

Challenges of Democratization

Dr. Tom G. Palmer
Senior Fellow
Cato Institute
tpalmer@cato.org

Introducing, consolidating, and maintaining democracy is not an easy task. Like all the good things in life, democracy faces many challenges. But they can all be overcome. Very importantly, we can learn from the experiences of others who have emerged from lawless dictatorship and tyranny to constitutional democracy.

1. The Challenge of Expectations

Expectations Too High: If expectations are unrealistically high and people expect that democracy will automatically deliver prosperity, health, education, and the other good things of life, they will become disappointed and support for democracy will drop. Democracy is not magic. Having a democracy does not guarantee instant wealth, health, or happiness. All that democracy can guarantee is the right to “the *pursuit* of happiness.” It cannot guarantee the achievement of happiness, or even good fortune. Those must be earned by effort in a law-governed and just society in which the rewards to effort are protected by law, and not confiscated by the injustice of the powerful.

Expectations Too Low: If expectations are too low, if people expect and accept unfair elections, illegal and unjust behavior by government officials, and violent exploitation by the police, then they will resign themselves to living with the outward form of democracy but without its substance. For democracy to be successful, citizens must expect as a matter of course that judges, governors, city councilors, mayors, members of parliament, presidents, ministers, and police officers will act in accordance with the law. In a corrupt and non-democratic state, the citizens are surprised when government officials act *legally*. In a law-governed democratic state, the citizens are surprised when government officials act *illegally*.

Realistic expectations are a key element to consolidating democracy and making it stable. If people expect magical outcomes, they will be disappointed and they will abandon democracy. On the other hand, if they do not expect just behavior from government officials and fair elections, they may not be disappointed, but they will certainly not long enjoy democracy.

2. The Challenge of Honor

It is important that honorable men and women come to understand that it is more honorable to accept a defeat in a fair election – in a law-governed democratic state – than to refuse to accept the outcome and to fight against it with weapons. In many societies

emerging into democracy it is difficult for people who have been opponents or who believe strongly in their causes to accept that the other side may fairly win an election. It may be hard to learn that there is more honor in accepting the results of a constitutional process than in challenging it by force. The status of the “loyal opposition” is an honorable one. The loyal opposition may someday become the government and when that happens the current government will show their commitment to honor by becoming the loyal opposition. What is dishonorable is rejecting the outcome of a fair election in a constitutional democratic state..

The honorableness of democracy is made easier to achieve when it is widely understood that to lose an election is not to lose everything, because a constitutional democracy protects the rights to life, liberty, and property and makes it possible for the honorable and loyal opposition of today to become the government in a future election.

3. The Challenge of Pluralism

Theories of democracy that are based on claims about the “will of the nation” are almost always doomed to failure. A nation may be made up of many individuals, families, tribes, religious communities, towns, regions, and ethnic groups. A nation is not like one person, who may have one decided opinion about something. A nation will contain within itself many opinions about many important matters, and not all of them will agree. If a democratic state tries to insist on uniformity in too many things, the nation will find itself divided against itself. There will be conflict, and that conflict may even become violent.

It is important that the issues to be decided by democratic processes be limited if democracy is to be harmonious and stable. In a stable constitutional democracy many issues are not decided by democratic elections, but are reserved to the free choices of individuals and groups, whose rights are protected by the constitution.

Constitutionally protected liberties are especially important in nations with “permanent minorities,” such as small ethnic or religious groups. If they think that they can never become a majority capable of winning an election, *and* that their most basic rights will be taken away if they are in the minority, then they may be so alienated from the democratic process that they may resort to violence. Freedom of religion, freedom to choose to cover one’s hair or not, freedom to speak one’s language of choice, and freedom to assemble with others without fear of arrest or harassment: all those are protected in the Constitution of a democratic state and are not affected by the changing outcomes of majority decisions.

There is no one “will of the nation,” but many different wills, views, interests, and opinions. One must beware of the politician who claims that there is a will of the nation and that he (or she) is its only legitimate voice. If it were ever meaningful to speak of the “will of the nation,” it would only be in reference to the Constitution itself, and not to any particular leader or to any particular decision on a matter of

policy. The Constitution itself, including its protections of rights, is the measure of the unity of the nation.

4. The Challenge of Justice

Especially in pluralistic societies with strong ethnic, religious, familial, tribal, or linguistic variety, there is a danger that democracy may be perverted into an instrument of injustice. Some politicians may blame national problems on other groups, quite often minorities, and then demand that the state take their wealth and punish them. Opportunistic and unjust politicians may demand that the goods of some be redistributed to their own supporters. The state may be reduced to an instrument of plunder. In such a state, no one's life, liberty, or property will be safe; the group that wins today and plunders all the others may lose tomorrow and lose all that they had gained – and even more. Everyone loses in the long run. By limiting the actions of the state to the provision of justice, and not considering state policy as a means of rewarding political support and punishing opposition, a constitutional democratic state creates the conditions for prosperity for all.

By attempting to rob from some to give to others, a state merely creates universal poverty, except, of course, for those who manage to gain supreme power, and who never lack for palaces and expensive cars. The defense of justice against aggression and violence must be the primary concern of the state. When the state itself becomes an instrument of aggression and violence, democracy itself is in danger.