THE SHAPING OF DEMOCRACY IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES

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I.   The Nature and the Meaning of Democracy

The word "democracy" is used in different contexts by different individuals to describe different phenomena. The countries which the Western Europeans and the Americans identify as totalitarian dictatorships, to cite only a too familiar example, are named People's Democracies by their own governments. While the Union of South Africa is called a democratic regime by some, it is viewed as an abhorrent manifestation of racism and non-democracy by others.

The confusion on what a democracy is, often derives from different conceptualizations of the phenomenon. The Socialist countries of Eastern Europe, I feel, are not strictly motivated by reasons of propaganda when they call themselves Democratic Republics, but they believe the public ownership of the means of production and the eradication of economically based social classes to be the very purpose of democracy as they define it. Western definitions on the other hand, bear the imprint of American and European political experience.

Any commentator who sets out to examine the shaping of democracy in developing societies needs to clarify, in view of the existing confusion, what he means by the term before engaging in a discussion of what factors may shape it in a particular group

of countries.

A democracy is a political system characterized by individual liberties and responsive government. By individual liberties, I mean that the citizens should have unrestricted opportunities to formulate public goals and express them both to their fellow citizens and those who are in a position to make decisions binding for all members of the political community. These liberties would therefore include the freedom of expression, the freedom of the press, the freedom to associate and other liberties referred to in the Declaration of Human Rights. It is also important to note that these liberties should be enjoyed by all citizens and not be denied to a particular group of citizens while being extended to others.

I take responsive government, on the other hand, to mean a government which bases its outputs on the choices and preferences of a majority of its citizens. Although it may be difficult to identify what the majority of citizens want on a given issue at a given time, there are two ways, one philosophical, the other practical, which promote responsive government. First, in a responsive political system, government is not seen as an instrument through which public goals prescribed in some other way than by the political community, are realized. To put it differently, goals are not known, but emanate from citizen choice. Second, those who govern submit their achievements (or non-achievements) to review by the citizenry in the form of elections. If a majority of the citizens express disapproval, then other cadres are given an opportunity to govern.

Individual liberties and responsive government should be seen as ideals, for they are never fully realized in any society, leaving aside the important question of whether their total achievement is in fact possible. It may be useful to conceive these two characteristics as a single continuum with a beginning point of non-existence and an end point of total achievement, recognizing that no society is at either end, but all are located somewhere in between, some closer to the beginning points, others further along.

In the light of this conceptualization, the examination of the shaping of democracy in developing societies becomes a question of how developing societies move away from a location closer to the beginning point along the continuum.

The conceptualization I have offered, I believe, has several advantages. First, it may be recognized immediately that moving along the continuum is a process and includes a time dimension. Lest a tacit assumption be made, I should add that the process is not unidirectional. A given society, in other words, may evolve in the direction of being more democratic or retrogress and become less democratic.

Second, societies may each be placed on the continuum, enabling us, if only in the ordinal sense, to see how they stand with regard to each other.

Third, the conceptualization lends itself to empirical studies. Although I will not attempt to do so here, measures of how democratic a system is may be and have been developed. (1), making it possible for us to judge the progress of societies to-

ward becoming more democratic over time.

Fourth, the conceptualization gives us a better perspective in understanding the shaping of democracy in developing societies. Western democracies have generally held what may be called a dichotomous and bipolar notion of democracy in the world. It has been dichotomous in the sense that societies have been perceived to be either democratic or not, and bipolar in the sense that they have tended to think of themselves as being democratic and others either as less or often as undemocratic. While this may be a consequence of their success in achieving more democratic societies in the way I have defined democracy, it stands in the way of appreciating the achievements in developing societies. It should only be remembered that no society which we call a democracy today was born a democracy and that some Western democracies were totalitarian dictatorships as recently as three and a half decades ago.

In summary, I am proposing that it may be more meaningful to study the shaping of democracy in developing societies by looking at the direction toward which their political systems are evolving rather than by judging them as being democratic or undemocratic at a given point in time.

II. Background Conditions of Democracy

Do certain conditions need to be met before a political system commences on the path to democratic development? Although, it is difficult to identify precisely a point before which a society cannot begin evolving toward a democracy, the terminology generally used in defining democracy, including those I have em-

ployed in mine, contains hints or more correctly some tacit as-
sumptions.

It is, for example, impossible to talk of democracy
without accepting the existence of a political community (2). A
political community is an aggregation of people who perceive that
they are and ought to be ruled by one government. The existence
of such a community does not mean that it will have a democratic
government, but it is impossible to have democratic government
unless there is a community. We cannot, to cite an instance, talk
about a majority without identifying a group of which the majority
is a part. Similarly, we cannot speak of changing majorities over
time, unless they constitute the majorities of a relatively stable
group.

In many developing societies, the political communities
are still in the process of evolving.

In many parts of the world, there are communities within the exis-
ting states who would rather live under another "one government"
be it a new or a different one. The last two decades have been
marked by secessionist wars in the Congo, Nigeria, Bengladesh and
Iraq among others. Struggles are still pending in countries such
as Ethiopia. Efforts to redefine the political community are under
way in Rhodesia and the Union of South Africa. Until intense con-
flicts on political community are settled, it does not appear
likely that political systems valuing individual liberties and re-
sponsive government will emerge in these societies.

We may appreciate the importance of the existence of

a political community also by looking at those developing countries
which have had democratic governments either intermittently or over
a reasonably long period of time. A list of them would include
among others Venezuela, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Greece, India,
Turkey at different times. A common characteristic of these coun-
tries is that none of them after their founding, has experienced
serious domestic challenges to its unity.

Closely linked to the concept of political community
is the existence of, for lack of a better expression, national
politics. In order that a democratic system be operative, the
members of a political community must feel that the daily activi-
ties of the government does affect their lives. Historically,
governments have affected the lives of their subjects in limited
ways, often to collect taxes and draft males for armies. People
have perceived government to be sometimes regular, sometimes un-
expected intervenor in their lives, usually to extract something.
In fact, as may be inferred from the previous sentence, people
were subjects not citizens.

The emergence of political systems in Western Europe
in which the activities of government became numerous, prompting
demands on the part of the ruled to affect governmental decisions
and actions was a long process, both preceded and accompanied by
economic development and social change. Expressed differently,
the governmental center expanded, forged closer links with the
periphery, and in turn, changed its own structure and nature. The
end product has often been referred to as participant society.

Whether a certain level of economic development or at

least a development threshhold is a necessary correlate of parti-
cipant society has not yet been clearly established (3), but that
democracy presumes a participant society, a society in which the
ruled produce demand, support and resource inputs into the political
system, has. And, in order that such a society come into being,
it is essential for people to feel that the government affects them
and that their demands, choices affect or ought to affect the be-
havior of those in government.

The multi-dimensional links that exist between gov-
ernment and citizens in a participant society do not come into
being automatically, but are formed in a bi-directional fashion.
Government expands to penetrate the society and render itself rel-
evant to the lives of the people on the one hand, people begin to
engage in efforts to influence the process of government, on the
other. Whereas these two developments have occurred over an ex-
tended period of time and relatively simultaneously in the Western
European experience, such is often not the case in the developing
countries of the world today. Governments, usually staffed by
cadres committed to rapid economic development and modernization,
have attempted to expand the role of government, mainly to alter
radically the social and economic structure of the society. Public
goals, in other words, have been defined by the ruling cadres and
masses have been asked to perform their function in the realization
of these goals. The role of government in such a situation then,
becomes extractive insofar as resources are demanded from the
citizens to achieve goals and regulative in the sense that people's
behavior is to be in harmony with the professed goals. People in

developing societies, in contrast to Western Europeans who did not know of a materially better world during the earlier stages of their economic and political development, aspire to a state of material well being which their current resources cannot support.

The contradiction between the choice of the governing elites and the masses do not promote, at least in the earlier stages of development, the evolution of a democratic system. The center (governing institutions) find it difficult to organize a system which enables them to penetrate the society, regulate it and extract from it the resources needed to realize the visions of political leaders. The greater the difficulties experienced, the greater the frustration of the leaders, and the greater their frustration, the more likely they will substitute coercive for institutional action. To make what I mean clearer, let me cite an example from the Ottoman Empire, which I feel, has much relevance in developing societies today. Not having effective bureaucratic mechanisms to enforce price controls, the typical Ottoman solution was to hang a few merchants who were selling commodities above the government determined price in order that it might deter others from disobeying government decrees.

The tendency to use coercion, almost without exception, is reinforced by political leaders who fan the expectations of the citizenry without alluding to the sacrifices rapid economic development calls for, and thus end up having to resort to even more authoritarian measures to contain the demands which they themselves have helped create.

III. The Evolution of _A Democratic System

While the existence of a national political community
and its corollary, the existence of national politics are necess-
ary background conditions, they do not in themselves insure that
a democracy will eventually obtain. Alternatively, the satisfac-
tion of these conditions means that a country can be placed some-
where along the continuum I have suggested, but the question of
where on the continuum and the direction toward which it will move
remains unanswered.

The first question of where a country should be placed
on the continuum is an empirical one; schemes for rating the degree
of political democracy in a society may be and has been devised (4).
The second question of whether a society will gradually develop
into a democratic system, calls for an examination of the factors
which may enhance, retard or preclude such an evolution.

Economic development and the accompanying social change
generates new sources of conflict within a society by increasing
specialization and differentiation. These may be new groups as
well as new topical areas.

Democracy is a system of non-violent change and con-
flict management, but not necessarily the only one which a society
can adopt. Communist systems, for example, set out to eradicate
sources of conflict rather than perceiving it as normal and work-
ing to cope with it. Are there then, some factors which either
create pressures or facilitate a democratic evolution?

The nature of issues over which political conflict
takes place is one of the important factors that help shape the

political system in a developing society. Democracy, in addition
to assuming conflict on public policy issues to be normal, fur-
ther assumes that issues over which disagreements occur are nego-
tiable, they can be bargained over, compromises can be reached and
no one group is a permanent loser. What constitutes a non-nego-
tiable issue may change from one society to another. Historically
religion has been an issue over which people have refused to bar-
gain and compromise; civil wars have raged on account of it in
many societies. In some, the political system and the political
community have disintegrated and religiously more homogeneous
political communities have been established, while in others reli-
gion has gradually been removed outside the realm of political
life and secular political systems have come into being. Generally,
if political cleavages are built upon other existing cleavages;
that is, if traditional cleavages such as religion, ethnic origin,
race or tribe also provide the basis for political cleavages in
a society, democratic development may be impeded. Even if solu-
tions are found which allow for individual liberties and respon-
sive government in such a situation, as had been the recent case
in Lebanon, they tend to be under steady strain because the system
is not very adaptable to shifts in the balance of power between
groups constituting the political community.

The social structure of a society may also affect the
evolution of its political system in several ways. First, the
absence of a rigid traditional class structure may improve the
chances for the evolution of a democratic system. As a society
becomes more participant, traditional wielders of political power

find that both their ability to make public decisions and the areas
in which they make decisions become more limited. The more en-
trenched the traditional political elites, the more intense is
their resistance to claims to share their power. The nature of
their power base, however, may also help determine their response
to challenges for sharing their power. If, for example, the tra-
ditional elites have, at the same time, been holders of economic
wealth, they may succeed in becoming entrepreneurs, retain much
of their political influence and be more amenable to accepting
demands for greater political participation. If, on the other
hand, traditional political elites are comprised of men of reli-
gion, and do not have a strong economic base, they may resist par-
ticipation by new groups in the public decision making process for
fear that they shall eventually lose all their power.

Social consequences of colonial policies may also have
negative effects for the emergence of a democratic system. In
many colonies, colonial powers have relied on minority groups for
recruitment for administrative and military personnel. After in-
dependence, one constant source of domestic strife has been efforts
by minorities to retain the advantageous position they had achieved
against the majority populations who now began to place claims on
political power.

Traditional political institutions and traditional
political culture may retard or facilitate democratic political
development. In the European experience, for example, there exist-
ed parliaments long before these countries evolved into democra-
cies, but the legislative institution provided a framework which

proved itself adaptable to the participation of new forces in
politics. Similarly, some developing countries have institutions
that may make transition to a participant society easier such as
the meeting of the tribal leaders in Kuwait which paved the way
to the now suspended Kuwaiti Legislature or the Village Councils
in India which have served as an instrument of political partici-
pation.

The significance of traditional culture in the devel-
opment of a democracy may best be illustrated by examples. In
some African societies, the concept and the word for opposition
did not use to exist. The word "enemy" was used also to denote
opposition. The images conjured by "opposition-enemy", I would
suspect, may render engaging in opposition in such countries dif-
ficult. Again, in some traditional cultures, the members of the
family are seen as the only persons among fellow men who can be
trusted. This renders it difficult to form political organizations
which will represent group interests effectively in a competitive
and participant political system.

Different levels of modernization in various segments
of a society are typical. Yet, if there are great discrepancies
in the level of modernization of sectors, the most modernized sec-
tors may aspire to achieve political power in order to alter rap-
idly and drastically the society to make it fit their images.
Differences in the level of modernization which have sometimes
been expressed as cultural dualities may be a result of sectorally
and/or regionally uneven economic development as well as the con-
sequence of different patterns of socialization among some elite

corps such as the military. Until modernization gaps between various parts of the population are narrowed or a synthesis between the old and the new is found, an atmosphere conducive to political competition may not come into being.

Relations with the outside world influences political development in a country several ways. First, external wars do not generally promote individual liberties and responsive government. This is true even in stable democratic systems where some liberties may be suspended during wartime. Prolonged engagements with neighbors in developing countries appear to have been, on the whole, disfunctional for democratic evolution. Defeats have also encouraged armed interventions or other non-democratic movements committed to radical alterations of societies. External threats, perceived or real, are known to have been used by political leaders to limit domestic political competition and dissent. Unless such a threat is purposely created by rulers for domestic ends where the intent is not democratic in any case, its existence does not usually contribute to the emergence of a climate for extensive exercise of liberties and a government occupied with external matters becomes less concerned with internal demands.

Relations with the outside world may act sometimes as an inspiration and sometimes as a limiting factor for the shaping of democratic systems in developing societies. Many developing countries, regardless of whether they have gone through a colonial experience or not, have received inspiration from democracies of Western Europe and the United States. More intense relations with political democracies have, in the past, inspired

political leaders to achieve democratic forms of government in their own societies and continue to do so today. Those countries which have close social, cultural, economic and political relations with democratic political systems may feel obliged to adopt, retain, or develop democratic systems either to maintain good relations or in response to pressures from the latter. The transition to competitive politics in Turkey, to give an example, was aided by demands of Western democracies that she render her system more democratic if she desired to have closer links with them. Greece, Portugal and Spain experienced difficulties in entering or keeping their membership in the Council of Europe and the Common Market during the times when they were under authoritarian governments.

A final very important factor in the shaping of democracy is the ideology of the governing elites. Ideology is not independent of the factors we have already discussed, yet it is not solely a function of them, but an autonomous variable. If the ideology of those in power is oriented toward the eradication of the sources of conflict, then the growth of a democratic system may be hindered. The longer such an ideology has been put into application, the lower the probability of democratic evolution. The reverse need not be true. That is, an ideological commitment to political democracy is not a requisite for a society to commence on the path to democracy. A positive commitment to it may evolve as a social system experiences more internal conflict and proves able to solve them only within a politically competitive framework, increasingly cognizant of individual liberties and citizen demands. By way of example, I think the eventual growth

of a political democracy is more likely to occur in Kenya and
Egypt than in Tanzania or Libya.

IV. Problems In The Growth of Democratic Systems

After having discussed some major factors which help
shape democracy in developing societies, I will last turn to some
typical problems that arise in this evolutionary process.

One problem derives, ironically enough, from the im-
mediate introduction of universal suffrage. Socio-economic
change in societies do not occur in all segments at the same pace.
When new groups begin to emerge and demand a voice in public de-
cision making, traditional elites have sometimes opted for the
introduction of universal suffrage so as to utilize a numerical
superiority to deny new groups a voice in government.

A variant of the same problem is to be observed both
in developing and stable democratic societies. Certain groups,
slow in adapting to competitive politics because of slower mod-
ernization or for other reasons, may be denied the benefits ac-
cruing from governments that tend to be more sensitive to those
groups that gain an earlier ability to pursue their demands ef-
fectively. Farm laborers in many developing countries or the
Blacks in the recent history of the United States are cases in
point. Such a situation is not only morally deplorable from the
viewpoint of those who profess a commitment to political democracy,
but it may also result in violent manifestations which may endan-
ger the further growth of democracy in societies where the poli-
tical system is unstable and still evolving.

A second problem is related to the costs of leaving

office in many a developing society. If there exists a great discrepancy in both material and social terms between being in and out of office, those in government may become more reluctant to be replaced by elections and deal with oppositions in ways which violate both individual liberties and principles of responsive government. As a society develops economically, these discrepancies may lessen, but it is at the moment true that many political leaders who have gotten elected in developing societies have later become reluctant to leave their offices because the costs of departure have appeared to be very high.

A final very common problem the developing countries have experienced has been the intervention of more developed societies in their internal affairs, generally covertly. Stable Western democracies have been among the major actors behind these interventions on many occasions. Motivated either by security considerations or economic benefit, classical democracies such as the United States, Great Britain, France, Belgium as well as others have extended support to rulers and movements which have resisted claims to share power by new social forces, which have suspended individual liberties and which have failed to respond to citizen needs and demands. They have at times threatened political communities by helping create or by aiding secessionist movements, thereby forcing rulers to become more authoritarian in order to deal with internal crises. Ironically, the actions of political democracies have, on many an occasion, proven to be an obstacle to the evolution of democratic political systems.

V.   Conclusion

The emergence of a political community and the establishment of a national political framework are two conditions which need to be met before a developing society may begin evolving into a political democracy.

Whether a political system will evolve in a democratic direction is affected by such factors as the nature of conflicts in a society, its social structure, the nature of its traditional political institutions and culture, the structure of its modernization, its relations with the outside world and the ideological disposition of its political elites.

During the course of the evolution of a political democracy in a developing society, difficulties may be encountered deriving from the introduction of universal suffrage as a means to combat the new social forces, from the high costs incurred by those leaving political office as well as from the interventions of outside powers.

To evaluate the evolution of a political system toward political democracy, it may be more meaningful to examine the political processes in developing societies over time rather than study them at a given point in time and judge them as being democratic or not. Democracies in Western Europe and the United States have been built over time and the political systems in most developing societies are still in the making.

Footnotes

(1)   Some well known examples include Seymour Martin Lipset, _Political Man_ (Doubleday, 1960); Philips Cutright, "National Political Development: Its Measurement and Social Correlates" in Nelson W. Polsby, Robert A. Dentler and Paul A. Smith, eds., _Politics and Social Life_ (Houghton Mifflin, 1963); Dankwart E. Rustow, _A World of Nations: Problems of Political Modernization_ (Brookings Institutions, 1967); Gabriel Almond and James S. Coleman, _The Politics of Developing Areas_ (Princeton University Press, 1969); Arthur K. Smith, Jr., "Socio-Economic Development and Political Democracy," _Midwest Journal of Political Science_ (1969, 13:95-125) and Philips Cutright and James A. Wiley, "Modernization and Political Representation: 1927-1966," _Studies in Comparative International Development_, 1969-1970, vol. 2

(2)   D.A. Rustow, in his "Transitions to Democracy," _Comparative Politics_ (1970: 2, 337-364) identifies national unity as a background condition. I have preferred "political community" which I think is more comprehensive. It is, for example, probably more appropriate to talk of the emergence of a political community in the Union of South Africa than the achievement of national unity.

(3)   For an excellent critique of attempts to relate socio-economic indicators to democracy, see John D. May, _Of the Conditions and Measures of Democracy_ (General Learning Press, 1973)

(4)   See ff. 1