

I WANT TO BE FREE

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By Roland Watson

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Life challenges

We all face many life challenges, starting with as individuals and from birth. For many of our initial requirements, including to have food and otherwise to stay alive, we are dependent on others: on our mother and family. As we grow we then face new tasks, and for which we are partly if not wholly responsible. We also, through the groups to which we belong by default, and through others that we join, face other larger, more complex and more difficult challenges.

As individuals, the greatest challenges for most people are to learn and to find love and companionship, and through this to achieve happiness. These all take years of hard work, and there is a real chance of failure. Many people are poorly educated, live alone, and are not happy. Even worse, for people who are born to difficult circumstances, from a dysfunctional family to a tyrannical dictatorship, the challenge may well remain simply to survive.

What all of this reveals is a basic truth: Life is a gift, but it is not free.

Assuming, though, that we can satisfy these needs, the horizons are essentially limitless. We can devote ourselves to personal education and development, and attain originality in countless different ways, from scientific and mathematical breakthroughs, to social leadership, to wide-ranging experience, to wisdom, and to artistic and sports excellence. (Lots of people also just focus on the practical, and dedicate themselves to having children - to perpetuating their family line, or to making a lot of money.) Nonetheless, in all of these cases we will not be alone in our success. Most of us have innate gifts of one type or another, and many people have the perseverance to develop their gifts, both on their own and with the help of others.

While we idolize people like Albert Einstein or Michael Jordan (or Warren Buffet), there are in fact many, many people who have accomplished the extraordinary. I don't mean to diminish what they have achieved, but the possibilities of life get much more challenging than even this.

The greatest challenges

The greatest challenges extend beyond the concerns of any one person. Indeed, a transition challenge from the individual to the group is the goal of saving lives. Some people dedicate themselves to helping others, and attain remarkable success in doing so, ensuring that many other people survive in circumstances where they otherwise would not, and all of whom then have the ability to develop and grow as well, including by helping still more people.

What this illustrates is that the overall challenge of life has two dimensions: to help yourself, and to help others. Many people in fact do try to help others - starting with their children and other family members - after their own needs are satisfied. Some people try to help others even though they also suffer great want.

There are many social challenges that involve other people, and for that matter other life. Probably the greatest of all is the need to reduce the overall human impact, from reversing global warming to protecting endangered species and habitats. These problems are so large that no-one, not even presidents and prime ministers, can solve them (although they can certainly help - by setting appropriate policy and establishing large-scale conservation programs). That these issues derive from our collective behavior as individuals also means that everyone has a responsibility to work towards their resolution, from reducing child-bearing and consumption to joining groups that are active on local issues.

After global warming and environmental destruction, the next greatest challenge is to confront dictatorship - in those countries where it still exists, or where power-mad individuals hope to take over. Indeed, the objective to free such a country represents a singular test, of human courage and of our ability to cooperate. Lots of people achieve their dreams of personal excellence, from solving a scientific problem to winning an Olympic medal to being a billionaire. Many people also strive to help others, both as a career, such as a teacher or social worker, or through being an activist. The much more difficult test, though, is to help a large group escape repression. This requires more than face-to-face assistance. It demands organization both within and outside the nation that is under subjugation, and policy and action from the world's democratic leaders. Only then can such a country and its people be freed.

This task is so complicated that it is in fact the most difficult thing we can try to do. This is proven by the short list of countries which have achieved freedom in recent years. While some might say that confronting global warming and environmental destruction are more pressing concerns, and they certainly have a point since these issues are both extremely serious and planet-wide, the more immediate requirement is defeating dictatorship and establishing democracy. The simple reason for this is that the first is predicated on the second. The countries with the worst behavior towards nature are the dictatorships. If we can't transform them to democracies, we have no hope to save the earth.

To free a country

The transition to democracy has two stages: to remove the dictators, and then to establish a well-functioning political system. For the first, and with which this article is most concerned, the key prerequisite is pressure. Further, since no dictatorship gives up power voluntarily, the pressure imposed upon it must be very great. The dictators must be forced to go.

Generally, this takes the form of mass protests, or the actions of armed pro-democracy rebels, or a combination of both. Such pressure causes the dictatorship to break - the people overrun the palace so to speak, although in some cases there is an intermediate step where high-level officers in the regime, who secretly want democracy as well, launch a coup against the top rulers. Then, with the dictatorship defeated, many additional things happen - the movement to real democracy begins. This includes arresting the regime's officials and security forces; implementing an international peacekeeping force if this is necessary to maintain order in post-dictatorship chaos; forming a constitutional convention and drafting a new charter; establishing political parties and selecting candidates; and holding the country's first free and fair general election.

Participants

The participants in a democracy transition comprise the dictatorship, including its security forces and business cronies; the general public, including internal activist, civil society and media organizations; their leaders - both recognized and underground; rebel groups, including their leaders; international activists and civil society organizations who are dedicated to the cause; the leaders and diplomats of other nations and supranational organizations; international businesses that are or want to be active in the country; and international media. In summary, accomplishing the political transformation of an entire nation is an historical event - it attracts a lot of attention.

In general terms, the most important participant is the dictatorship, since it effectively defines the nature of the transition. This is manifested by how hard and brutal it is willing to fight to stay in power. Countries where the dictators commit extreme repression, starting with crimes against humanity, are the the most difficult to change.

Related to this is the social nature of the dictatorship: if it is based on religion or ideology; or a specific family; or an ethnic group. The last are often the worst, engaging in racist violence against the country's other groups. These characteristics in turn underlie the dictatorship's degree of cohesion and through this its internal strength. Also supporting such cohesion is the relative wealth of the dictators, meaning of the country as a whole (since the regime steals the bulk of this wealth). For instance, nations with great natural resources often have entrenched dictatorships (the "resource curse"), which initially fought to control the resources and which now use them to perpetuate their power.

Confronting the regime is the country's public. The key characteristic here is the extent to which the people desire change; and, as a reflection of this, how much they have organized and in what ways. The public must be motivated to create the necessary pressure, and this task is much easier if they are angry and prepared to sacrifice everything. Related to their anger, though, is their amount of repression. Great repression will make the people furious, but it can also cause them to fall into despair and to live in fear and resignation.

Also critical is the degree to which the dictatorship has been able to turn distinct groups within the nation against each other - this is called "divide and conquer," groups which normally would

be natural allies against the regime and whom if unified could cause it real problems. Some dictatorships are extremely deft at using this tactic, including with ideology (propaganda), force, and financial inducements, thereby limiting the ability of the entire population to unify in opposition.

All of the other potential participants become involved if and when they find the situation of interest. For example, the countries with the greatest repression tend to attract the most international activists. These individuals and groups are further engaged if there is a significant domestic resistance movement - if the people are standing up for themselves and if there is a possibility of success. International media in turn follow the same types of situations, provided they can get access - ideally with powerful video. But, if the dictatorship blocks the media, they will usually ignore the country, even if horror stories do leak out.

Related to this, a recent factor is the development of social media, and the widespread availability of the Internet - even in repressive states. When the population has access to cell phones and can share videos and photos, this draws much greater attention to their cause.

Finally, countries which in some way impact global geopolitical interests attract international diplomats, and businesses. However, in many if not most of these cases the diplomats and businesses have actually backed the dictators against the people, to satisfy their own objectives.

This is the mix, then, that surrounds any dictatorship and the public's attempts to defeat it. A few examples should illustrate the structure and variations more clearly.

Zimbabwe

Among the world's more notorious regimes, Zimbabwe in Southern Africa is run by Robert Mugabe. Ironically, he was an independence leader when the people of the country, then called Rhodesia, threw off British colonial rule. He ran for office in the first election, in 1980, and then became Prime Minister. Unfortunately, he has clung to power ever since, in the process degrading the nation from a new democracy to a totalitarian state, and with even greater repression than when it had been a colony. Mugabe is now 93 years old. The people of Zimbabwe are basically waiting for him to die.

Robert Mugabe is brutal, and cracks down on any significant opposition. He has also used the tactic of divide and conquer, favoring the northern Shona-language based groups against the southern Ndebele-speakers. This pattern was established early on, through the Gukurahundi genocide in the mid-1980s against the Ndebele resistance.

Nowadays, the population is basically being kept down through grinding poverty. His economic policies have been a disaster. Mugabe himself, though, has expropriated Zimbabwe's resource wealth, notably diamonds. The nature of his dictatorship, therefore, is individual, with ethnic backing. There is no ideological basis. For this reason, transitioning to democracy following his

death may be easier, as he has no natural or groomed heirs to take over power.

As with much of Africa, the rest of the world is ignoring the country. There is little activist or media attention. The U.S. and Europe accept the periodic elections even though they are rigged. China, as it is doing with other African strongmen, is the largest economic partner.

Burma

Burma, aka Myanmar, is in Southeast Asia. It has been controlled by a brutal military dictatorship since 1962, when General Ne Win seized power, and which is based on ethnicity. Even though the country has tremendous diversity, the rulers are all members of the largest group, the Burmans or Bamar. Again, there is no ideological basis (other than Burman ultranationalism).

The Burma dictatorship's core strategy to retain power is the use of force combined with divide and conquer. The country has had a civil war that actually predates Ne Win coup's, extending all the way back to World War II. At this time, he was a general of the Japanese-aligned Burma Independence Army, which fought to expel the British, the country's colonial rulers. (Ne Win has similarities with Robert Mugabe.) He ordered his "pocket army" troops to attack another group, and the Japanese themselves had to step in to stop it. After his coup, he implemented a genocidal "four-cuts" policy against the country's other ethnicities, coupled with military offensives, and a strategy of signing ceasefires with some of the resistance groups - which were formed in response to his repression, to be able to concentrate his resources against others.

As a consequence of what is now more than fifty years of war and chaos, the people of Burma suffer tremendous deprivation. More than two million have fled the country, and there are roughly another million in border refugee camps and internally-displaced person sites. The dictatorship, though, is doing just fine, thanks to its theft of the country's extraordinary natural resource wealth, starting with natural gas.

The nation's pro-democracy resistance has two components: Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, the National League for Democracy; and the resistance armies of the ethnic groups. Interestingly, these factions are not unified. They have never cooperated, possibly because Suu Kyi is Burman herself, and since her father, independence hero Aung San, founded the Burma Army, on which the dictatorship is based. Indeed, her recent actions raise the question of whether she truly supports the transition to democracy, or is in fact a closet backer of the ruling generals.

Burma has attracted a lot of international attention, because of the war and repression; Suu Kyi's prize; and the nation's resource wealth. The cause of freedom and democracy has had extensive activist support, although less media coverage, since free press is prohibited and because it is difficult if not impossible to reach the war zones. Businesses and diplomats, though, have fully supported the dictatorship, for the first out of lust for the resources and cheap labor. Diplomats

initially backed Ne Win as a tactic to contain Chinese communism, and later to support the companies. There was pro-democracy lip service from the West for decades, but this was abandoned under President Obama who changed U.S. policy to accept the regime openly. His about-face was predicated on the fact that the dictatorship did allow free and fair elections (although not quite, since it reserved 25% of the seats in Parliament for itself), and through which Suu Kyi became de-facto President. However, using many different means, starting with the Army and its MPs, the generals continue their complete domination. Since the 2015 general election and Suu Kyi's own reversal, the civil war has actually escalated, as has the repression, most severely with a genocide that is now being perpetrated against the Rohingya group in Western Burma.

China

China is Burma's neighbor to the northeast. It is undoubtedly the world's leading dictatorship, including in the number of people subdued, its financial and military power, and the complexity of the strategy that is used to maintain autocratic rule. For this reason, it is and will continue to be the most difficult country to convert to democracy. Indeed, advocates inside China are not even pushing for the democratic system itself; instead, they are focused on achieving human rights. They either do not recognize, or because of the oppression have been compelled to ignore (and in doing so to forget what they previously understood in 1989 at Tiananmen Square), the immutable connection between the two. Human rights come from democracy. They can only be guaranteed if a country is democratic (and even then they are often at great risk).

The foundation of China's dictatorship was communism, but this was discarded by Deng Xiaoping. As a consequence, it is now only about power - wealth and power. There is no religious or ideological basis, or ethnic racism, or family dynasty.

This in turn explains the open question of why the rulers of China would even want the country to remain a dictatorship. It is extremely expensive to maintain a military (as we saw with the USSR, and still with the USA), and they can also see (or not, because of the air pollution!) that having democracy is much better for economic development, certainly over the long-term. The China boom has been driven by one factor, cheap labor costs, which advantage is now finished. This is why they have a huge espionage program to steal Western commercial secrets. Nonetheless, the country would do better with democracy. But, this in turn would mean the end of the power and privilege - the "princeling" class would be destroyed.

So, the rulers have taken the decision to keep their dictatorship. China has simply replaced Mao's communist ideology with a new version of its age-old imperialism and feudalism (and which Mao actually overthrew). Amazingly, the National People's Congress has 100 billionaires.

They don't have much to worry about, though. The dictators have manipulated the Chinese public with great success. Popular anger against Beijing has been redirected through indoctrination. There is virulent nationalism against the West now, even as it continues to be their

main market. They also rigorously control internal activists, and have the world's largest network of prisons for dissidents ("laogai"). 2010 Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobao is even still imprisoned, although he only called for mild changes. They also rigorously monitor internal media, and block the outside world through the Great Firewall.

The world in turn accepts the country as it is. The global public has been happy to look the other way in return for cheap goods. And, other international leaders have never, ever pressed China's rulers to yield their power. President Obama formally ended even the United States insincere calls for human rights. Donald Trump, despite his initial harsh rhetoric, has fallen into line as well. He backed the One China policy, although it denies recognition to independent and democratic Taiwan. Family members have important business connections. His Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, in his first visit, declared "mutual respect" for China's "core interests," which above all else are to remain a brutal dictatorship. And, he appointed as Ambassador Iowa Governor Terry Branstad, a pro-business figure and long-standing friend of the autocrats. (The business community more than anyone else does not want China to become democratic. They love the sweatshops, and complete lack of regulation.) All of this means that China will remain a dictatorship until a crisis, probably a global recession, causes economic chaos internally, such that its citizens finally see through, and reject, the regime's lies.

This is the end of the review of China, with two critical exceptions. The first is that the dictatorship is also a colonial power. It is not only its own public that its suffering. China has annexed and maintains ruthless control over Tibet, East Turkestan, and Southern Mongolia (and also control over Hong Kong and Macao), all of which should be independent countries in their own right. East Turkestan, which the Chinese call Xinjiang, or New Frontier or Territory - it should be known as Stolen Territory!, is in fact an excellent example of the need for international media coverage and diplomatic attention. There is literally none of either regarding the occupation. The difficulty of transforming China to a democracy also and regrettably means that these countries too will remain under the heel of Beijing's dictatorship for the foreseeable future.

Secondly, the world's worst dictatorship, North Korea, is China's neighbor and client (as is the Burma dictatorship, and also the regimes in Laos and Cambodia). North Korea is a family dynasty that is so repressive and poorly run that without Chinese support it would fail. Frankly, it should already have collapsed years if not decades ago. But, with China's backing, it has no real threat. The U.S will not confront North Korea not only because of the risk to Seoul, South Korea, but also since this would anger China.

Russia

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia - and the other Soviet states - had a chance at freedom, at least initially. Russia itself (and a few of the states) was in fact able to transform to a democratic system, under Gorbachev and then Yeltsin. But Yeltsin was corrupt (and an alcoholic). It became apparent that seventy years of communist rule had not completely wiped out the underpinnings of the country's historic feudal system, with land-owning lords and serfs.

The corruption allowed a new type of business lord to take control (“oligarchs”), with the result that the people were again reduced to penury. Indeed, Russia was so poorly governed that the communist guarantee of food, clothing and housing, albeit of limited selection and supply, and of course also accompanied by severe repression, was no longer satisfied. Some Russians even began to feel nostalgia for the “glories” of the Soviet era, including both its superpower status and that basic needs were met.

Vladimir Putin, former KGB officer and Yeltsin protege, took advantage of this atmosphere, vowing that Russia could be strong again. He was able to win election, and subsequently used his position to ensure that he could never be removed from power (although he did install a puppet, Dmitry Medvedev, for four years). In this way, too, he is analogous to Mugabe, a democratically-elected official who went on to seize absolute power and become a strongman. Now, even though periodic elections are held, Putin is an out and out dictator.

Because of the social and environmental tumult that has resulted from globalization, many established democracies around the world are falling prey to the designs of wannabe strongmen. This has occurred in the Philippines, Turkey, Poland, Hungary, Venezuela, Ukraine, Thailand, and elsewhere. (For the last two, the strongmen have been expelled.) Unfortunately, even the U.S. and some countries in Western Europe are also at risk of takeover.

For Putin, his dictatorship is personal and based on resource wealth (foremost oil and natural gas). He has rejected communist ideology, although he does promote himself as the heir to Stalin, literally one of the world’s worst-ever autocrats. In this way, he too makes superiority claims, not about communism but that Russia can be a superpower again, which claims are comparable to those of other dictatorships, and which are based on either ethnicity or religion.

Putin maintains his control by promoting a zealous ultranationalism dedicated to reclaiming Soviet power, coupled with crackdowns on free media and dissidents. For the latter, he has perpetrated the murder of many key opponents, both in Russia and after they traveled to other countries, using assassins who are no doubt from the KGB or other security organs. He is also expansionist like China - in Ukraine, Georgia, and through his involvement in Syria. Finally, under Putin, Russia once again conducts widespread espionage, now with computer hacking, also copying China.

For the opposition, as with almost all authoritarian states (probably excluding only North Korea), there is a domestic pro-democracy movement. Town-by-town, people are working to determine the truth and to protect human rights. But, there is limited national organization. (Given Russia’s size, unity will always be a great challenge.) There is also minimal international activist or media attention to democratic issues. Further, diplomats accept Putin’s rule. The only international pressure, from any quarter, focuses on his “adventures” and the hacking, which, of course, is exactly what he wants. These are distractions that he has created as a means to undermine the demand for real democracy at home, and the international support that the cause might receive.

Syria

Syria under Bashar al Assad is another notorious dictatorship, because of the horrible war and refugee crisis that is underway, and for which his savagery, including mass executions and the use of chemical weapons, is responsible. Syria is now so torn apart that it is a collapsed state.

Bashar inherited power from his father Hafez, who was ruler from 1970 - 2000. But where Hafez was able to maintain control using the standard tools of repression - and without a complete social breakdown, his son has failed. Family-based dictatorships are in fact the most difficult to preserve, as the subsequent generations lack the “legitimacy” of the founding rulers.

This problem is also now evident in North Korea (if the reports coming out of the isolated country are correct, not to mention the recent assassination in Malaysia of the current dictator’s half-brother). However, the country is more stable than Syria. The Kim family, in its third generation, has been able to maintain absolute power by using both extraordinary repression and psychological manipulation of the public.

Family-based regimes tend to weaken generation by generation, unless they have a basis in monarchy (as with the sheiks of the Arab world). This in turn creates an opportunity for a popular movement and democratic revolution.

Indeed, there are problems with succession following the rule of any dictator. Both the Soviet Union and China, though, were able to use the Communist Politburo structure to maintain their regimes, starting with post-Lenin, Stalin and Mao. Ultimately, the Soviet system failed due to economic pressure, and one expects a similar fate for the Communist Party of China, although the timing for this is of course difficult to predict.

Returning to Syria, democratic longings were released with the death of Hafez, leading to the birth of a Free Syria Movement, and on which Bashar then launched a vicious crackdown. Opportunistically, both Putin and the United States got involved, backing the respective sides. The Syria cause for democracy then became astonishingly brutal - a civil war. Syria is also now a proxy war, the first significant such conflict since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s, to which the United States responded by backing the mujahideen. (Putin is also currently attempting to turn Libya into a proxy war.)

To make matters even more complex, the chaos in Syria and also in neighboring Iraq provided fertile ground for the birth of a new Islamist insurgency - ISIS - seeking to establish a regional caliphate: a religious dictatorship. However, this actually only became possible because the U.S. took its eye off the ball in Iraq following the capture of Saddam Hussein, and which was similar to the American loss of focus in Afghanistan after the Soviet retreat, and where another fundamentalist Islamist movement, the Taleban, was then able to take hold.

The situation in Syria is so complicated, and violent, that it appears it can only be resolved through war. Bashar will either win - he will stay in power, or lose, through war. Similarly, ISIS can only be defeated in combat. While it is true that the Muslim world can and should reject the movement - at this point one can argue that it comprises a cult, and one that worships death - and thereby deny it new recruits, those currently fighting, because of their fanaticism, will no doubt fight to the death. (This is similar to the mindset of the Japanese Army in WWII.)

International parties should do everything they can to back the Free Syria Movement, to pressure Putin to drop his support, and to confront ISIS. Still, the country will never be free until Bashar is removed. Given the current dynamic, this will require concerted military action by Free Syria forces and their international allies. For Syria, Bashar, Putin and ISIS all must go.

Saudi Arabia

The final example, Saudi Arabia, is extraordinary because it has two separate power centers, and which cooperate. These are the al Saud sheiks - this aspect is a family-based autocracy, and the Wahhabi Muslim leaders. Saudi Arabia combines both an absolute monarchy and theocracy. Put simply, for the country to be free and democratic, both power centers must be overthrown. It is for this reason that the Saudi dictatorship, in its own way, is as durable as that of China.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia is also a resource-based dictatorship, because of its extraordinary oil wealth. The regime has been able to control its critics, both with repression and economic handouts. The monarchy in recent years had been following a strategy to keep the world oil price low, to deter new producers. However, this also cut into its revenues, and through this its ability to buy off the public. The strategy has now been reversed, and oil prices have risen (even though its competitors are once again ramping up production).

As background, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the third iteration of a family dynasty that dates to the 18th century. It was founded by ibn Mohammad al Saud, who in 1902 retook his family's home of Riyadh and who by 1932, through war, had extended his control to most of the Arabian peninsula. Shortly after this, in 1938, oil was discovered on the peninsula by a U.S. company.

Also, while the sheiks have wielded absolute power, they have historically not been remote. The rulers regularly met with the public, traveling from community to community, to hear grievances and to settle disputes.

Wahhabism is an ultraconservative interpretation of Islam, propagated by ibn Abdul Wahhab, also of the 18th century. The al Saud dynasty has accepted this interpretation for its entire history.

The core belief is that the two most important aspects of Islam are the Koran and "the sword," with the second meaning that Muslims who do not accept this are apostates and must be converted by force. Both al Qaeda and ISIS also follow Wahhabism.

Another aspect of the interpretation is that the religion should control all public affairs, meaning both government and society. This reflects the fact that the Prophet, following his victory over his own home town of Mecca, became both Arabia's religious and political leader; and also that the Koran lays out many social rules. In Saudi Arabia today, the monarchy runs the country (making certain not to deviate from the clerics), and which, given modern complexity, requires an extensive, professional bureaucracy. Nonetheless, this core interpretation, that Saudi Arabia is an Islamic State and that ultimately the religious leaders take precedence, establishes it as fundamentally undemocratic. There is no real separation of religion and government (much less popular rule), and as long as the Wahhabi interpretation is in force there never will be.

In recent decades, the Saudi sheiks have become repressive and brutal. They follow the Wahhabi belief that society should mirror the conditions and attitudes of the 6th-7th century - when the Prophet lived, and therefore prohibit many contemporary practices. This means there is an inherent clash not only between the country and democracy, but also with the modern world.

While some people in Saudi Arabia do push for their rights, such as the right of women to vote in municipal council elections (which councils have extremely limited powers), and to drive (and most recently to go to a gym), there are few pro-democracy expressions. Similarly, there is little international attention on the issue of democracy in the country, other than the annual reports by Freedom House about how undemocratic it remains.

Democracy prospects

The process of transitioning from dictatorship to democracy is not rocket science. Many formerly autocratic nations have become democratic, and their conversions are well understood. The dictators must be confronted, and removed from power. This typically requires great pressure, in the form of popular uprisings and even armed struggle.

Nevertheless, while it may not be rocket science, it is extremely dangerous. Dictators fight back. The people therefore must be willing to risk their lives, to win their freedom.

Zimbabwe: With Mugabe at 93 there really isn't much longer to wait. What happens when he dies can't be fully predicted, of course, but there is an electoral system in place and which should be implemented. Surviving members of the regime will naturally try to retain control. (His wife has said that even if he dies before it, he should be on the ballot in the upcoming 2018 election.) However, and whenever it happens, after Mugabe the country will choose new leaders. Political, media and activist efforts will be required to ensure that this process is free and fair. Following the vote, the new government, and the people, can then begin to work to end the ethnic divisions that he created between the north and the south. One hopes there will be an intelligent approach to economic development as well, and that China's role therein will be reduced.

Burma: At present, the pro-democracy movement is in limbo. As noted earlier, a free election was held and Aung San Suu Kyi is in charge of the government. However, its powers are extremely limited, since the military maintains complete independence and also control of the most important ministries including the general administrative function that extends throughout the country. Moreover, the country's constitution ensures that this centralization of power can never be changed. The generals further continue to pursue their own objectives, to remain in power and to rob the country blind, including for the first time through launching a major offensive against resistance groups in the North and a genocide against the Rohingya in the West. If effect, Burma's political structure contains a fake democratic system on top of a very concrete and brutal dictatorship.

The country's prospects therefore are dim, not the least because Suu Kyi defends this structure. She has made no material attempt to change it. Even worse, she has repeatedly praised the Burma Army and ignored the civil war it has instigated and the Rohingya genocide. It seems there is no possibility of real democracy for Burma until she leaves the political scene. Following this, a new and unified resistance movement hopefully can be formed to take on the generals once and for all. However, since she is only 71, this is still likely far in the future.

China: There are few democracy hopes at the present time for China, its colonies Tibet, East Turkestan and Southern Mongolia, and its clients including North Korea, Laos and Cambodia. The China-backed block of dictatorship is entrenched. It is further the largest contiguous collection of repression in the world, including in territory, population, and economic output. Moreover, there are only two events with which it might be threatened. The first is a new global recession, perhaps following a Trump-instigated trade war. The second would be if, somehow, against all the challenges, the dictatorships in either Burma or North Korea collapsed. This would lead to large, democratic groups lying just across its borders. At present, China's immediate neighbors are all also dictatorships. (The countries that are democracies are separated by overwhelming natural barriers.) It is effectively insulated inside a dictatorship cocoon. But, having new democratic societies as neighbors could function like a social virus, injecting China's own public with a desire to be free. Using a local metaphor, one can say that the dictatorship sits astride a tiger, composed of 1.3 billion people. If they ever get agitated, they will be able to throw off its control with ease.

Russia: Other than Zimbabwe, Russia has the best prospects for achieving freedom and real democracy in the near term. This is because its dictatorship rests with one man, Putin, and whose support is limited to corrupt oligarchs, the security services, and his own collection of brainwashed nationalists. But, the country does have elections (of course, they have been rigged in a variety of ways), and, unlike China, its people are in regular contact with the free populations of many different neighbors in Europe. This explains why Putin has been working so hard to support authoritarianism in these neighbors, including Ukraine, Poland and Hungary. Like China, he wants his own dictatorship cocoon.

His problem, though, is the economic disaster that the country remains. Because of his poor governance, Russia has failed to develop a modern economy and from which the entire population would benefit. Instead, it remains resource-based, and which extractive companies are corrupt and all under Putin's personal (although indirect) control. The key question is how long the people will accept this - their poverty. Putin benefits from the country's historical experience of decades of destitution under the Soviets, such that the public has been conditioned to accept this as their lot, and with many self-medicating using vodka. But, and just as economic pressures doomed the Soviet Union, they should with time accomplish the same with Putin's rule. Large impoverished groups have always found a way to rise up (witness the Bolshevik Revolution), and this will hopefully be accelerated given Russia's close proximity to wealthy Western Europe.

Syria: Democracy campaigners in Syria must confront the Assad dictatorship, his support from Putin, and ISIS. Since these groups all use violence (for Putin, through his air strikes backing Assad), the campaigners in turn must employ military means. The war in Syria will continue until the dictators are defeated and Putin withdraws. While it is certainly true that some type of peace deal could be reached, as a way to stop the atrocities, if Assad is not removed and if ISIS does not lose its territory, such a peace will necessarily be temporary.

Since it is a war, conditions can and do change day-by-day. At the time of writing, it seems that ISIS is under the most pressure, paralleling its defeats in Iraq. Assad, though, remains undeterred and has even reclaimed the resistance stronghold of Aleppo. It is clear that the war in Syria and the struggle for democracy will continue for years to come.

Saudi Arabia: The prospects for democracy in Saudi Arabia depend on the public's approach to the overall dictatorship's two components: the monarchy and the Wahhabi clerics. For the monarchy, there does not appear to be a concerted attempt at overthrow. Rather, and as in China, the focus is on securing more rights.

For religion, Saudis are of course Muslims, from birth, and which faith they are not allowed to leave. This social system is reinforced by the fact that the first book to which children are exposed (in all Muslim societies) is the Koran, and which because of this is in fact the most widely read book in the world. It is not only the work through which children are exposed to spirituality; it is also the means by which they learn language - Arabic.

Indeed, the religious aspect of the Saudi dictatorship extends to many other Islamic societies. Throughout the Middle East, these nations mirror the country by having religious rule combined with authoritarian governance, including through other royal families, the military, and strongmen dictators such as Syria's Assad.

To confront their religious control, Muslims have two options - to oppose the Wahhabi interpretation, and to leave the faith entirely. For the first, many Muslims are rejecting fundamentalist Islam including through the renunciation of its terrorist practitioners, ISIS, al Qaeda, and the Taleban. It is also the case that Islamic societies in Asia and Africa demand

significantly less strict adherence, such as by not imposing Sharia law and instead implementing a modern legal system. The Wahhabi interpretation has been in practice for two centuries now, but as these nations show the people can insist that it not be followed.

Regarding leaving the faith entirely, there are two profound barriers. In some countries at least, this is punishable by death; and, it runs counter to a lifetime of social conditioning. Also, Islam can rightly be viewed as a religion of peace, such that many if not most of its followers would want to maintain their adherence. It further has many admirable tenets. The Prophet established a peaceful and united society throughout Arabia. War only returned when he passed, and different factions began to fight over his legacy. Islam also supports charity for the poor and many other laudable practices (the aforementioned social rules).

Even though the penalty for renouncing the faith is absolute, individuals who do not want to follow Islam do have options. Just as many Christians do not attend church every Sunday, Muslims are not forced to attend the five daily prayers or to complete the faith's other "pillars."

In summary, democracy in Saudi Arabia and throughout the Arab world will only become possible when the people demand that the religion find a way to coexist with modern society (which it already does in countries in other regions); and that the family and other political rulers relinquish their control. Fortunately, both trends are underway, having received a substantial catalyst from the development of social media. Many Muslims are renouncing the fanatics and debating how the faith can adapt to modern conditions; and, there are nascent underground pro-democracy movements, as illustrated by the Arab Spring, in all of the countries - including Saudi Arabia.

The United States

Any democracy review of the world must also consider the United States, for two reasons. The first is that the U.S. is a leading democracy model, and considered to be the most active national proponent of the political system. The second is that, under the new Trump Administration, democracy in the United States is itself under threat.

Regarding U.S. support for democracy in other countries, while Americans regularly tout this, the claim for the most part is false - for show only. Considering the major conflicts in which the U.S. has been involved, none of them were directly impelled by a desire to spread democracy. The real motivations were to respond to attacks, including on Americans; to assist allies; to pursue other U.S. interests; to install undemocratic rulers supportive of perceived U.S. interests; and to oppose the Soviet Union through involvement in proxy wars. This includes both World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, both Gulf Wars, and the full 30 plus years of conflict which has raged in Afghanistan.

The only example I am personally aware of where the U.S. unequivocally supported the aspirations of a repressed people - it even backed apartheid in South Africa - was when President

Clinton imposed sanctions on Burma in 1997. (Dictator Watch was active in calling for the sanctions.) The U.S. had backed the Burmese military dictatorship for decades, as a supposed counter to China, only dropping this support following the regime-perpetrated massacre in 1988. But it didn't actually change policy to back the people until the sanctions; and, it never meaningfully assisted the country's ethnic resistance forces in their revolution against the generals. The U.S. likes to pretend that it promotes democracy around the world. President Reagan even set up the National Endowment for Democracy, supposedly to do exactly this. The hard reality, though, is that such efforts have always been weak. No rational observer would ever seriously believe that they would make a real difference.

This was the situation until President Obama, who went even further and abandoned the pretense. For democracy, his policy was simply atrocious. He dropped from consideration any concern for human rights in China; he sat on the sidelines of the Arab Spring, refusing to back the people who were striving to rise up in one country after another; he drew a "red line" with Syria over chemical weapons, and then did nothing when Assad used them to attack the Syrian people; and he blanched in the face of Putin's aggression, including in both Syria and Ukraine, for the latter essentially minimizing the actions of Russia's special operations forces who used a missile to shoot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, murdering 298 people.

The eight years with Obama as President were a dark age for democracy promotion. And now we have Trump. The egomaniac conman is a complete wild card. He says he wants the U.S. to be isolationist, but he is so emotionally unstable that he could start a war at any time. He also clearly wants to be a dictator, so we shouldn't forget that engaging in war is a core strategy for almost all autocrats. (It justifies centralized military rule.)

The Trump regime

Trump wants to be the U.S. strongman, supposedly because only he knows what America needs. This too is a standard dictator strategy - you have to follow me because only I can lead the way.

Still, it is not as if the U.S. has been a shining beacon of democracy. For decades now, the country has actually been a plutocracy - rule for the rich, whose special interests were able to buy off both political parties and thereby obtain absolute power in Washington. This in turn marked the completion of a cycle, bringing America back to its earliest conditions when only white men who owned property were allowed to vote.

Indeed, the Republicans - through the rise of the Neoconservative movement - decided that even plutocracy was insufficient. They have been determined to establish one-party rule, with control of all three branches of federal government and control of a majority of the state governments, and which now with Trump they seemingly have achieved. To undermine democracy they have engaged in voter suppression, of groups likely to vote Democrat; gerrymandering of state districts, also to the detriment of the Democrats; and media brainwashing, led by Rupert Murdoch's Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, and now the white supremacist outlets like Breitbart on

social media. Nonetheless, even with all of this they were unable to realize their dream - the American democratic system is that strong - without the interference of Putin, with his hacking attack against Hillary Clinton, and the treason of FBI Director James Comey. (Note: It wasn't just Comey. The FBI has become so corrupted that one current agent describes it as "Trumpland.")

So now we have Trump, who has been trying to undermine both the judiciary and the media in his quest for dictatorial power. Fortunately, both have responded. He has learned through the reaction to his Muslim Ban that even though he may someday be able to appoint a ninth Supreme Court justice, the judiciary overall still takes the rule of law quite seriously. And the media, which was his key enabler, is now fighting back.

Also, he didn't "win," and not only with the popular vote. Trump is completely illegitimate. (He should never be referred to as "president.") The actions of Comey and the Russians were so egregious that the election result is fraudulent. It does not represent the will of the people. The American voters were manipulated through espionage and illegal FBI bias.

Comey said this week, before the House Intelligence Committee, that there is an FBI investigation of the Trump Campaign's links to Russia, and that it began last July. This means it was well underway when he torpedoed Hillary Clinton's chances by announcing that *she* was under investigation, twice, which definitely lost her many votes. But he refused to confirm at the time that Trump too was under investigation (even though he also admitted to the Committee that the Russians wanted to help Trump and hurt Clinton). This was blatantly transparent bias. His post-election confirmation of the investigation is proof that he and the FBI intended to sway the result. This *is* treason. Comey has given an enemy of the United States, in this case Vladimir Putin's Russia, "*aid and comfort*," by covering up Russia-Trump ties and through this helping Putin elect a pro-Russia president. He will go down in history as another Benedict Arnold.

The election result should be overruled by the courts, and it would be, if the Republicans would permit an independent criminal investigation - with a special prosecutor. (Comey, also a Republican, cannot be trusted to lead an impartial inquiry.) But, since they are doing everything possible to prevent this, we may well have to wait until Trump commits unarguably impeachable acts (or hard evidence of his campaign's collusion with Russia is released, Republican efforts to cover it up notwithstanding). Indeed, it is not the case that he should be removed and then Pence assume the office. There should be a new election, outside of the normal cycle (and which the eight current Supreme Court justices could mandate, and which would also serve as penance for the Court's own betrayal in *Bush v. Gore*). That is how serious the events during the last election really were. They require a completely new form of remedy.

The people of the United States are now being called upon to fulfill their role as democracy's final check. And, using the power of social media and the widespread outrage at his theft of power, "The Resistance" is underway (#notmypresident).

Analogous to what happened during the Revolutionary War, ordinary Americans must become pro-democracy activists. While the situation does not necessitate a violent response, all other activist tactics, including widespread public protests, civil disobedience, and direct action, should be pursued.

The people need allies, though. The Democratic Party must oppose with No Compromise everything that Trump tries to do. Even progressive icons such as Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders have been far too weak. The Democrats should not allow another Supreme Court justice to be seated. And, when the Republicans try a power grab, they should do everything conceivable to stop it. If need be, they should even boycott Congress - every Democratic Congressperson and Senator should simply walk out. This will reveal, visually, the Republican's core aspiration to duplicate what their one-party blood brothers have in North Korea and China.

The Republicans "won" because they were willing to do anything. I'm not saying that Democrats and Independents should mirror their immorality; just that they have to adopt a results-oriented mindset. It is not enough, not nearly enough, to be nice - to be principled. Democracy has to win. This absolutely is a zero-sum situation. The Republicans want America to be an overt political dictatorship. We have to make sure not only that Trump is expelled and that the country remains democratic, but that its democracy improves and flourishes, foremost by reducing inequality.

I want to be free

The Second Iraq War was launched on the basis of George W. Bush's lie that Saddam Hussain had weapons of mass destruction (which lie in turn only became possible through the Supreme Court ruling giving him the presidency). While the U.S. and its allies ultimately gained a degree of control over the country such that a new government could be formed, this came at an astronomical cost, including in lives and money, and also the formation an anti-American insurgency and which subsequently linked with extremist Muslims and metastasized into ISIS.

Interestingly, before Bush's lie, I fully supported the idea of a military intervention in Iraq. Saddam's tyranny, as with the tyranny in North Korea and Burma, was so severe that the world had an obligation to step in. (The United Nations calls this the Responsibility to Protect - although it never does!) Even though World War II was not fought with the specific objective to establish democracy in Germany and Japan, a breathtaking victory was achieved and there was a palpable conviction that this would lead to a new age of peace. Such hopes were then dashed by the actions of Stalin and Mao. Still, even with the Cold War the belief persisted that we could overcome our problems, and that atrocities such as genocide and slavery could be stopped.

We were wrong. The world got caught up in commercial development, and we looked the other way, not only from the internal repression in the Soviet Union and China, but from other new dictators who sought to emulate their models. The only exception to this was South Korea and the Korean War, which because of the North's Soviet and Chinese support was fought to a standstill. (Korea was itself a type of proxy war.)

None of this history though contradicts the basic point that dictators must be pressured to yield - if need be by being defeated in combat. The crucial question, for the latter, is how it is done.

In pressing for intervention in Iraq, I made a completely different argument. Even though one can naturally assume that repressed populations would appreciate international help (everyone wants to be defended from bullies), you still have to ask. They have to decide.

I argued at the time that the United States should infiltrate fliers into Iraq (as activists now float into North Korea), asking the people the simple question if they would like assistance to be free of Saddam. It would then be up to the Iraqis themselves to say "Yes," including by finding ways to do so. But, assuming that they did want help and could convey it, the U.S - indeed - any democratic countries and parties - would then have the legitimacy they needed to launch an intervention.

Had the United States and its coalition allies asked first, they might well have been received as emancipators, such that the insurgency could have been avoided and a stronger democratic system established. Immediate steps could then have been taken to provide the population the real benefits of development (social development, not commercial), so a positive perception of the new democracy was reinforced.

This didn't happen, but it doesn't mean that it's not a viable approach. And, of course, not every dictatorship requires violent means to achieve change.

In our own small way, Dictator Watch would like to help instigate this process. To all the people living in all the remaining dictatorships, please let it be known and in the strongest manner possible that you want be free.

We need to establish an international movement for freedom, against all forms of dictatorship. Even though many countries do have free and fair elections, because of the corrupting influence of money most of them are not truly democratic. And, of course, the majority of the world's population still lacks basic freedoms. Nowadays, many people criticize democracy (most of them are dictatorship propaganda agents), but the simple fact is that we have not yet established the system properly, as government "by the people." It is time to implement true democratic systems, and to enter properly humanity's Democracy Age.

In conclusion, at the beginning of the review I talked about how freeing a country is perhaps the most difficult life challenge of all. The plain truth is: The more people who participate, the easier it is. This includes both inside and outside. More and more people inside dictatorships need to resist, and more and more people outside need to help. Please get involved.