

The Fall of Kabul, “The Fall of Democracy”. Hubris of Western Plutocracies

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“Democracy” seems to be under threat again, this time in Kabul. We are told that a horrible force is at the helm of power in Afghanistan, the Taliban – yes, the same Taliban that the US-NATO vanquished and dethroned in 2001. The so-called democracy that Western forces had gifted to Afghans was now being forcefully overturned.

On the other hand, the good news is that democracy supposedly remains stable and sturdy in the Western nations that ushered in the era of democracy in Afghanistan from 2001 onwards. There is nothing to worry there. The storming of Washington D.C.’s Capitol Hill in January of this year was simply considered an anomalous instance of an attack on the ‘greatest democracy in the world.’ And the mob assault only served to demonstrate how robust democracy is in America. The solid democratic foundations of the US can withstand anything, so the narrative goes.

Perhaps the only thing democracy cannot withstand is critical self-scrutiny. Ideally, we expect a decent system of governance to be just, fair, transparent, and accountable. Democracy, we are told, is the only form of governance that lives up to these characteristics. This leaves us with the quandary of determining which places are democratic and which are not.

Herein lies the perplexity in such a narrative around politics and governance. Is democracy indeed a reference to such noble and desirable features of governance, or is it, fundamentally, a metaphor for something else?

What seems paramount, therefore, is to begin with an internal critique of the way democracy is ‘performed’ in much of the Western world. Rather than reflecting the interests and concerns of the bulk of these populations, politics is reduced to becoming a spectator sport for the majority. These societies are given the choice to ratify one member of the oligarchic elite or another. This is the ‘freedom to choose’ that is granted in a Western plutocracy – ‘rule by the wealthy’ – misleadingly called a democracy, of course.

Nevertheless, the real critical interrogation of the concept of democracy centrally concerns its discursive deployment in the world today. Does the term really refer to a mode of

governance, and certain characteristics of a political order? Or should democracy simply be decoded and explained by its etymology, by the word's Greek origins as 'rule by the people'?

Crucial to this discussion is the important question of who gets to anoint societies as democratic or undemocratic. It seems clear that such authority fundamentally emanates from existing global relations of power. The Western world has for centuries constructed caricatures of societies not like theirs. These 'Others' are either afflicted by 'Oriental despotism' or by authoritarianism - and hence, lack of democracy.

It is incessantly regurgitated that countries such as Russia, Iran, China, Venezuela, and so on are authoritarian, even totalitarian. They are certainly not deemed to be democracies, and are putatively something approximating the opposite. The Western invective does not go much into details or specific, rational criticisms of the efficacy of these nations' modes of governance. Rather, it is sufficient to merely denounce these countries as being 'undemocratic.'

We have to put aside for a moment the fact that a country like Great Britain could assert that it was a democracy even when more than ninety percent of British subjects had no right to vote and had absolutely no representation in the nation's Parliament. Or that the United States could have one of the most ruthless forms of slavery in recorded history, consider more than half of its population to be unworthy political subjects (women), and exterminate the original inhabitants of its territory - and still call itself a democracy.

What is equally scandalous is the hubris of these two Western plutocracies in particular to arrogate to themselves the right to determine which nation is democratic (good) and which is not (bad).

In the case of the 'graveyard of empires,' the dominant view of the US-backed Afghan government over the past two decades is emblematic of a well-trodden pattern. No matter how the puppet fiefdom in Kabul had been perceived by both Afghans and much of the rest of the world, the Western expectation has been to see it as the deliverance of democracy via B-52s, cruise missiles, drones, and 'boots on the ground' since October 2001. Exiled Afghans parachuted from abroad, along with a motley crew of warlords, were to be the 'true and authentic voice' of the people of Afghanistan.

Thus, when the Taliban ousted this government and returned to the seat of power last month, democracy was ostensibly derailed due to the return of totalitarianism. Despotism had replaced democracy.

It is an inconvenient fact that the legitimacy of the leaders of this 'fledgling democracy' rested on the barrel of an American gun. The rule of the warlords and exiled Afghans, the militarism, violence, and obscene corruption under foreign occupation, were all sold to us as democracy.

It seems that observers who find such political characterizations as problematic have a point, assuming that democracy is a mode of governance that is just, fair, accountable, and transparent. Whether or not democracies live up to such criteria is always a matter of contestation. But it is abundantly evident that Western designations of being a democracy rarely have anything to do with adherence to these features.

Indeed, almost like clockwork, labels of being anti-democratic are bandied about to the usual suspects: those countries which are deemed to be 'anti-Western'. Which is why it's instructive to do a simple exercise: finding a democracy which is anti-Western. They do not – or rather cannot – exist. Democracies can only be pro-Western, a law supposedly as natural as that of gravity.

That seems curious and ironic. Considering that a large part of the world has been at the brunt of violent Western interventionism and varying modes of hybrid warfare, it would be highly likely that democracy – as the professed 'rule by the people' – would render many of these societies to indeed *choose* to be 'anti-Western'.

It is important to note, however, that the term 'anti-Western' denotes a term of ideological propaganda deployed as a caricature of legitimate criticisms of Western foreign policy. The term functions to suppress, obfuscate, and deflect from rational discussion on the criminality of global hegemony.

Nevertheless, if there was any confusion concerning the political weaponization of the bestowed honor of being called a democracy, then the ignominious defeat and collapse of the West's favored (puppet) 'democrats' in Kabul should lay that to rest. Any notion that the 'Green Zone' Kingdom of Kabul protected by American marines these past two decades had any popular legitimacy has now become farcical.

The image of former President Ashraf Ghani fleeing Afghanistan with bags of cash should be a metaphor for the sheer vacuity and hollowness of the rhetoric around democracy.

Indeed, the day an anti-Western government will be declared a democracy by Washington and London is when – perhaps – serious discussion about the subject can actually commence.

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