Despots Masquerading as Democrats

By Kenneth Roth

Rarely has democracy been so acclaimed yet so breached, so promoted yet so disrespected, so important yet so disappointing. Today, democracy has become the *sine qua non* of legitimacy. Few governments want to be seen as undemocratic. Yet the credentials of the claimants have not kept pace with democracy's growing popularity. These days, even overt dictators aspire to the status conferred by the democracy label. Determined not to let mere facts stand in the way, these rulers have mastered the art of democratic rhetoric that bears little relationship to their practice of governing.

Why else would as ruthless a leader as Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov choose to stage elections? Why bother? Karimov heads a government that has imprisoned some 7,000 people for political and religious reasons, routinely tortures detainees, and as recently as 2005 massacred hundreds of protesters in Andijan. He is hardly a democrat, and he faces no real opponents in December 2007 elections because no one dares mount a serious challenge to his rule. Even a constitutional prohibition against a third seven-year presidential term has not stood in his way.

Yet this brutal president finds utility in holding electoral charades to legitimize his reign. So do, among others, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, and Vladimir Putin of Russia.

Even China has gotten into the game. In an October 2007 speech to the Communist Party Congress, President Hu Jintao used the word "democracy" more than 60 times in calling for more of it within the party. Yet that has not stopped him from barring independent political parties, blocking legal efforts to uphold basic rights, and shutting down countless civil society organizations, media outlets, and websites. And there are no national elections. So what did he have in mind? The party allowed 221 candidates to contest 204 seats for its Central Committee.

The techniques used by such autocrats to tame the nettlesome unpredictability of democracy are nothing if not creative. The challenge they face is to appear to embrace democratic principles while avoiding any risk of succumbing to popular preferences. Electoral fraud, political violence, press censorship, repression of civil society, even military rule have all been used to curtail the prospect that the proclaimed process of democratization might actually lead to a popular say in government.

Part of the reason that dictators can hope to get away with such subterfuge is that, unlike human rights, "democracy" has no legally established definition. The concept of democracy reflects the powerful vision that the best way to select a government and guide its course is to entrust ultimate authority to those who are subject to its rule. It is far from a perfect political system, with its risk of majoritarian indifference to minorities and its susceptibility to excessive influence by powerful elements, but as famously the "least bad" form of government, in the words of Winston Churchill, it is an important part of the human rights ideal. Yet there is no International Convention on Democracy, no widely ratified treaty affirming how a government must behave to earn the democracy label. The meaning of democracy lies too much in the eye of the beholder.

By contrast, international human rights law grants all citizens the right to "take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives" and to "vote" in "genuine periodic elections" with "universal and equal suffrage" and "secret ballot" so as to "guarantee[] the free expression of the will of the electors." It also grants a range of related rights that should be seen as essential to democracy in any robust and meaningful form, including rights protecting a diverse and vigorous civil society and a free and vibrant press, rights defending the interests of minorities, and rights ensuring that government officials are subject to the rule of law. The specificity and legally binding nature of human rights are their great strength. But when autocrats manage to deflect criticism for violating these rights by pretending to be democrats, when they can enjoy the benefits of admission to the club of democracies without paying the admission fee of respect for basic rights, the global defense of human rights is put in jeopardy. Why bother complying with so intrusive a set of rules as international human rights law when, with a bit of maneuvering, any tyrant can pass himself off as a "democrat"?

The misuse of the democratic name is not entirely new. The one-time German Democratic Republic (the name of the now-defunct one-party Communist state in East Germany) or today's Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the improbable, official name of North Korea) are prime examples. But few gave any credence to these Orwellian claims. The sad new development is how easy it has become for today's autocrats to get away with mounting a democratic facade.

It is not that pseudo-democratic leaders gain much legitimacy at home. The local population knows all too bitterly what a farce the elections really are. At best, these leaders gain the benefit of feigned compliance with local laws requiring elections. Rather, a good part of the motivation today behind this democratic veneer stems from the international legitimacy that an electoral exercise, however empty, can win for even the most hardened dictator. Because of other interests—energy, commerce, counterterrorism—the world's more established democracies too often find it convenient to appear credulous of these sham democrats.

Foremost has been the United States under President George W. Bush. In a troubling parallel to abusive governments around the world, the US government has embraced democracy promotion as a softer and fuzzier alternative to defending human rights. Democracy is a metric by which the United States still measures up fairly well, but human rights are a standard by which the record of the Bush administration is deeply troubling. Talk of human rights leads to Guantanamo, secret CIA prisons, waterboarding, rendition, military commissions, and the suspension of habeas corpus. Despite the 2000 presidential elections, discussion of democracy takes place on a more comfortable terrain.

Such divorcing of democracy from the international standards that give it meaning helps to convince autocrats that mere elections, regardless of the circumstances, are sufficient to warrant the democrat label. Bush's response to then-General Musharraf's November 2007 declaration of "emergency rule" illustrates the problem. Even after Musharraf's effective coup and his detention of thousands of political opponents, Bush said that Musharraf had somehow not "crossed the line." Bush could hardly trumpet Musharraf's human rights record, so he declared that Musharraf is "somebody who believes in democracy" and that Pakistan was "on the road to democracy." But if, unlike human rights law, "the road to democracy" permits locking up political opponents, dismissing independent judges, and silencing the independent press, it is easy to see why tyrants the world over are

tempted to believe that they, too, might be eligible. As such unworthy claimants as the leaders of Egypt, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, and Nigeria wrap themselves in the democracy mantle with scant international objection, the concept of democracy gets cheapened, its human rights component cast aside.

To make matters worse, the Bush administration's efforts to rationalize the invasion of Iraq in terms of democracy promotion has made it easier for autocrats to equate pressure on them to democratize with an imperial, militarist agenda. Sadly, that cynical ploy often works, because much of the world today views any Washington-led campaign for democracy as a pretext for military invasion or regime change, if not also as a recipe for chaos. Dictators have learned that conjuring up visions of Iraq can be a useful way to blunt pressure to democratize. And governments that might have defended a more robust vision of democracy are reluctant to do so for fear of being seen as joining the Bush agenda.

Other governments, too, have treated empty elections as an excuse to re-start business as usual with dictatorships that merit denunciation, not partnership. A prime example is the treatment of Kazakhstan by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a body that comprises 56 governments from Europe and Central Asia as well as the United States and Canada. In August 2007, President Nursultan Nazarbaev staged parliamentary elections in which the OSCE found vote-counting flaws in 40 percent of the polling stations it visited. The predictable result: Nazarbaev's party won all the seats in the lower house of parliament with a declared 88 percent of the vote, and no opposition party was said to have surpassed the 7 percent threshold needed for parliamentary representation. This fraud occurred against a backdrop of continuing, widespread human rights violations: government loyalists dominate the broadcast media, independent journalists are threatened and harassed for criticizing the president or the government, libel continues to be used as a criminal offense, and opposition activists risk imprisonment, such as Alibek Zhumbaev, currently serving a five-year prison term for insulting Nazarbaev.

But the OSCE, in evidence-be-damned fashion, claimed that the elections had "moved Kazakhstan forward in its evolution towards a democratic country." This wishful thinking was apparently designed to avoid keeping Kazakhstan from its long-sought goal of becoming the first former Soviet republic to chair the OSCE. Preoccupied by energy concerns, Germany joined Russia in supporting this inappropriate candidacy. Although the US and British governments led the

opposition, they, too, ultimately wavered. In November 2007, OSCE states by consensus granted Kazakhstan the chairmanship in 2010. Kazakhstan, rather than having to demonstrate respect in fact for the democracy and human rights standards that are at the heart of the OSCE, had only to pledge to undertake media and electoral reform and to stop trying to undermine the OSCE's human rights mandate. Dumbing down democracy in this form, with little protest from the governments that are best placed to serve as its guardians, has made it easier for authoritarian leaders like Nazarbaev to masquerade as democrats and deflect pressure for more meaningful human rights reform.

Of course, insisting on real democracy is not the only test of the international community's commitment to human rights. Also of fundamental importance is its response to mass atrocities in places such as eastern Chad, Colombia, eastern Congo, the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and the Darfur region of Sudan, as well as to closed societies or severe repression in countries such as Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam. These urgent situations are addressed in detail within this volume. But the human rights cause must be concerned not only with these severe cases but also with governments that may be slightly more open but still use repressive means to prevent any challenge to their rule. Their task is eased when mere gestures toward democracy are allowed to displace respect for the full panoply of human rights.

To avoid this shell game, to prevent the appeal of "democracy" from being abused as a poor surrogate for more exacting rights standards, there is an urgent need to reclaim the full meaning of the democratic ideal. That does not mean advocating a narrowly defined form of governance. Democracy legitimately comes in many varieties, including systems based on proportional representation and first-past-the-post models, those featuring a strong president and those centered around a powerful prime minister, those that entrust authority primarily to the executive branch and those that prefer a stronger legislature. But all democracies worthy of the name have certain common characteristics, including periodic competitive elections that are freely held as well as transparently and accurately tabulated, a meaningful array of political parties, independent media outlets, civil society organizations that give citizens—including minorities—a broad range of opportunities to band together with others to make their voices heard, and a legal system that ensures that no one—and especially no government official—is above the law.

In 2007, democracy showed continuing vitality in, for example, Sierra Leone, Jamaica, Poland, and Australia—all countries where power alternated and opposition parties took office after elections that were widely considered free and fair. In Turkey, when the military launched a so-called email coup in an effort to block the democratically elected, moderate Islamic government from appointing one of its officials, Abdullah Gül, as president, the government called an early general election, received an overwhelming reaffirmation of its mandate, and proceeded to appoint Gül anyway. The Turkish people's desire for democracy proved strong.

Still, many dictators are eager to legitimize themselves on the cheap. If they can get away with a sham election, they will. Their ability to do so depends in large part on the vigilance of established democracies in insisting on democracy in all its dimensions, including respect for a broad array of human rights and the rule of law. A principled commitment to democracy is not easy. It may mean putting pressure on dictatorial friends or promoting rights that even some established democracies would prefer not to highlight. But a principled commitment is needed if the promotion of democracy is to serve as a source of real pressure to respect human rights rather than a new tool to bypass international standards in favor of a feel-good, empty alternative.

To recapture the powerful ideal of democracy, so central to the human rights cause yet so at risk of being manipulated as a false but beguiling substitute, requires heightened attention to the clever subterfuges of its detractors. What follows is a summary of recent trends as governments violate human rights to subvert democracy or trumpet democracy to avoid discussion of human rights.

Upholding democracy also requires avoiding some of the pitfalls that have undermined recent efforts to defend it. As described below, many established democracies have fallen victim to the tendencies to bank on the "democrat" rather than democratic principles, to accept the false dichotomy that the only alternative to the despot one knows is the despot one fears, to claim that democracy could flourish even if divorced from the human rights that give it meaning, or to modulate demands for genuine democracy according to the strategic value of the democracy pretender. These tendencies must be resisted if democracy promotion is to reach its potential as a positive force for human rights.

Rhetorical Games

Authoritarian leaders' evasive use of democracy often begins with word games and rhetorical sleights of hand suggesting that restrictions undermining democracy are really necessary to save it. In Pakistan, for example, Musharraf imposed "emergency rule" to prevent the then-independent Supreme Court from ruling illegal his election as president while he remained the head of the military. Despite this very personal motivation, he claimed the coup was necessary to "preserve the democratic transition." Similarly in Bangladesh, an army-appointed caretaker government banned all political and trade union activities and limited press freedoms, all in the name of preparing credible national elections.

Many repressive leaders have tried to redefine democracy by introducing a devastating qualifier or an antithetical adjective. President Vladimir Putin, as he cripples democracy by shutting down all competing centers of influence in Russia, has become a proponent of "sovereign democracy," meaning in effect that democracy is whatever the sovereign wants it to mean. As the Burmese junta rounded up protesting monks and violently suppressed dissent, it spoke of the need for "disciplined democracy." China has long promoted "socialist democracy," by which it means a top-down centralism that eliminates minority views.

Musharraf in Pakistan justified "emergency rule" as "genuine democracy," explaining: "We want democracy, we want human rights, we want civil liberties but we will do it our own way." Libya's Mu`ammar al-Qadhafi uses the term "participatory democracy" to justify abolishing independent political parties on the grounds that the population does not need them as intermediaries because it participates directly in governance through government-staged assemblies. In the Cuban version of the same concept, candidates must be pre-approved by mass organizations controlled by the government, and the constitution severely limits any political organization other than the Communist Party.

Electoral Fraud

Ordinary electoral fraud is one of the most common strategies to circumvent the uncertainties of democracy. In addition to the case of Kazakhstan, cited above, Nigeria and Chad are recent examples.

In Nigeria, facing the first transfer of power from one civilian leader to another since the country's independence in 1960, the ruling People's Democratic Party resorted to massive fraud to ensure that its candidate, Umaru Yar'Adua, succeeded Olusegun Obasanjo as president in April 2007 elections. In an effort to redeem some legitimacy, Yar'Adua, to his credit, has launched an electoral reform process, has allowed the courts to overturn several of his party's fraudulent state-level victories, and continues to face judicial review of his own tainted election. But no one has been prosecuted for the blatant ballot-stuffing, vote-buying, and political intimidation that were central to his "election," so the Nigerian people are losing confidence that he will translate his reformist rhetoric into a new democratic reality. In Chad, President Idriss Déby, who seized power in 1990, has given his rule the imprimatur of democracy by holding three sham presidential elections. In 2005, he did away with a provision barring him from seeking a third five-year term by amending the constitution in a referendum plagued by irregularities. Anticipating fraud, opposition groups refused to field candidates for the 2006 presidential elections, leaving Déby to prevail easily over four weak challengers including two government ministers. The United States and European Union declined to send observers, while the balloting was marred by low voter participation, underage voting, and multiple voting.

Controlling the Electoral Machinery

Fair elections depend on the independence of the people running them, so it should come as no surprise that one favorite way for rulers to manipulate elections is to stack electoral machinery with their supporters. In Azerbaijan, where electoral fraud has been a persistent problem, the ruling party of President Ilham Aliev names the chairperson and maintains a majority on the election commission. In Zimbabwe, opposition parties are excluded from the Electoral Commission. In Thailand, the new military-sponsored constitution allows members of the National Election Commission to be selected by the Senate, which was once elected but is now appointed.

The case of Malaysia illustrates why governments seek control of the electoral machinery. Its government-dominated Election Commission rejected opposition efforts to remove alleged phantom voters from the electoral rolls, eliminate the widespread use of absentee ballots by government workers, and permit access to state-controlled media by all political parties. Similarly, Cambodia has made an art of holding elections staged by a National Election Commission controlled by the

ruling Cambodian People's Party, which then simply ignores claims of violence, fraud, or intimidation by independent monitors or opposition parties.

Because of such failings, national electoral monitoring mechanisms are often supplemented by international institutions. But these, too, have been targeted by those seeking to manage elections. The Kremlin effectively prevented observers from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the main election monitoring body of the OSCE, from reviewing Russia's December 2007 parliamentary elections by delaying visas, limiting the number of international monitors to be admitted, and threatening to prevent the OSCE from offering its assessment until long after Russia's government-controlled media had shaped public perceptions of the balloting.

Blocking and Discouraging Opposition Candidates

One obvious way to fix an election is to prevent opposition candidates from running. Iran has perfected this method, with its Council of Guardians having rejected some half of the candidates for the 2004 parliamentary elections, most of whom it apparently deemed too reform-minded. In Cuba, the Communist Party-controlled National Assembly has the authority to reject any prospective candidate for public office. Tunisia refuses to legalize most genuine opposition parties. In Thailand, the military government's election commission adopted stringent new rules permitting disqualification of candidates for such trivial offenses as playing music at rallies or having posters not of an approved size—evidently with the goal of eliminating candidates of the People's Power Party, the successor to ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai party.

In several cases, more punitive measures were used. In 2005, just months before Uganda's first multiparty parliamentary and presidential elections in 26 years, the government jailed the leading opposition presidential challenger, Kizza Besigye, on politically-motivated charges of treason and rape. He was later released, but the detention significantly impaired his ability to contest elections a few months later, which he lost to President Yoweri Museveni. In Zimbabwe, the government sent a similar message of discouragement to would-be challengers in March 2007 by dispatching police to severely beat opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai and to arrest scores of other opposition members.

Turkmenistan had the chance to finally give its people a real choice after the December 2006 death of Saparmurat Niazov, the tyrant who ruled the country for 21 years and laid waste to its social welfare system. Instead, the chair of parliament, who was the constitutionally designated successor to Niazov as interim president, was imprisoned on charges of driving a relative to attempt suicide, paving the way for Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov to take over. Five low-ranking "alternative" candidates, all representing the country's sole political party, ran unsuccessfully against Berdymukhamedov. No opposition leader was allowed to return from exile to stand as a candidate.

Sometimes, opposition candidates are permitted to run for office but then are punished for having done so, discouraging such challenges in the future. Under President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, the government detained both opposition candidates who challenged him in the March 2006 presidential election. One of them is serving a five-and-a-half-year prison term on "hooliganism" charges.

Similarly, in 2005, at a time when Egyptian President Mubarak was still facing pressure from the US government to democratize, he allowed other candidates to run against him. Ayman Nour, his most energetic and popular opponent, won an officially reported 7 percent of the vote. But to ensure that Nour's candidacy would not encourage more formidable future challengers, the Egyptian government convicted him after an unfair trial on politically-motivated charges of forgery and sentenced him to five years in prison.

Again following the powerful showing in the 2005 parliamentary elections of the Muslim Brotherhood, the country's largest opposition group, the Egyptian government detained more than a thousand of its members, holding some for up to eight months. The government has prohibited political activity with a religious basis, eliminating the possibility that the Muslim Brotherhood could become a legally recognized political party. The government has also discussed preventing candidates from running as independents, which is how Muslim Brotherhood members have managed so far to participate in elections.

Israel took this process to a new level by detaining candidates even after they had won an election. Dismayed that Hamas won parliamentary elections in 2006, Israel arrested Hamas legislators so that the party could not obtain a quorum in parliament.

Political Violence

Violence is a tool commonly used to tame democracy. In Lebanon, unidentified assailants have assassinated a series of figures from the parliamentary majority, which has been engaged in an ongoing political struggle with Syria and its allies in Lebanon. In Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov—the president installed by the Kremlin—uses security forces known as the "Kadyrovtsy" to brutally enforce his rule. Cambodia's Hun Sen, prime minister since 1985, has used violence in election after election to muffle dissent, including numerous assassinations of opposition party members, independent journalists, human rights defenders, and trade union leaders. Ethiopian authorities reacted to unexpected opposition wins in the 2005 elections by violently dispersing peaceful demonstrations and detaining most of the opposition leadership.

In Zimbabwe, which has scheduled presidential and parliamentary elections for March 2008, the government has let loose youth militia and "war veterans" to beat, torture and rape opposition figures, and the police have used excessive force, sometimes lethal, to break up opposition demonstrations. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, soldiers and police used excessive force, killing more than 100 civilians in the course of crushing sometimes-violent protests against electoral corruption in January-February 2007. In Nigeria, the ruling party recruited gang-like "cults" to curb opposition in advance of April 2007 elections. In Egypt's 2005 parliamentary elections, as return polls showed an increasing number of candidates affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood winning seats, the Egyptian security forces physically blocked voters from reaching polling stations in Muslim Brotherhood strongholds, and in the ensuing violence killed 11 people trying to vote.

Silencing the Media

A meaningful election requires a free press—to highlight issues demanding governmental attention and to permit public scrutiny of candidates' competing political visions. The media is also essential for conveying popular concerns between elections—necessary input because a single vote cast every few years is a crude and insufficient method to make popular concerns known. It is thus no surprise that governments trying to control the democratic process seek to silence the press.

One of the first targets of Russian President Putin was the independent media. Today, all major television and radio stations and most major newspapers are in the hands of Kremlin loyalists. This controlled media landscape was one of Putin's most

important tools for ensuring that the opposition had no chance to threaten his political dominance, whether in the parliamentary elections of December 2007 or the planned presidential elections of March 2008.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, making arbitrary use of a regulatory process, refused to renew the license of RCTV, one of the country's four leading private television stations and the only one with national coverage that had dared to maintain an anti-Chávez editorial line. Under Zimbabwe's repressive media laws, the only independent daily newspaper, the Daily News, was shut down in 2003.

Egypt imprisoned journalists and bloggers for such offenses as criticizing Mubarak, "undermin[ing] the dignity of the country," and publishing "false news … likely to disturb public order." Azerbaijan imprisoned at least 10 journalists on a range of trumped-up charges to prevent criticism of President Aliev and his government. It also shut down the leading independent newspaper. Kazakhstan closed a television station and weekly newspaper owned by the president's estranged son-in-law, now a political opponent. Like Azerbaijan, it also uses criminal libel laws to jail critics for such charges as "insulting the honor and dignity" of the president. At least six journalists have died in suspicious "accidents" in Kazakhstan since 2002.

Preventing Opposition Rallies

One way for candidates to speak to supporters and to demonstrate political strength is to organize public rallies. Yet because large opposition rallies can show the emptiness of a government's claim to broad popular support, these demonstrations are another favorite target of repression.

In Malaysia, for example, which bans public gatherings of more than five people without a permit, the police used chemical-laced water and tear gas to break up an orderly and peaceful march of protesters demanding electoral reforms ahead of planned elections expected in early 2008. In Russia the authorities beat, detained, and harassed participants in peaceful political protests, including, in November 2007, the former chess champion and current opposition leader Garry Kasparov.

In Zimbabwe, armed riot police violently disrupted political rallies in February 2007, firing tear gas at opposition supporters and arresting more than 70 of them in the cities of Harare and Bulawayo before imposing a three-month ban on all political

rallies and demonstrations in Harare, the capital. Authorities also violently broke up rallies in Egypt and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Shutting Down Civil Society

In addition to political parties, a vibrant democracy requires a variety of associations and organizations so that people can mobilize support for their policy preferences and make their voices heard. These civil society organizations thus are another common target of autocratic rulers.

In Russia, for example, a 2006 law regulating nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) has served as a pretext for growing harassment. The law requires groups to submit annual reports on their activities and their use of foreign funds on pain of liquidation—a sanction that already has been used. Meanwhile, organizations have been subject to intrusive inspections, and a 2007 law allowing any politically or ideologically-motivated crime to be designated "extremist" and subject to harsh punishment raises concerns that the law will be used to silence dissent.

In Turkmenistan, severe legal restrictions on NGOs include the need to register every grant with the government, inform the government of every meeting, and allow a government representative to participate. Just three independent NGOs have been registered since 2003, only one of which has anything to do with human rights or public accountability. In Uzbekistan since the 2005 Andijan massacre, at least 17 human rights defenders have been imprisoned on politically-motivated charges, dozens have had to stop their human rights work or flee the country altogether, and numerous international organizations have been forced out. The United Arab Emirates bans most civil society organizations, and in August 2007 the Palestinian Authority announced that it would shut down 103 civil society organizations on a variety of technical grounds.

In countries where domestic funders of critical NGOs risk governmental wrath, a limitation on external sources of funding is a serious impediment to organized independent voices. Yet Egypt shut down a local human rights group engaged in vigorous anti-torture advocacy by reviving a years-old complaint against it for using funds from a foreign donor without government permission. Jordan and Bahrain have proposed similar legislation requiring government permission to use funds from abroad. Iran and Syria have already enacted this requirement and exercise complete

control over the day-to-day operations of civil society. The Tunisian government has blocked European Union grants to the Tunisian Human Rights League and other independent organizations.

Undermining the Rule of Law

Much of the repression and manipulation outlined above is illegal. Governments seeking to use it thus must avoid independent legal oversight. Sometimes, this can be accomplished by beating and arresting lawyers, as in Zimbabwe or China. Other times it occurs by way of amnesties for any crimes committed. Pakistan's Musharraf and the military rulers in Thailand, for example, pushed through constitutional changes granting them impunity for actions taken during their respective coups. Musharraf also dismissed the Supreme Court judges who threatened to rule against the legitimacy of his selection as president, replacing them with pliant loyalists who promptly validated the choice.

The Weak International Response

The use of these techniques to trivialize democracy does not occur in a political vacuum. Abusive governments may want to legitimize themselves on the cheap, but it takes their peers to let them do so. To a significant degree, half-baked democrats succeed in passing themselves off as the real thing because they are beneficiaries of diminished expectations from the more established democracies.

In part the problem is one of competing interests. Would-be defenders of a more meaningful vision of democracy are too ready to allow commercial opportunities, access to resources, or the perceived requirements of fighting terrorism to override concern with a government's democratic credentials. In part, though, the problem is one of hypocrisy avoidance. Even seemingly flourishing democracies can, as noted, find it inconvenient to embrace all the rights that constitute genuine democracy lest the subject lead to their own violations.

The problem is compounded by inconsistency in promoting democracy—a longstanding problem. These days, for example, the US government's vigorous criticism of democratic shortcomings tends to be reserved mainly for long-time adversaries or pariahs, such as Syria, Burma or Cuba. Washington has largely exempted such allies as Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, or Ethiopia, while its short-lived pressure on others, such as Egypt or Jordan, has waned. Indeed, the US government

is often a major funder of these allied governments despite their repressive practices. This obvious double standard makes the promotion of democracy seem like an act of political convenience rather than a commitment of principle, weakening the pressure for real democratic change.

Ethiopia has been an illustrative beneficiary of this double standard. The government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi arrested thousands of demonstrators protesting against fraud in the 2005 elections and charged 18 journalists with treason. These arrests were part of a broader pattern of repression, including the use of torture, detention, and intimidation of people perceived as political opponents and, more recently, extraordinary brutality in suppressing an insurgency in the Ogaden region and fighting Islamic forces in neighboring Somalia. The US government has expressed dismay about the post-election crackdown, but Ethiopia, a key counterterrorism partner, remains Washington's biggest aid beneficiary in sub-Saharan Africa.

Ethiopia is also among the top African recipients of European Union aid. After the 2005 election violence, the EU, along with the World Bank and the United Kingdom, suspended portions of their direct budget support to Ethiopia, but the UK has since increased its aid.

Jordan has also benefited from diminished democratic expectations, due largely to the US government's fear that Islamists in the country might replicate Hamas's victory in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but also to Washington's apparent gratitude for Jordan's assistance in fighting terrorism by providing secret detention centers where US-delivered suspects could be tortured. Jordan's municipal elections in July 2007 were reportedly tainted by massive fraud, including soldiers bussed to opposition strongholds to vote for the government, multiple voting, and manipulated voter rolls. Yet both the US ambassador and Congress congratulated Jordanians on the exercise of their democratic rights. Some of these faults were allegedly replicated in parliamentary elections in November, but the US State Department "commend[ed]" the Jordanian government for "ensuring another step has been taken on the country's path of political development." The State Department praised in particular the use of "independent national observers" without noting that, as mentioned, the government had reneged on its promise to allow them to enter polling places, forcing them to try to observe the proceedings from outside.

The European Union's reaction to the Jordanian elections was no more principled. It issued no known public protest, even though Jordan, as a member of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), has signed an Association Agreement with the EU, of which respect for democratic principles and fundamental human rights is supposed to constitute an "essential element." This failing reflects broader problems with the ENP, since unlike the successful Copenhagen criteria for accession to the EU, there are no benchmarks or timelines associated with it, and it is becoming increasingly focused on issues such as cooperation for border management and migration control.

Such unprincipled endorsements suggest that Washington and often the European Union will accept an electoral facade so long as the "victor" is a strategic or commercial ally. The fairness of the vote and the openness of campaign conditions seem to matter less than the political orientation of the democracy pretender.

A False Dichotomy: The Tyrant You Know or the Tyrant You Fear

The weak international response to the manipulation of democracy is founded in part on fear that an autocrat might be replaced by someone or something worse. Beginning with the FIS parliamentary victory in Algeria in 1991, the rise of political Islam has made that fear especially acute. Savvy dictators have learned to use a me-or-them logic to justify continued rule, but the dichotomy is often a false one.

For example, Egypt's Mubarak has profited from Western concern that Islamists will win any fair election in the country. As evidence, Mubarak can point to the parliamentary elections of 2005, when candidates backed by the Muslim Brotherhood captured a majority of the seats they contested. There is no doubt that the Muslim Brotherhood is genuinely popular, but some of that popularity is a product of limited choice. In thirty years, the Egyptian government has refused to register more than 60 political parties while accepting only two, one of which it later suspended. Many of these parties could have served as a rallying point for a secular opposition.

The Muslim Brotherhood, as noted, is also banned as a political party, but it has been able to build a following by providing social services and developing a reputation as above corruption. So, today, if an Egyptian seeks an alternative to Mubarak and his ruling National Democratic Party, the Muslim Brotherhood appears to be the only real game in town. That serves Mubarak well, because Western acquiescence in his electoral manipulations is more likely in light of this false

political choice. US pressure for democratization largely ended with the strong Muslim Brotherhood showing of 2005.

Pakistan's Musharraf has played a similar game. He justified "emergency rule" as the only alternative to rule by al Qaeda and Islamic extremists. The West accepted and even embraced Musharraf's manipulation of the political landscape as a form of "moderation" and a step on the road to "democracy." Never mind that Pakistanis historically have voted for centrist political parties (corrupt and inept as they often were), that Islamist political parties never gained more than 11 percent of the vote in a competitive national election, that Musharraf's attacks on the moderate center have forced him to seek alliance with and, in turn, bolster the Islamists, and that the lack of opportunity under a military government for peaceful political change is a powerful recruiting force for the Islamists.

The Bush administration's inconsistent response to Musharraf's declaration of emergency rule was illustrative. On the one hand, Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte flew to Islamabad to ask Musharraf to lift emergency rule and to release the thousands of political prisoners who had been detained. He even said, appropriately, that "[e]mergency rule is not compatible with free, fair and credible elections." Even Bush urged Musharraf to "take off your uniform."

But at this writing, the US government has never asked Musharraf to reinstate the independent Supreme Court judges whom he had dismissed in favor of the pliant allies who blessed his selection as president while still military chief. Nor has Washington suspended any of its massive military assistance. The message sent was that rather than risking the tenure of its counterterrorism ally, Washington would divorce democracy from the rule of law. Washington also seemed to want to stop the courts from continuing to free suspects who had disappeared into the custody of Pakistan's abusive Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), a detention and interrogation service that the US government has had occasion to avail itself of.

Fear of rising Islamic militancy seems also to lie behind a mixed international response to Bangladesh. At first, the international community promoted a more principled vision of democracy. The United Nations and the European Union found elections planned for January 2007 to be too compromised to warrant sending observers, thus contributing to their postponement. However, the caretaker government brought in ostensibly to ensure free and fair elections has instead

declared a “state of emergency” and become a vehicle for de facto military rule, presiding over large numbers of arbitrary arrests, cases of torture, and custodial killings by security forces acting with impunity. The US, UK, and Indian governments have expressed concern about the slow pace of election preparations but not the country’s poor human rights record. Nor have they called on the army to return full powers to a civilian government. However, the EU has been more outspoken and is providing financial assistance for governance and human rights.

Such complicity in dictatorial rule is sometimes rationalized with patronizing claims that the people in question—often Muslim, frequently Arab—are not “ready” for democracy, that the risks in these societies are simply too great to afford them the same rights of freedom and self-governance that people everywhere else aspire to. Put another way, Western governments sometimes complain that there is no opposition worthy of support. But that supposed lack of readiness, the lack of political alternatives, is no more than the warped political conditions that, with Western acquiescence, these countries’ leadership has bequeathed them. The entire point of the pseudo-democrats’ repression is to cripple the emergence of an effective opposition. Indeed, in the case of Saudi Arabia, lack of readiness is an excuse that the government itself has used to avoid elections. Pakistan’s Musharraf made similar excuses, charging that the West has an “unrealistic obsession with your form of democracy, your human rights and civil liberties ... which you took centuries to (evolve), but you want us to adopt in months .... [T]his is not possible.”

To reject that logic is not to suggest that immediate, unfettered elections are the answer, either. Just as extremism flourishes in a constrained political environment, so it may prevail in a snap election called in such an environment. A more sophisticated response is needed, one that would push autocrats to allow a range of political choices before rushing to elections—that is, to prioritize respect for an array of essential political rights over the balloting itself. Instead of accepting a dictator’s crimped set of options as the only conceivable ones, democracy promoters should press to transform the political landscape so that voters will face a meaningful range of political options before marking their ballot. That genuine choice tends to be an enemy of extremism.

Banking on the “Democrat” Rather than Democratic Principles

One common failing is to support a particular proclaimed “democrat” rather than the human rights principles that make democracy meaningful. Established democracies

seem increasingly to look for individuals—rather than institutions—to save the day, hoping that people will equate the ascendance of a leader prone to democratic rhetoric with the arrival of democracy itself, even though the first lesson of democratic theory is that unrestrained power tends toward tyranny. This failing has certainly characterized Western policy toward Pakistan's Musharraf, but it has also played a central role in the response to such disparate countries as Russia, Nigeria and Georgia.

Bush famously embraced Putin in 2001 after "look[ing] into his eyes and s[eeing] his soul." Putin proceeded systematically to undermine nearly every competing center of influence in Russia—the Duma, the regional governors, the press, the NGOs, even the oligarchs. The US government ultimately did react, but it had lost an early opportunity to build US-Russian relations around principles rather than personal chemistry.

Germany, which traditionally plays a leading role in shaping the European Union's policy toward Russia, had a mixed record in 2007. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, perhaps because she grew up in the East under Soviet domination, sees Putin with clearer eyes than her mercantilist predecessor, Gerhard Schröder. She has spoken out several times about the disturbing trends in Russia, and during her first trip to Moscow in 2006, made a point of visiting human rights NGOs. That led to hope that Germany would elevate the importance of human rights when it assumed the EU presidency during the first half of 2007. In fact, human rights continued to be consigned largely to low-level consultations. Merkel did raise human rights during the EU-Russia summit in May 2007, when demonstrations were quashed, but the next EU presidency, under the Portuguese government, undermined that effort by equating the raising of human rights issues with "lecturing."

The US and UK governments as well as the EU were candid about the blatant fraud that marred Nigeria's presidential and parliamentary elections in April 2007, but these Western governments seemed eager to work with President Yar'Adua because his rhetoric was reformist, even though the circumstances of his election set a far more powerful precedent than his conciliatory words. Nor did Yar'Adua translate his reformist message into prosecution of anyone responsible for the fraud and parallel political violence. Again, the message seems to be that, so long as the leader in question is friendly to the West, even fake elections will suffice to legitimize him.

In Georgia, the 2003 Rose Revolution brought to power a government with a strong commitment to democratic principles and a vibrant civil society. But serious human

rights problems persisted in the years that followed, particularly in the criminal justice system. Yet international organizations and governments—the US most prominently among them—resisted robust criticism, wishing to believe in the good intentions of a Western-educated ally, President Mikheil Saakashvili. The danger of embracing a person rather than democratic principles became apparent when in November 2007 the Georgian government unleashed a violent crackdown on protesters and imposed a nine-day state of emergency.

As noted, US policy toward Pakistan has been dominated by this tendency to reduce democracy to favored personalities. In addition to accepting Musharraf's dismissal of the Supreme Court to preserve his presidency, the Bush administration devoted enormous energy to negotiating a deal between Musharraf and its preferred prime ministerial candidate, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, paving the way for her return from exile to Pakistan. But in September, when the Musharraf government blocked the initial attempt to return of exiled former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, her chief civilian competitor, the US State Department spokesman said, "[T]his is wholly and entirely a Pakistani issue to resolve."

Failing Turkey

Turkey presented perhaps the most important test of the European Union's commitment to democracy and human rights. In principle, the EU is committed to admitting Turkey as a member—a step of enormous importance—if Ankara meets the Copenhagen criteria on democracy and human rights. But key European leaders—especially German Chancellor Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy—have spoken out against Turkey's membership in the EU. As the possibility of Turkey's accession to the EU is perceived as more remote, the EU has lost leverage itself and diminished the clout of those in Turkey who have cited the prospect of EU membership as a reason for reform. Unsurprisingly, the military has begun once more to intrude into governmental affairs, going so far as to launch the above-mentioned email coup attempt to block the naming of Abdullah Gül as president. The civilian government's successful deflection of that coup attempt owed far more to the insistence of the Turkish people than to the EU's fading promise of membership to a democratic, rights-respecting Turkey.

Conclusion

It is a sign of hope that even dictators have come to believe that the route to legitimacy runs by way of democratic credentials. Broadly shared and deeply felt values underwrite the principle that sovereignty lies with the people of a nation and that the authority to govern is ultimately theirs. But that progress is fragile, its meaning dependent in large part on the commitment of the world's established democracies. If they accept any dictator who puts on the charade of an election, if they allow their commitment to democracy to be watered down by their pursuit of resources, commercial opportunities, and short-sighted visions of security, they will devalue the currency of democracy. And if dictators can get away with calling themselves "democrats," they will have acquired a powerful tool for deflecting pressure to uphold human rights. It is time to stop selling democracy on the cheap and to start substituting a broader and more meaningful vision of the concept that incorporates all human rights.

This Report

This report is Human Rights Watch's eighteenth annual review of human rights practices around the globe. It summarizes key human rights issues in more than 75 countries worldwide, drawing on events through November 2007.

Each country entry identifies significant human rights issues, examines the freedom of local human rights defenders to conduct their work, and surveys the response of key international actors, such as the United Nations, European Union, Japan, the United States, and various regional and international organizations and institutions.

This report reflects extensive investigative work undertaken in 2007 by the Human Rights Watch research staff, usually in close partnership with human rights activists in the country in question. It also reflects the work of our advocacy team, which monitors policy developments and strives to persuade governments and international institutions to curb abuses and promote human rights. Human Rights Watch publications, issued throughout the year, contain more detailed accounts of many of the issues addressed in the brief summaries collected in this volume. They can be found on the Human Rights Watch website, www.hrw.org.

As in past years, this report does not include a chapter on every country where Human Rights Watch works, nor does it discuss every issue of importance. The

failure to include a particular country or issue often reflects no more than staffing limitations and should not be taken as commentary on the significance of the problem. There are many serious human rights violations that Human Rights Watch simply lacks the capacity to address.

The factors we considered in determining the focus of our work in 2007 (and hence the content of this volume) include the number of people affected and the severity of abuse, access to the country and the availability of information about it, the susceptibility of abusive forces to influence, and the importance of addressing certain thematic concerns and of reinforcing the work of local rights organizations.

The World Report does not have separate chapters addressing our thematic work but instead incorporates such material directly into the country entries. Please consult the Human Rights Watch website for more detailed treatment of our work on children's rights, women's rights, arms and military issues, business and human rights, HIV/AIDS and human rights, international justice, terrorism and counterterrorism, refugees and displaced people, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people's rights, and for information about our international film festivals.

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