

The North African Revolutions, Africa, and Democracy

Many forms of Government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

—Winston Churchill, 1947

No matter how bad the political, economic, and social conditions, no matter how steep the fall to unimagined depths, democracies can pull through. There is a way up. There is always hope, and one should never let go of it.

—Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono
President of the Republic of Indonesia

Contrary to popular belief, the spread of democracy is not a new phenomenon in Africa. As Peter Schraeder points out, “the ‘third wave’ of democratization within the international system (the first two waves began in the 1820s and the 1940s) has led to an outpouring of scholarship. . . . In the case of . . . African studies, scholarly analyses of the democratization process—often referred to as Africa’s ‘springtime’ or ‘second independence’—dramatically increased at the end of the decade of the 1980s.”¹ That wind of democratization, blowing since 1974, did not spare Africa, with the exception of North Africa—an area that lagged behind the rest of the continent. However, the “Jasmine Revolution”—prompted by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, and the ousting of Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali 28 days later on 14 January 2011—was a brutal awakening. The North African revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya gave a new impetus, a trigger, to Africa’s democratic evolution. Immediate reactions came from Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Uganda, Nigeria, Malawi, and Senegal. Some African governments banned any mention of the dreadful words *Jasmine Revolution*, *Arab Spring*, or *North African revolutions* from the Internet and public media. Other autocrats openly supported the despots being ousted. The North African revolutions spread like fire in the Middle East and shocked the whole world, especially authoritarian

regimes that impede the United Nations Security Council's search for a way to protect communities and civilians from abuses by their own governments.

Until recently, democracy was synonymous with wealthier countries and almost all nations that have largely Western cultures. Supposedly, democracy was incompatible with non-European nations having different cultures, civilizations, religions, and so forth. At best, most people considered democracy a luxury that poorer countries could not afford. Mali, however, represents a disavowal of such belief. Without fanfare that country has moved from 35 years of single-party rule and 23 years of military dictatorship to a multiparty democracy. Mali has none of the supposed preconditions for democracy. Landlocked, it has a population of more than 14 million, most of them illiterate, about half of them destitute (below the international poverty line of \$1.25 [US] a day), and facing a life expectancy of only 44 years. Furthermore, the Malian population, comprised of more than 10 ethnic groups, is overwhelmingly Muslim.² If democracy can emerge and persist for more than a decade in Mali, then there is no reason why it cannot develop in the remaining totalitarian nations, rich or poor.

No longer is democracy a luxury. Authoritarian regimes do not exist because their people want dictatorship; on the contrary, the recent demonstrations of courage have shown the world that all peoples aspire to freedom. In point of fact, these regimes exist because they cater to narrow, corrupt, self-serving, and entrenched political elites. Larry Diamond writes that "there are no preconditions for democracy, other than a willingness on the part of a nation's elite to attempt to govern by democratic means."³ Democracy is present in every major religious and philosophical tradition, in countries predominantly Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and Muslim.

Furthermore, Indonesia, though clearly not African, can still teach us lessons about democratic governance. That nation, the largest Muslim country in the world, has experienced colonization, coups d'état, dictatorships, ethnic rivalries, and violent insurgencies. Nevertheless, according to Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, "Regardless of how one defines that elusive term 'democracy,' I have no doubt that the future belongs to those who are willing to *possibly* embrace pluralism, openness, and freedom. . . . Once individuals and communities get a taste of the exercise of democracy and choice, they are likely to cling to it and fight for it when it is under threat. In short, we [Indonesians] have awakened our democratic instinct" (emphasis in original).⁴

All over the world despotism is in retreat. Just as dinosaurs failed to survive the Ice Age, so will authoritarian regimes fail to survive the age of democratization.

Notes

1. Peter J. Schraeder, "Understanding the 'Third Wave' of Democratization in Africa," *Journal of Politics* 57, no. 4 (November 1995): 1160.
2. The most significant ethnic groups include the Bambara, Soninké, Khassonké, Malinké, Fula, Voltaic, Songhai, Tuareg, and Moor.
3. Larry Diamond, *Can the Whole World Become Democratic? Democracy, Development, and International Policies* (Irvine, CA: Center for the Study of Democracy, University of California–Irvine, 2003), see abstract, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bv4b2w1.pdf>.
4. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, "The Democratic Instinct in the 21st Century," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (July 2010): 6.

Rémy M. Mauduit, Editor
Air and Space Power Journal—Africa and Francophonie
Maxwell AFB, Alabama

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