

## **A Brief History of Political Legitimacy: Demotic Ideology and the Spread of Democracy.**

By Alexander Maxwell

To establish democratic government in a previously undemocratic state requires its inhabitants to possess certain popular attitudes toward political legitimacy. Democracy, like any other form of government, can only function properly if the people it seeks to govern understand and accept its implicit assumptions. The rise of democracy thus has a cultural history. A long-term perspective on political legitimacy, considering change over centuries rather than year-to-year, suggests that democratic ideas are spreading more rapidly than democracy itself. In the long term, therefore, optimism about the future prospects for stable democratic government seems warranted.

The history of political legitimacy enables scholars to track how cultural attitudes toward state power have changed over time. The earliest historical records suggest that in the ancient world, ruling elites routinely proclaimed themselves gods, or to have descended from gods. The Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt posed as divine (see Ions 1982: 120). Ptolemy V, best remembered for the Rosetta stone, on which he claimed divine descent and ordered priests to pay regular homage to him (Bevan, Mahaffy 1927:236). Augustus Caesar proclaimed himself a god, and ordered prayers said to him (Beard et al, 1998:128). Sassanid emperor Shapur I claimed that his “seed is from gods” (Soudavar 2003:43). Further examples could easily be given.

Ancient claims to divinity may have catered to popular expectations rather than genuine religious belief. Plutarch’s biography of Alexander the Great (1994:7:307, 309), for example, notes that while Alexander posed as a god when demanding tribute of conquered peoples, but did not expect his fellow soldiers to believe such claims: “Alexander himself was not foolishly affected or puffed up by the belief in his divinity, but used it for the subjugation of others.” Alexander publically professed himself a god because he lived in an age in which rulers derived their legitimacy from claims to divinity.

Assertions of divinity fell from favour during the Middle Ages, since the idea of a single jealous God spread with monotheistic Christianity and Islam. Medieval and early modern rulers instead proclaimed themselves to be God’s chosen representative. Christian monarchs, whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant, claimed to rule by grace of God. (Canning 1996:17;

Zenkovsky 2003:1:36; Dabbs 1971). Roy Rappaport (1999: 315) rightly described Christian kingship as “not sacred but merely sanctified, albeit highly so.” Islamic rulers similarly claimed to rule as God’s deputy, lieutenant, or favourite (see Crone 2003; Black 2001:206; Safran 2000:47-49). The first Umayyad Caliph Mu’awiya exemplified the cosmological claims to political legitimacy common throughout the medieval and early modern Christian and Muslim worlds by claiming that “the earth belongs to God and I am the deputy of God” (Crone 2003:6). Once again, further examples could easily be given.

Several rulers who posed as God’s chosen representative were simply catering to popular expectations. Henry IV of France, to give one particularly famous example, converted to Catholicism for secular reasons: “Paris is worth a mass” (see Lindberg 2009:280). Several monarchs claiming to rule through divine sanction flouted the basic tenants of the religion that ostensibly legitimized their rule. Ottoman Sultan Selim II drank so much alcohol that history remembers him as “Selim the Drunkard” (see Kohen 2007: 73). Russian emperor Peter the Great repeatedly mocked Orthodoxy with his “most drunken Synod of Fools and Jesters” (Zguta 1973; Shubin 2004: 238). Nevertheless, no monarchs sought to abolish the church as a means of social control over the population at large. For “the common people,” as Nietzsche (2002:55) observed, “religion ... glorifies their obedience.” Just as Alexander the Great cynically proclaimed his own divinity, free-thinking monarchs publically professed to derive their authority from God because they lived in an age in which rulers derived legitimacy from claims to divine sanction.

Monarchs could not formally reject religion without undermining the foundations of their legitimacy, thus creating civil strife. The perceived link between religious dissent and sedition, combined with religious chauvinism, generated several conflicts between Muslims and Christians, Sunni and Shi’a, Catholics and Protestants. Similar forces contributed to the ongoing persecution of Jews (See Flannery 1999; Cohen 1995).

Political theorists using religion to legitimize state power thus often rejected religious toleration. If a given religious belief justified political power, rejecting that belief implied rejecting secular authority. Islamic thinkers developed justifications for rebellion against impious rulers as early as the seventh century (see Grunebaum 2005: 61-62; Dabashi 1993:125). Both Catholic and Protestant thinkers developed similar justifications for sedition during the Reformation. One French tract from 1590 explicitly justified the assassination of unbelieving kings (see Stankiewicz 1976: 39-40). The violence and destruction of Reformation’s religious

wars, however, drove European thinkers to seek a basis for political legitimacy that rested on non-sectarian principles. Their efforts bore fruit in social contract theory.

Contract theory derives legitimacy from parables about the rational self-interest of the people (see Morris 1999; Lessnoff 1990). Several early social contract theorists supported absolute monarchy, but by 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2008:32) described the collective will of the people as “the sovereign,” able to legitimately oppose the royal will. Rousseau treated the social contract itself as sacred, suggesting that it could form a simple “civil religion” to replace complex Christian theology (see Deenan 2005).

Political theory inspired by social contract theory eventually led to a new series of political upheavals, often called the “Age of Revolutions,” with the French Revolution at its centre. The spread of contractarian thinking and its political ramifications is too complex to summarize here, but two points deserve emphasis. Firstly, states legitimated through contract theory are historically a very recent phenomenon. Liberal democratic government may trace its roots back past the Enlightenment to Ancient Greece, yet only in the twentieth century has republican government become the rule: for most of human history, rulers have claimed legitimacy from the blessings of supernatural forces. Secondly, the transition from monarchs ruling “by grace of God” to popular will was typically bloody and protracted. Most absolute monarchs fell from power because of war or revolution, and several democracies have been unstable and collapsed.

Consider the painful transition to democracy in France. The French Revolution of 1789 briefly replaced absolute monarchy in constitutional monarchy, but Louis XVI’s unwillingness to cede power led to his execution in 1792. The resulting Republic proved so tyrannical that historians often refer to the Jacobin period as “the Terror.” Two short-lived Republican governments followed before the dictator Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in a 1799 coup. Napoleon launched so many aggressive wars against neighboring countries that he was eventually toppled through foreign intervention, and in 1814 absolutist monarchy returned. Another revolution in 1830 led to a somewhat more successful constitutional monarchy; still another revolution in 1848 led to a short-lived republic that promptly became a dictatorship under Napoleon III. Only after Napoleon’s capture in the Franco-Prussian war and a brief civil war did stable democratic government emerge in France. The path to French democracy, in

short, involved three revolutions, two dictatorships, and two foreign interventions. The whole process lasted the better part of a century.

The transition to democracy in Germany proved equally protracted. The Revolution of 1848 brought into being a German parliament that sought to coexist with German princely families, which quickly proved impractical. Defeat in the First World War enabled German democrats to found a German Republic in 1919, but the dictator Adolf Hitler seized power in 1933. Hitler's dictatorship launched so many aggressive wars against neighboring countries that it was eventually toppled through foreign intervention, and only in 1948 did a stable German democracy emerge in the Western zone of occupation. Establishing a stable German democracy, therefore, involved two revolutions, (three if one counts the 1989 revolution that toppled the Berlin wall), and an unusually brutal dictatorship. The whole process lasted a full century.

Establishing British democracy took even longer. The first English republic came into being in 1649, led by the dictator Cromwell who launched aggressive wars against neighboring Ireland and Scotland, though without prompting foreign intervention. The Stuart dynasty returned to power in 1660, but further revolution in 1688 established a constitutional monarchy. The United Kingdom, as its name suggests, has since remained nominally monarchical, even if it established democratic government in practice during the nineteenth century. Several of its former colonies, however, have established republican governments, and the United States, the first formal democracy to emerge in the British world, gained its independence in 1783. The United States, furthermore, tolerated human slavery until the 1860s. The path to British and American democracy thus also involved revolution, and if one accepts that American democracy rested on British foundations, the process of establishing it lasted centuries.

Perhaps, then, one should take a philosophical attitude toward unstable or fragile democratic states. As I write this essay, the situation in Iraq looks bleak. Consider, however, that the first Iraqi Republic appeared when the Hashemite dynasty was overthrown in 1958. It proved unstable, and in 1979, the dictator Saddam Hussein seized power. Hussein launched two aggressive wars against neighboring countries before being toppled by foreign intervention. One may legitimately doubt whether Iraq's current democratic government enjoys much popular support, or how long it could survive without foreign support. The century-long timeframe suggested by the German, French and British examples warns against expecting too much too soon. Yet the same examples also suggest that Iraqi democracy is developing normally: other

examples of democratic transition suggest that catastrophic reversals usually characterize the path from monarchical rule to democracy. Instead of despairing that Iraq's current elections are not yet peaceful, free and fair, one might instead be optimistic that Iraq has been holding elections since 1925.

Indeed, one the most striking features of contemporary global politics is the spread of democratic rhetoric, symbolism even in frankly undemocratic states. One might distinguish "democratic" government from "demotic" governments. Democratic governments, as defined here, subjects themselves to popular review in the form of free and fair elections, respect the rule of law, and honour the civil rights of its inhabitants, and so forth. Readers may mentally substitute their own criteria of liberal democracy. To qualify as "demotic," by contrast, a government must only claim its legitimacy arises from the popular will, instead of claiming legitimacy from supernatural forces.

Several twentieth-century dictatorships qualify as demotic. Consider how many states hold elections that are neither free nor fair (see Mackenzie 1958). The tyrant Stalin once remarked that voters were unimportant, explaining "What is extremely important is who counts the votes and how they are recorded" (see Service 2005: 227-28). Stalinism obviously does not qualify as a democratic system of government, yet it remains demotic: Stalin's 1936 Constitution for the USSR explicitly proclaimed that "in the USSR all power belongs to the working people of town and country as represented by the Soviets of Working People's Deputies" (Beard 1996). The Soviet Union and its puppet states, furthermore, routinely organized elections. Voters in Soviet elections, of course, only had one choice of candidate, and could be severely punished for voting incorrectly (see Brym, 1978; Pravda 1978). Yet the sham elections of the Soviet period show the lengths Soviet leaders went to create the appearance of legitimacy from below, while their Romanov predecessors had claimed their legitimacy derived from God. Soviet leaders thus publically professed their obedience to the popular will because they lived in an age in which rulers were expected to derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed.

Sham elections remain popular among contemporary dictatorships. In Africa, Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe has held regular parliamentary and presidential elections (see Copson 2006: 3-21). In Central Asia, Saparmurat Niyazov's Turkmenistan witnessed a bizarre personality cult, yet organized regular elections (see Ochs 1997:22; Kehl-Bodrogi 2006:143). The Islamic Republic of Iran organizes regular elections which are neither a sham nor properly

democratic (see Demant, 2006: 255; Jahanbakhsh, 2001; Gheissari and Nasr, 2006). While none of these states qualify as liberal democracies, the prominent role of elections in such diverse political contexts illustrates the explosive spread of demotic political legitimacy.

If demotic political rhetoric spreads faster than democratic practice, perhaps the one presages the other. If so, demotic rhetoric presages the eventual emergence of genuinely democratic government. Several apparently stable democracies have emerged from the collapse of Soviet Communism, and even Communist China has found that limited local elections can lead to unexpectedly substantive transfers of power (Epstein 1997; Pei 1995). As demotic ideas eventually acquire hegemony, democratic practice may follow.

Yet if history offers grounds for optimism in the long term, the short or medium term may witness unrest and turbulence. While revolution and expansionist dictatorships eventually pass, the fact offers but cold comfort to those who must endure violent times. As demotic political ideals spread to Africa and the Middle East traditional state structures may collapse even if the political will or social structures necessary for democratic government are not in place. If bloody revolutions and expansionist dictatorships resulted in France, Germany, England, and Iraq, perhaps one should expect similar results in Africa and the Middle East.

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