of liberal-democratic rule continue to radiate with enormous intensity in all cultural circles. And this by no means solely because western prosperity and consumption are associated with democracy. Moreover the institutional principles of liberal democracy are linked to the well-justified hope that under democratic order government are not confined to the interests of a few powerful groups, but is geared to the needs of broad strata of society. This is not only evident from the events of the Arab Spring, when large sections of the population stood up for greater political participation and democracy. At least Muslims of the urban middle classes have little interest in Islamist authoritarianism. It is no different in South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Ghana or South Africa, where the institutional principles of democracy have been established and are endorsed by a majority of the population. Conversely, authoritarian regimes invest hugely in censorship and repression in all cultural circles with a view to preventing an open debate on the legitimacy of different forms of political order.

This does not mean that the institutions of liberal democracy will be established quickly and without conflict. For so optimistic a forecast the inertia of the political and economic elites who benefit handsomely from illiberal and autocratic structures is just too strong. Yet, the experience of the last decades just does not lend support to the thesis that the attractiveness of liberal-democratic principles is reserved to certain large cultural areas. It would be a cynical undertaking to declare to today's Indian demonstrators that, although fundamental rights of girls and women must be guaranteed by the state, freedom of assembly and

demands for parliament and government to be more accountable are culturally illegitimate means of achieving that end. Similarly, it would be contemptuous to tell Chinese bloggers as Michael Anti that they are wrong in describing democracy as a “universal value” or to advise civil society actors in Africa that the democratically legitimised rule of law for which they are pressing is a culturally uninformed expectation.

The charge laid by culturally relativistic sceptics that the concept of liberal democracy as a canon of universal values is a fixed component of western “value imperialism” can even be reversed in many cases. For what right do western cultural relativists have to claim that societies in other regions are culturally unfit for democratic rule? The reference to intellectual opponents of liberal-democratic principles in the countries of the South is, in any case, worth little, since they often prove on closer inspection to be the victims of censorship or even beneficiaries of authoritarian structures.

The core of the culturally relativistic argument that liberal democracy does not travel well is, then, neither empirically tenable nor normatively comprehensible. However, overly optimistic forecasts of the irreversible triumphant arrival of liberal democracy should also be viewed with caution. The barriers to greater democracy are rooted less in the universal attractiveness of liberal democracy than in the fact that inclusive rights to participation and freedom constitute a threat to the political and economic beneficiaries of authoritarian structures.

Finally, acceptance of the universality of the concepts of liberal democracy does not mean that criticism may not be levelled at the practices and conduct of western democracy promotion. Diplomatic deviousness and the often patronising self-satisfaction of western democracy promoters are often of little help to gain acceptance for democracy as a universal value in a changing international system.



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