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Interjection

The Fight for Democracy

The Desire for Freedom Cannot Be Suppressed!

Frank Priess

In this issue of International Reports, which focuses on the pressures placed on democracy and the rule of law around the world, Christopher Walker writes for good reason against the backdrop of many relevant current events about a proliferating "authoritarian virus". There is truly a great deal to be concerned about. The issues begin in our neighbourhood and extend to the furthest corners of the world – seen from our perspective. Positive developments can easily fade into the background, but they do exist as well. And when one takes the long view, not everything looks quite as bleak as it may appear at first blush: in 1963, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung began its international work in Venezuela, Chile and Brazil – but it would take until 1989 for the first office to be opened in Central/Eastern Europe; and it was not until the middle of the nineteen-nineties that the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung was able to begin working in former communist countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia, as well as the People's Republic of China. Even in a country like Mexico, it took until 2000 for an opposition party to win for the first time at national level. Sometimes it takes enormous perseverance – and there can be setbacks along the way.

Care should also be taken to differentiate and not pigeonhole all manifestations of authoritarian conduct. After all, it does make a difference whether we are dealing with a totalitarian system that operates with extreme brutality – "authoritarian" would almost be a euphemism here – or with a fundamentally democratic country from which alarming signals emanate indicating that civil liberties are being curtailed. Current developments fall at various points between these two poles.

It is also worthwhile to take a look at the reasons, justifications and motives for various forms of conduct. We tend to consider the status the debate on values has reached in Germany to be the norm and pillory for the democratic deficits or lack of human rights of countries that may not – yet – have come as far. Not all states around the world will, for instance, want to accept the statements of the current red-red-green Berlin coalition agreement on gender issues as the norm. You don't need to be of advanced age to remember a time when homosexuality was criminalised in our country as well, a situation that now elicits talk of compensation. Discussions on family politics were also based on a completely different understanding of people's roles not so very long ago, and a message from the church pulpit still carried some weight. Not everywhere does the balance between individual and community interests lean as clearly towards the individual's right to self-development as in our country. And it is most definitely not true that everything that seems conservative and not much in tune with today's zeitgeist is somehow undemocratic. It is no wonder that new complexities are making many people feel insecure because they long for clear structures, feel some nostalgia for the past and find refuge among those who promise them "peace and order" – here in Germany and particularly in countries where things don't develop at as frenetic a pace as in modern industrialised and service societies.

We are also finding out once again that in turbulent times the national state, which had mistakenly been considered a thing of the past in Western Europe, is seen as a protector and a lifeline, and that national pride is not frowned upon everywhere as it is in "progressive circles" in our country. The statement that dealing with migration in a manner we view as a humane obligation invokes the notion of "moral imperialism" elsewhere may be a mere side note, but it illustrates how not everyone will automatically follow us on our path to what we consider to be the realisation of Western liberal values. That said, it is practically a tradition for most Germans not to mind almost everyone else having a different opinion from their own.

All the more important, then, to bring our values into the debate – the speeches people give on our behalf at prominent forums do not, in fact, always spell these out. The right approach requires people to have a clearly coordinated system for their own values; even the oft-cited dialogue of cultures can

only be conducted by those who know at least their own culture. The ease with which value systems based on religion are dismissed as outdated makes Europe an exception among world regions – some would say pioneers – but who knows: maybe there will be something of a religious renaissance here as people search for orientation and certainties, at the latest via the burgeoning immigrant communities. That does not obviate advocating for a clear separation of Church and state, different versions of which developed in Europe over the centuries. Religious freedom is a great good that must be defended vigorously throughout the world. It is shocking to see religious fanaticism gaining ground, suppression and even manslaughter being justified in the name of God. It is crucial to build a worldwide coalition for tolerance in this regard: there are perpetrators and victims in all religions, although the picture is currently dominated particularly by Islamist terror.

The most difficult states to deal with are of course those that invoke ultimate religious truths to justify their actions, leave the last word to religious authorities, punish "deviants" rigorously and make concerted efforts to also enforce their norms in other countries. In most cases they too have signed the UN Human Rights Charter and regularly sit on the United Nations Human Rights Council – sufficient cause not to refrain from issuing robust reminders of their obligations under the charter.

Courageous people in such systems deserve special solidarity from us; efforts should be made to strengthen the usually poorly developed civil society and especially young people as the drivers of change; many of them still pin their hopes on "the West", although they have experienced many disappointments, not least the tendency of the West to treat undemocratic regimes they regard as allies with considerably greater indulgence than those they see more as enemies, undermining its credibility. This conduct may be referred to as "realpolitik", but it is ultimately not fruitful. Stability and democracy are not opposites – and the former is not furthered by brutal repression, the most likely outcome of which will be to breed the terrorists of the next generation. Simply abandoning efforts to promote democracy, participation and transparency in the short term for the sake of superficial stability is not an acceptable approach, particularly for a democratic political foundation.

There remains, however, the question as to the means available to achieve change and make a difference – measures differ greatly in their effectiveness. In many cases, it is not the vociferous public declaration that brings about a change in behaviour, although it is mostly not very helpful either to beat about the bush with respect to one's differences. However, speaking one's mind requires trust and open channels of communication. Authoritarian regimes tend to interpret an exceedingly kid glove approach as weakness. Being too deferential will not gain any respect – and therefore ultimately prevent achieving one's goal of making an impact. As is well-known, it is not just "Western" democracies that have interests: Europe, the USA, Japan and several others are still the largest donors of public development aid, provide great proportions of the funding for international organisations, form part of the most interesting markets, invest worldwide, offer technology transfer, and, thanks to the openness of their universities and scientific communities, are essential to innovation, which in turn can only flourish in the long term in free societies. One should also add that their financial system is a refuge for flight capital from all over the world and that their property markets attract those who do not yet trust the "rule of law" in their home country, although this can only be considered a positive thing with reservations. But surely it can be used to an advantage!

Of course it would be helpful if there was a degree of unity in the approach taken by democratic countries instead of opportunistically seeking short-term benefits from bilateral deals as is seen all too frequently, particularly when dealing with economically attractive "partners". And, naturally, one has to practice what one preaches, for example as a member of the "Community of Values" that the EU represents.

Orange – the colour of hope: "Descriptions of 'colour revolutions' as being controlled from outside or denouncements of the 'Arab Spring' revolutions as Western conspiracies are defensive declarations, intended to politicise the situation." Source: © Gleb Garanich, Reuters.

The EU in particular cannot afford to fail meeting its own standards and must keep a keen eye on problematic tendencies among its own members. It does have the tools to do so in principle, as, by the way, does the Council of Europe with its Venice Commission. It could prove fatal to create the impression that once the criteria for accession were fulfilled, a country would then be free to ignore the common values and dismiss any admonitions as external interference – in some cases combined with the sort of EU-bashing that is more likely to undermine the community than foster it. However, the relevant actors should also avoid applying double standards, widening gulfs unnecessarily and treating friends roughly or condescendingly, sometimes more roughly than those who would clearly be more deserving of such treatment.

"Western values", the Western lifestyle, Western culture still exert an enormous attraction, as is illustrated impressively in the destination

countries of the current migration. The over five hundred experts responding to the Global Future Survey of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung even expect the Western-liberal idea to gain ground in almost all parts of the world in the-coming years. These expectations provide some hope particularly for Africa and Latin America, and positive voices are also in the majority in Asia. The fact that Europe is the only region the experts view with scepticism provides food for thought: Is this very continent, on which many people around the world are pinning their hopes, in trouble? Is there a certain fatigue affecting its aging societies? Are policies once again driven by a sense of panic resulting from lengthy economic crises in the continent's south, are Central and Eastern European countries suffering identity issues, are there concerns regarding the ability to master the current challenges that have arisen due to the migration? No doubt it is worth looking into these questions in greater detail, but there also needs to be a certain level of self-confidence: Europe is stronger than it maybe believes itself – as long as it combines forces, strengthens its institutions and intensifies cooperation particularly in areas where it matters. The continent will need to project an image of a successful and attractive region not least economically if it wants to be heard in the debate on values. Attractive countries attract imitators, good examples make an impact!

And that is precisely what authoritarian systems of all types view as a threat, especially as new information channels and social networks make isolationism and censorship considerably more difficult, if not impossible. Descriptions of "colour revolutions" as being controlled from outside or denouncements of the "Arab Spring" revolutions as Western conspiracies are defensive declarations, intended to politicise the situation. The pressure for change comes from within: the affected systems are simply not attractive for their citizens, least of all for young people who still have their lives ahead of them and wish to shape their own destinies. The failure of these states to offer their citizens prospects of economic development is exacerbated by the stifling atmosphere created by excessive state control in all areas. At some point in time, the pressure in the pressure cooker becomes too high, particularly when there are no safety valves such as those available in Western democracies.

In this situation, it is a sign of weakness when a state attempts to restrict the activities of civil society with ever more NGO laws and regulations. One of the measures these states use is to restrict international aid and tar it with the brush of "foreign agency" – the opportunities of domestic funding are usually already blocked, and there is hardly any public support for a living, pluralistic range of NGOs – or at least brand such activities as inadmissible external interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state. It is amazing to see such arguments being accepted here in Germany as well and serious politicians occasionally comparing political foundations to Islamist sects. There is most definitely a need to enlighten people on the role of civil societies! Of course it is legitimate for environmental movements to network globally, for anti-corruption networks to collaborate across borders, and for likeminded political parties to jointly promote their values.

In line with its partner principle, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, for instance, picks up on local concerns, seeks out a community of values, takes local interests seriously, and does not simply attempt to export German models all over the world. It wishes to act as a dialogue partner, offer its services, and in turn learn from its experiences in other countries and take these experiences back into the German debate, an approach that is pursued by many organisations of German International Cooperation. Without this exchange systems are at risk of suffocating.

This is no argument in favour of doing away with rules; there are laws here as well, of course. But it is often not helpful to equate our experiences and terminology with those formally similar in other countries. To give a current example: a presidential system of government is not necessarily worse than a parliamentary system, and there are, of course, plenty of democratic

presidential systems. Therefore, the matter requires closer examination: if a presidential system concentrates all the power in one person, fails to implement the separation of powers, undermines the independence of the judiciary, then the situation gets dangerous. Authoritarian regimes invoke the latter in particular, but the fundamental requirements are frequently not met. There is no truly independent jurisdiction – and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has experienced this itself in Egypt.

It is not for nothing that the five regional rule of law programs of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung form a key component of its efforts to promote democracy and good governance. Authoritarian states tend to put on a show of upholding the rule of law – and regularly succeed in duping foreign observers – as is currently in evidence in the unedifying conflict in Venezuela between the democratically legitimised parliament and the regime-controlled Supreme Court. Laws with partly identical wording can have totally different consequences depending on the circumstances. In some countries, anti-terror laws are interpreted in such a way that the voicing of any opinion deviating from the regime line can be criminalised – it can be a very short path from being a journalist doing investigative reporting to being a spy or even a supporter of terrorism. There are also laws in almost all countries intended to protect individuals' honour. But the way they are interpreted arbitrarily in some countries, they become an instrument for suppressing press freedom completely, at the latest by the time the imposed – totally disproportionate – financial penalties have ruined people's livelihoods. And when all that does not silence a person, there is always the option of having a compliant tax authority carry out a tax fraud investigation. Then, someone will disappear in a penal camp for alleged tax offences, and the naïve foreigner may think: Well, you should be honest in your tax affairs, the case probably has nothing to do with politics.

Freedom of the press and journalists being allowed to carry out their work are generally good indicators of the level of democratic development in a country – and things look decidedly bleak based on the statistics of "Reporters Without Borders" or Freedom House. Whenever press freedom is curtailed, so is the right of mature citizens to freely obtain information from pluralistic sources and to form their own opinions, a prerequisite of a functioning democracy. This is where the regional media programmes of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung come in, since investigative journalism and data-driven journalism are important means to ensure transparency and to make democracy possible and better today. Once again: closer examination is needed to detect manipulations in state-controlled "journalism", to identify campaigns, and to denounce attempts at interference. In many cases, states that restrict freedom of information severely at home are all too eager to take advantage of all the opportunities to engage in unhindered "public relations" abroad.

Self-assured states would be able to deal with criticism confidently; autocrats who feel threatened try to buy time by resorting to repression where efforts to co-opt and manipulate are no longer effective. But even this is not deterring many people, especially younger ones, from once again taking to the streets to demand their rights, denounce injustices and insist on change. The desire for freedom is innate to humans – and it cannot be suppressed forever.

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