

Democracy Delusion

The West's interests aren't always best served by one man, one vote.

By Peter Hitchens

HOW MANY Islamic republics would you like? How many do you think the world needs? Spreading democracy across the Muslim world—as so many enlightened people say they wish to do—should certainly increase the number. Yet the enthusiasts for planting democracy all over the planet also tend to be the people who dislike Islamic republics and warn endlessly about their likely use as bases for terror.

How on earth are we to make sense of this contradiction? Are we once again in the realm of doublethink, the invariable result of dogma? If so, is the dogma a dangerous one?

I have in the past few years visited several countries where democracy will, if unfettered, favor political Islam. The supposed Cedar Revolution in Lebanon received gushing praise from Western commentators. There was even talk of genuine elections in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood would be the most likely beneficiary of majority rule. As for the Palestinian entity, the angry irredentists of Hamas undoubtedly won the democratic contest, and their control of Gaza is a clear expression of the people's will. Did the United States really want a Shia Muslim state in Iraq?

Then there was Pakistan, where Western idealists encouraged the return of the Oxford-educated Benazir Bhutto and her husband, despite their past failures in government, and applauded the removal of the military tyrant Pervez Musharraf. Mrs. Bhutto was foully murdered, an incident that underlined the instability of that unhappy country. But

the experiment in democracy continued, and Pakistan has been seething with Islamic revolt. For historical reasons, it has a special army unit trained to mount coups d'état, and there is little doubt that if the Islamists get out of control, that unit will do its duty again, presumably to the relief of all opponents of Islamofascism—though they may keep their joy to themselves because the result will certainly not be democratic.

Perhaps most interesting of all, it has been fashionable for some time, in advanced foreign-policy circles, to favor the march of democracy in Turkey, which many pretend is a more or less European nation because of its willingness to cooperate in Western alliances such as NATO. Awkwardly, the beneficiaries of this American and European benevolence are not quite what the neo-conservatives would have chosen. They are the Law and Justice Party (its Turkish initials are AK), whose leaders are Sunni Islamist militants.

But we are not supposed to mention this. The AK and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, are invariably praised by mainstream media and Western politicians for their supposed moderation and economic competence. The competence is real, at least by comparison with those who have gone before, but the moderation is another matter. Turkish membership in the European Union—with the possibility of large subsidies and easier migration of Turkish workers—has long been dangled in front of the Turkish state as its reward for becoming more democratic and more in tune with the

human-rights culture of the EU. This process has for many years been a fashionable cause among advanced thinkers in Turkey, Europe, and the United States.

The same people emphatically deplore something sinister known as “the Deep State,” their term for the secular military Turkish establishment, which has several times overthrown democratic governments in modern Turkey—two of them merely incompetent and unpopular, one alarmingly anti-secular. The most recent of these—known as “the postmodern coup” because of its bloodlessness—took place just 13 years ago, when the Islamist government of Necmettin Erbakan was forced from office and his Welfare Party banned. Erdogan was then a member of that party, and his support for its cause led to his imprisonment. He has undoubtedly not forgotten, and it seems unlikely that he has forgiven.

One of the effects of the flirtation with the EU has been pressure on this Deep State to restrain itself. It is, in fact, the old Turkish military establishment set up by Mustafa Kemal 90 years ago, aimed at doing to Islam in Turkey pretty much what the neoconservatives would like to do to Islam everywhere—force it out of political life and make it subservient to a secular government. It was this force and power that kept Turkey on the side of the West during the Cold War and has since prevented it from slipping into the militant pro-Muslim camp in the Middle East. But its crude,

despotic methods cannot be maintained under the delicate rules of modern European democracy.

Kemal and Stalin are the only modern rulers who have subjugated militant political Islam, unveiled women, and controlled the mullahs. But their ferocity would be impossible now. If there is a middle way between such repression and the return of Turkey to its Muslim past, nobody has yet found it. If they do, it may be incompatible with the 21st-century belief in the goodness of democracy and the sanctity of human rights.

The message to the Turkish military is clear: any more putsches and the EU deal is off. This powerful restraint on the secular generals has greatly increased the confidence of Prime Minister Erdogan, who has several times faced down objections and mutterings from the military leadership. There is little doubt that, without EU intervention, the AK government would have been overthrown some time ago or so badly defeated that it would have been effectively powerless. It is an odd paradox: Western intervention in a secular Muslim state, leading to the weakening of the secular forces and the increasing power of an Islamist party, all in the name of democracy. It is more paradoxical still because the EU's love for Turkey has cooled, and it is beginning to dawn on Ankara's politicians that EU membership will never happen. This realization has probably come too late for the generals, now so weakened and isolated politically that they will find it very difficult to act against Erdogan. It has also given a new character to the Erdogan government, which has simultaneously been freed from two obstacles. The prime minister no longer needs to worry about a secular putsch or about wooing the non-Muslim West.

Thanks to this, we may be about to see Turkey undergo its most significant political shift since the collapse of the

Ottoman Empire in 1922. Having—or so it hopes—tamed the secular forces of the Deep State, and having abandoned hope of acceptance as a European nation, Erdogan's Turkey is looking elsewhere for friendship. And where might that be?

Erdogan may now be garlanded with Western praise as a "moderate," but in 1998, he was imprisoned after famously reading in public a poem, much beloved of militant Muslims, containing the following passage: "The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers..." Since coming to power, he has greatly improved his country's relations with Syria and picked a loud quarrel with Israeli President Shimon Peres, disrupting what had been a rather close alliance between the Jewish state and Turkey. He has also been sidling toward a new friendship with the Iranian regime next door, just as the rigged re-election of President Ahmadinejad has disgusted all who had hoped for freedom in that Islamic Republic.

But most fascinating of all, and all but unnoticed in the West, is Turkey's internal shift—the extraordinary series of events known as the Ergenekon Affair. The word refers to a valley lost deep in the Altai Mountains, supposedly the origin of the Turkish nation, who were miraculously led out by a gray she-wolf. The story was for many years a favorite of secular nationalists seeking to replace Islam with a patriotic founding myth. But now it is supposed (a little like al-Qaeda, perhaps) to be the unifying name of a conspiracy of military officers, judges, journalists, professors, and reactionary political organizations. The alleged existence of this shadowy secularist spider's web has been the excuse for repeated waves of arrests, many of them at 4:30 in the morning, of prominent opponents of the Islamization of Turkey. Much of this activity was pre-

sumably a response to an attempt by the Constitutional Court to outlaw the AK party. This was the secular state's answer to the AK's efforts to overturn a ban on women wearing headscarves on state premises. This seemingly trivial change is immensely important in a country where outward signs of Muslim fervor were banned by Mustafa Kemal before World War II in his attempt to turn Turkey into a modern nation, with a legal system based on Switzerland's rather than on Sharia and with emancipated women. Now, after years of Muslim subjection, the newly militant Islamic movement sees its chance to re-establish power.

It is tempting to wonder if these events are not a slow-motion version of the Islamic revolution that engulfed Iran in 1979—except for one great difference: Iran was never as fervently Muslim a country as Turkey. While Iran is a largely secular state with an Islamic government, Turkey is the reverse, especially since the huge migration of devout rural Turks into the cities in the prosperous postwar years, particularly the megalopolis of Istanbul, so vast that it appears to stretch forever. A relaxed secularism was always popular in Iran, especially among the middle classes, and is stronger than ever after three decades of narrow theocracy.

But on a recent visit to Istanbul and Ankara during Ramadan, I was struck by the level of piety among almost everyone I met. The strictly observed fast was near universal. A senior journalist whom I interviewed would not even drink a glass of water while we talked. Many do not even swallow their own saliva. The streets, by late afternoon, were worryingly tense as the blood-sugar levels of tens of thousands of drivers who had been fasting since dawn fell and they became bad-tempered and accident-prone. The call to prayer, once all but banished from central Ankara, a modern

capital deliberately chosen to be far from the minarets of Istanbul, could be heard clearly at Mustafa Kemal's grandiose mausoleum, the chief shrine of Turkish secularism. Inch by inch, Kemal's secular state is being menaced into such weakness that it will be powerless to prevent whatever the AK party is planning next.

It would be absurd if it were not so serious. At one stage, an indictment against alleged Ergenekon conspirators claimed that they had met Dick Cheney to discuss overthrowing the Erdogan government. The plot was supposed to have created the conditions in which a military coup could take place. In recent weeks, similar claims have led to the arrests of several senior retired military commanders, accused of having planned a putsch, in a conspiracy of astonishing, almost childish crudity, back in 2003.

DEMOCRACY HAS IN FACT DONE WESTERN NATIONS FEW FAVORS IN RECENT YEARS. IT HAS NOT KEPT THEM FROM EMBARKING ON FOOLISH WARS. IT HAS NOT RESTRAINED THEM FROM SUICIDAL ECONOMIC BLUNDERS.

I am amazed that this extraordinary development in this important country has attracted so little attention. I can only conclude that the reason is that it is happening under the flag of democracy and that those who might normally be concerned are trying to convince themselves that Erdogan and his AK party are an Islamic version of Christian Democracy. Most of his enemies, after all, are not conventionally attractive—repressive state actors, secretive military men, reactionary judges, corrupt and incompetent old guard politicians. Perhaps the public relations are for once true and he really does intend no more than the creation of a mildly Islamist nation in which the *hijab* coexists with a free press, tol-

erance, and an open society. I doubt it. The process is likely to come to a crisis fairly soon, and then we shall know for certain.

But the real issue goes far deeper and rebounds on the democratic West. If our desire to establish democracy as the test of goodness succeeds, it is bound in some cases to lead to the creation of states we like even less than we liked them when they were despotic. Is it possible that we have misunderstood our own societies and wrongly thought that the exercise of majority rule through democratic vote was the key to their success?

Ever since I observed Russia's tragicomic transformation from corrupt Soviet state to corrupt gangster democracy, I have wondered if elections are really quite as liberating as we imagine. Long before that, I had noticed the curious status of Hong Kong, until 1997 a

British colony with the sketchiest makings of democracy. Yet, especially approached across its border with the Chinese People's Republic, Hong Kong seemed to have most of the characteristics of a Western society. Its press was free, its courts operated under law, its police were servants, not insolent overlords. Even now, some years after it became a "special administrative region" of China, travelers from Peking immediately feel a weight lift as the train passes the frontier at Lo Wu and everything is not merely cleaner, safer, and more modern, but more free. Yet it is much less democratic than Vladimir Putin's Russia or Iraq or Iran.

If we were to bottle the thing that

makes Hong Kong better than China, or which makes the countries of the Anglosphere so much more free and happy than almost any other territories on the globe, would it be the habit of holding regular elections? Or would it be something more elusive, harder to transport and more difficult to establish?

Democracy has in fact done Western nations few favors in recent years. It has not kept them from embarking on foolish wars. It has not restrained them from suicidal economic blunders. It has done little to empower the people's desire for less mass immigration or more effective schools. It has above all been feeble when called upon to defend established liberties. In fact, it has often been the enemy of those liberties, as demagogues have sought to win mass support for the excesses of Guantanamo, the reintroduction of torture, and the extension of intrusive surveillance.

It is the very liberties that democracy has recently helped to undermine that are the real spirit of the English-speaking free nations—*habeas corpus*, now hugely weakened; jury trial, the essential safeguard against arbitrary imprisonment by state power; freedom and pluralism of the press and media; the supremacy of law over power. As for democracy, it only defends freedom where it means that a government can be lawfully and peacefully removed at an election. If there is no opposition party ready to take over the government, if congresses are not adversarial, if parties engage in a private consensus and ignore the people's concerns, if major legislation can be imposed despite the wishes of parliaments and people by Supreme Courts or Human Rights Courts or by international bodies, democracy does not add up to much if what you really want is freedom.

It is striking that the war on terror has spoken so strongly about democracy

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Mall of America

Nowhere in D.C. is as exposed as the National Mall. Inside the white-frosting museums are spaceships and a giant porcupine and a firetruck-red Calder hung from

the ceiling like playground equipment for alien children. But on the Mall itself, under the red eye of the white monument, the people look small and alone. The carousel calliope sounds tinny and far-off, fainter than the squealing of the gears. The triceratops has gone away to the Zoo—I used to slide down his tail. I don't think children are allowed to ride him now.

There's a noticeable dearth of iPods. A few joggers use the little earbuds to seal themselves off from the tourists and the beggars and the cultists selling knickknacks, but most of the people on the Mall lack that sonic bubble-wrap. Instead, we're treated to the music of the bucket drummers. These guys, with their make-do drum kits held up by repurposed traffic cones, are the opposite of the iPod. They're free, intentionally intrusive, icons of salvage and interdependence rather than consumer solitude. The tourists give them money; sometimes the locals pause.

An Amish family rides the escalators up from the subway entrance. A security guard suns himself on a bench. Four girls in school uniforms breeze by, arm in arm in arm in arm like the joke about the octopus, then unknot themselves as they try to figure out where their museum has gone. Uniforms of one kind or another are as common as foldout maps. They make us easily legible to one another.

Trudge from the metro to the National Museum of the American Indian, and

you'll come to a raised wall with a conchita growing from it. The branches kink like a woman's hair, and in the spring the yellow-green pollen hangs in swaying tapers. A Jerusalem sage stretches out its arms. There are robins and a dove and frondy false cypress. Even this quiet, beautiful place must be made educational somehow, plaqued and paraded like all the other denizens of museum row. So here we learn that this piney creature, lying on its side, its needles flimsy but sharper than they look, is called "prostrate beauty." There's also a Lenten rose, named for its incongruous blooming season.

There are foreign plants here, tourists who can't get home, like the cherry blossoms for which the city is known. These too are labeled with their countries of origin, their passport stamps. There's a coral bark maple from Korea, with veiny red limbs like an anatomy chart. A tiny nest in the high branches lies open to the elements, since the maple hasn't come fully into leaf.

The museums have been rationalized. The giant squid, which used to be dumped in a murky vat to brood like Loki waiting for his revenge on the gods, has gone from squid couchant to squid rampant, and has a cool light-up display showing its beak and suckers. Even the National Museum of American History, once known as "America's attic" for its bizarre displays and rummage-sale aesthetic, has been reworked to teach approved narratives. I remember it for

its display case filled with weird things made from aluminum, from a fiddle to a lady's fan, and its hall of threshers. It seemed like a maze, like one of the old text-adventure games where even the most random object could turn out to be useful when you encountered a monster many screens later.

The museums may have been tamed, but the Mall still hosts emotions that can't be kept safely under glass. It's where we perform our ritualized dissent: placards waving, puppets nodding, a man dressed as Condoleezza Rice pretending to eat baby dolls spattered with red paint. These are carnivals of consolation, what we have instead of effective political representation. AIDS Quilt, March for Women's Lives, veterans protesting the war that claimed their friends' lives, women standing in a line with signs saying *I regret my abortion*—all those private griefs displayed for public purposes. At the March for Life we walked in procession toward the Supreme Court building, with drummers playing and banners snapping in the frigid air like something out of Kurosawa. The theatricality of these protests never salves the helplessness.

But the Mall is where we express our longings as well as our demands. We play out the yearning American restlessness, the dissatisfaction no policy change or cultural shift can ease. My favorite memory of the Mall is from the 2002 Fourth of July, when we were herded through the post-9/11 security cordon just in time to hear the big speakers play "Moon River." *Two drifters, off to see the world ...*

We gazed up at the dark streaky sky and waited for the fireworks. ■