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Democratisation and the culture cudgel

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Democratisation and the culture cudgel

Bonn, 21 February 2011. So now it's the Middle East/Middle East and North Africa/Arab world. It may be far from certain that Egypt and Tunisia are definitely moving towards democracy – for that the military has yet to prove itself to be a potential guardian of a controlled transition to democracy. Nor is it certain whether the sections of the population demanding political participation will so organise themselves that they can act as a democratic bulwark against the opposition of the old elites or fundamentalist threats. What the recent events in the Arab world do show, however, is that culturalist arguments do little to explain the collapse of autocratic systems and democratisation processes that have been initiated.

Only a few weeks ago a common argument advanced by many a social scientist, political commentator and feature writer was that the stability of dictatorial regimes in the Arab world was due to the dominant religion of Islam. But it is not only the now evident instability of some regimes in the region that refute this assumption: the country with the largest Muslim population, Indonesia, changed into a democracy more than ten years ago. The consolidation of democracy and the rule of law is advancing at a very slow pace, corruption and nepotism are still widespread. Yet this is not just an Indonesian phenomenon: the same is true of many young democracies of a different cultural hue, whether South Africa, the Philippines or Bolivia.

However, these crude cultural arguments are encountered not only in the context of the relationship between Islam and democracy. Some like to argue, for example, that East Asian countries have developed particularly cooperative and stable forms of authoritarian rule through their Confucian disposition. This tiresome argument regarding the problematic relationship between democ-

cracy and Asian values stands up to any comparative observation. In China's case, neither Mao's totalitarian regime with its horrific Cultural Revolution cannot be classed as especially cooperative, nor is the government of the Republic of Taiwan authoritarian. What is probably East Asia's most Confucian country, Korea, is a particularly vivid illustration of the weakness of the argument: on the one hand, South Korea operating democratically for over two decades; on the other, a tragicomic totalitarian regime in the North. The list of questionable explanations could be extended to include "Soviet man", once widespread in Eastern and Southeastern Europe and, according to the culturalist line of argument, hardly susceptible to the democratic form of government. Why, then, have some of the formerly Communist countries of this region established relatively successful democratic systems, while others have not been able to do so?

The weakness of the culturalist cudgel is clear. The indiscriminate reference to religion or membership of a given culture group has so far done little to provide a reasonable explanation for the stability of autocratic government or the initiation of democratisation processes. Nonetheless, these lines of argument show a surprising degree of constancy in the public debate. Evidently, the attribution of countries to certain religions and culture groups seems to many observers a suitable way of obscuring the confusing complexity of political factors in distant countries and offering their listeners/readers simple – but incorrect – interpretations. For culture sometimes changes very quickly, and cultural traditions may be interpreted quite differently by different actors. It is not surprising, therefore, that political interest groups compete for sovereignty in matters of interpretation. The authoritarian elites of China and Singapore, for example, do not tire of empha-

sisting the concurrence of public-welfare-oriented Confucian traditions and the features of their own authoritarian systems. If the elites of democratic Taiwan or South Korea are asked, they will judge their Asian traditions quite differently, emphasizing the compatibility of their culture with forms of representative democracy.

Cultural features which, as customary rights, customs and political practices, influence the conduct of the elites and the masses may be important factors for the explanation of political change. But such informal sets of rules or political attitudes have not been fixed for centuries, but have also reacted to economic and social changes. A good example of this is Germany itself. The surveys conducted in the early 1960s by the pioneers of research into political attitudes led them to a sceptical image of the political culture in (West) Germany. The political culture of the average German citizen was regarded as obedient to au-

thority and committed to democratic values to only a limited degree. Just two decades later this image had to be revised following new surveys. The political attitudes of the Germans seemed to have rapidly adjusted to democracy-friendly values, and the country seemed to have arrived in the community of democratic values. This need not remain so for ever, and politicians would do well to reinforce the socio-economic and political factors that give rise to such democratic attitudes. But where Egypt, Tunisia and even China are concerned, do we really intend to believe that the socio-economic changes occurring there in interaction with now forms of political communication do not have an effect on the political culture of those societies? The path to democracy in such countries is anything but secure; China has not even set foot on it yet. But to put this down to the culturalist cudgel is simply nonsense.



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