

Democracy

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“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...”

So starts the second paragraph of the Declaration of independence. It continues by stating “That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

The concept that government derives its power from the governed was, and still is, revolutionary. Prior to the Magna Charta, it was accepted that the King governed from the power of God. In truth, most realized that the power came actually from the sword and gold.

Our founders recognized that overthrowing governments was costly and difficult, when they stated “Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes...”

Democracy is defined as “Government by the People, exercised either directly or through elected representatives (American Heritage Dictionary).” The writers of the Declaration of Independence were not specifically talking about Democracy: they contend quite clearly that *all government* ultimately derives its power and legitimacy from the people. Democracy is the exercise of that power either directly or indirectly through elected representatives.

If any government derives power from the consent of the governed, then Democracy can only survive if the people consent to Democracy. History, I’m afraid, is littered with abortive Democracy. Even if a majority of people want Democracy, it may not survive: a minority who do not consent to Democracy can be sufficient to overthrow that government. They possess the same Right of the People to Alter or abolish a government they do like as our founding fathers did.

It appears that successful Democracy requires a commitment by more than a majority. It takes a lot trust and goodwill: there will always be a “minority” group in any democracy. That minority must believe that their “unalienable Rights” of “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” will be preserved. Our country has been successful because the majority party did not trample the minority (indeed, we have had our most distressful times when this was forgotten). More importantly, the minority has consented to be governed by the majority, trusting that its voice will still be heard and respected.

I am watching closely in Iraq to see if Western Democracy can arise and survive there. As this drama unfolds we must remember that Democracy, like all forms of government – and perhaps even more than other forms of government – derives its power from the consent of the governed. When our leaders talk of “Defeating the Insurgency” and tell us that “Coalition forces, foreign forces are not going to repress that insurgency. We’re going to create an environment that the Iraqi people and the Iraqi security forces can win against that insurgency,” I wonder if the new Iraqi Government derives its power from The People or simply from force. I hope ultimately that the people of Iraq find a government that brings them the stability needed to ensure “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” One must keep in mind that the Declaration of Independence does not require that government be Democracy, it specifically states that the people should organize their government “in such form, as to *them* shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” I must ask: does the government that is being organized for the Iraqi people really “seem to *them*” most likely to effect *their* safety and happiness? Or is it simply another form of tyranny that like the tyranny of King George and the British Parliament (an elected body) will be abolished?