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Freedom Favors Development

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HARVARD -- Something of a "general theory" of the relationship between political liberty and economic prosperity has been articulated in recent years by that unlikely theorist Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore. He is not alone in praising the supposed advantages of "the hard state" in promoting economic development that goes back a long way in the development literature. Even the sagacious Gunnar Myrdal's extensive skepticism, in Asian Drama, of what he called "the soft state" has sometimes been interpreted (rather unfairly to Myrdal) as a celebration of political toughness in the cause of good economics.

It is true that some relatively authoritarian states (such as Lee's Singapore, South Korea under military rule and, more recently, China) have had faster rates of economic growth than some less authoritarian states (such as India, Costa Rica and Jamaica). But the overall picture is much more complex than such isolated observations might suggest.

Systematic statistical studies give little support to the view of a general conflict between civil rights and economic performance. In fact, scholars such as Partha Dasgupta, Abbas Pourgerami and Surjit Bhalla have offered substantial evidence to suggest that political and civil rights have a positive impact on economic progress. Other scholars find divergent patterns, while still others argue, in the words of John Helliwell, that on the basis of the information so far obtained "an optimistic interpretation of the overall results would thus be that democracy, which apparently has a value independent of its economic effects, is estimated to be available at little cost in terms of subsequent lower growth."

There is not much comfort in all these findings for the "Lee Kuan Yew hypothesis" that there exists an essential conflict between political rights and economic performance. The general thesis in praise of the tough state suffers not only from casual empiricism based on a few selected examples, but also from a lack of conceptual discrimination. Political and civil rights come in various types, and authoritarian intrusions take many forms. It would be a mistake, for example, to equate North Korea with South Korea in the infringement of political rights, even though both have violated many such rights.

The complete suppression of opposition parties in the North can hardly be taken to be no more repressive than the roughness with which opposition parties have been treated in the South. Some authoritarian regimes, both of the "left" and of the "right," such as Zaire or Sudan or Ethiopia or the Khmer Rouge's Cambodia, have been enormously more hostile to political rights than many other regimes that are also identified, rightly, as authoritarian.

It is also necessary to examine more rigorously the causal process that is supposed to underlie these generalizations about the impact of authoritarianism on prosperity.

The processes that led to the economic success of, say, South Korea are now reasonably well understood. A variety of factors played a part, including the use of international markets, an openness to competition, a high level of literacy, successful land reforms and the provision of selective incentives to encourage growth and exports. There is nothing to indicate that these economic and social policies were inconsistent with greater democracy, that they had to be sustained by the elements of authoritarianism actually present in South Korea.

The fundamental importance of political rights is not refuted by some allegedly negative effect of these rights on economic performance. In fact, the instrumental connections may even give a very positive role to political rights in the context of deprivations of a drastic and elementary kind: whether, and how, a government responds to intense needs and sufferings may well depend on how much pressure is put on it, and whether or not pressure is put on it will depend on the exercise of political rights such as voting, criticizing and protesting.

Consider the matter of famine. I have tried to argue elsewhere that the avoidance of such economic disasters as famines is made much easier by the existence, and the exercise, of various liberties and political rights, including the liberty of free expression. Indeed, one of the remarkable facts in the terrible history of famine is that no substantial famine has ever occurred in a country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press. They have occurred in ancient kingdoms and in contemporary authoritarian societies, in primitive tribal communities and in modern technocratic dictatorships, in colonial economies governed by imperialists from the north and in newly independent countries of the south run by despotic national leaders or by intolerant single parties. But famines have never afflicted any country that is independent, that goes to elections regularly, that has opposition parties to voice criticisms, that permits newspapers to report freely and to question the wisdom of government policies without extensive censorship.

VOTING AND FAMINE

Is this historical association between the absence of famine and the presence of political freedom a causal one, or is it simply an accidental connection? The possibility that the connection between democratic political rights and the absence of famine is a "bogus correlation" may seem plausible when one considers the fact that democratic countries are typically rather rich, and thus immune to famine for other reasons. But the absence of famine holds even for those democratic countries that happen to be poor, such as India, Botswana and Zimbabwe.

There is also what we might call "intertemporal evidence," which we observe when a country undergoes a transition to democracy. Thus India continued to have famines right up to the time of independence in 1947; the last famine, and one of the largest, was the Bengal famine of 1943, in which it is estimated that between 2 million and 3 million people died. Since independence, however, and the installation of a multiparty democratic system, there has been no substantial famine, even

though severe crop failures and food scarcities have occurred often enough (in 1968, 1973, 1979 and 1987).

Why might we expect a general connection between democracy and the nonoccurrence of famines? The answer is not hard to find. Famines kill millions of people in different countries in the world, but they do not kill the rulers. The kings and the presidents, the bureaucrats and the bosses, the military leaders and the commanders never starve. And if there are no elections, no opposition parties, no forums for uncensored public criticism, then those in authority do not have to suffer the political consequences of their failure to prevent famine. Democracy, by contrast, would spread the penalty of famine to the ruling groups and the political leadership.

There is, moreover, the issue of information. A free press, and more generally the practice of democracy, contributes greatly to bringing out the information that can have an enormous impact on policies for famine prevention, such as facts about the early effects of droughts and floods, and about the nature and the results of unemployment. The most elementary source of basic information about a threatening famine is the news media, especially when there are incentives, which a democratic system provides, for revealing facts that may be embarrassing to the government, facts that an undemocratic regime would tend to censor. Indeed, I would argue that a free press and an active political opposition constitute the best "early warning system" that a country threatened by famine can possess.

MAO'S MISSING LINKS

The connection between political rights and economic needs can be illustrated in the specific context of famine prevention by considering the massive Chinese famines of 1958-61. Even before the recent economic reforms, China had been much more successful than India in economic development. The average life expectancy, for example, rose in China much more than it did in India, and well before the reforms of 1979 it had already reached something like the high figure -- nearly 70 years at birth -- that is quoted now. And yet China was not able to prevent famine. It is now estimated that the Chinese famines of 1958-61 killed close to 30 million people -- 10 times more than even the gigantic 1943 famine in British India.

The so-called "Great Leap Forward," initiated in the late 1950s, was a massive failure, but the Chinese government refused to admit it and continued dogmatically to pursue much the same disastrous policies for three more years. It is hard to imagine that this could have happened in a country that goes to the polls regularly and has an independent press. During that terrible calamity, the government faced no pressure from newspapers, which were controlled, or from opposition parties, which were not allowed to exist.

The lack of a free system of news distribution even misled the government itself. It believed its own propaganda and the rosy reports of local party officials competing for credit in Beijing. Indeed, there is evidence that just as the famine was moving toward its peak, the Chinese authorities mistakenly believed that they had 100

million more metric tons of grain than they actually did. Interestingly enough, Mao himself, whose radical beliefs had much to do with the initiation of, and the perseverance with, the Great Leap Forward, identified the informational role of democracy, once the failure was belatedly acknowledged. In 1962, just after the famine had killed so many millions, he made the following observation to a gathering of 7,000 cadres:

Without democracy, you have no understanding of what is happening down below; the situation will be unclear; you will be unable to collect sufficient opinions from all sides; there can be no communication between top and bottom; top-level organs of leadership will depend on one-sided and incorrect material to decide issues, thus you will find it difficult to avoid being subjectivist; it will be impossible to achieve unity of understanding and unity of action, and impossible to achieve true centralism.

Mao's defense of democracy here is quite limited. The focus is exclusively on the informational side, ignoring the incentive role of democracy, not to mention any intrinsic importance that it may have. Still, it is significant that Mao himself acknowledged the extent to which disastrous official policies were caused by the lack of the informational links that a more democratic system could have provided.

These issues remain relevant in China today. Since the economic reforms of 1979, official Chinese policies have been based on the acknowledgment of the importance of economic incentives without a similar acknowledgment of the importance of political incentives. When things go reasonably well, the disciplinary role of democracy might not be greatly missed; but when big policy mistakes are made, this lacuna can be quite disastrous. The significance of the democracy movements in contemporary China has to be judged in this light.

AFRICAN DISASTERS

Another set of examples comes from sub-Saharan Africa, which has been plagued by persistent famine since the early 1970s. There are many factors underlying the susceptibility of this region to famine, from the ecological impact of climatic deterioration -- making crops more uncertain -- to the negative effects of persistent wars and skirmishes. But the typically authoritarian nature of many of the sub-Saharan African polities also has something to do with the frequency of famine.

The nationalist movements were all anti-colonialist, but they were not all pro-democratic, and it is only recently that the assertion of the value of democracy has achieved some political respectability in many of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. And in this political milieu the Cold War did not help at all. The United States and its allies were ready to support undemocratic governments if they were sufficiently anti-Communist, no matter how anti-egalitarian they might have been in their domestic policies. The Soviet Union and China, of course, also did not recoil from authoritarian regimes. When opposition parties were banned and newspapers were suppressed, there were very few international protests.

One must not deny that there were African governments, even in one-party states, that were deeply concerned about averting disasters and famine. Examples of this range from the tiny country of Cape Verde to the politically experimental nation of Tanzania. But quite often the absence of opposition and the suppression of free newspapers gave the respective governments an immunity from social criticism and political pressure that translated into thoroughly insensitive and callous policies.

Often famines were taken for granted, and it was common to put the blame for the disasters on natural causes and the perfidy of other countries. In various ways, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Chad, several of the Sahel countries and others provide glaring examples of how badly things can go wrong without the discipline of opposition parties and the news media. The way toward the Somali crisis was prepared by decades of intolerance, authoritarianism and a general undermining of orderly political processes.

This is not to deny that famines in these countries were often associated with crop failures: When a crop fails, it not only affects the food supply, it also destroys employment and the means of livelihood. But the occurrence of crop failures is not independent of public policies (such as governmental fixing of relative prices, policy regardingirrigation and agricultural research and so on). Moreover, even when crops fail, a famine can be averted by a careful redistribution policy. Botswana, for example, experienced a fall in food production of 17 percent, and Zimbabwe a fall of 38 percent, between 1979-81 and 1983-84, in the same period in which the decline in food production amounted to a relatively modest II percent or 12 percent in Sudan and Ethiopia. Sudan and Ethiopia, with comparatively smaller declines in food output, had major famines. Botswana and Zimbabwe had none. The happy outcome in the latter countries was largely the result of timely and extensive famine-prevention policies by these latter countries. And democracy, which included a relatively uncensored press, made such policies imperative. For had the governments in Botswana and Zimbabwe failed to do this, they would have come under severe criticism from the political opposition. The Ethiopian and Sudanese governments, by contrast, did not have to reckon with such democratic inconveniences.

SOME QUALIFICATIONS

In making such arguments, of course, there is the danger of exaggerating the effectiveness of democracy. Political rights and liberties are permissive advantages, and their effectiveness depends on how they are exercised. Democracies have been particularly successful in preventing disasters that are easy to understand, in which sympathy can take an especially immediate form. Many other problems are not quite so accessible. Thus India's success in eradicating famine is not matched by a similar success in eliminating non-extreme hunger, or in curing persistent illiteracy, or in relieving inequalities in gender relations. While the plight of famine victims is easy to politicize, these other deprivations call for deeper analysis, and

for greater and more effective use of mass communication and political participation -- in sum, for a further practice of democracy.

A similar observation may be made about various failings in more mature democracies as well. For example, the extraordinary deprivations in health care, education and social environment of African Americans in the US make their mortality rates exceptionally high. American blacks have low survival chances to old age not only compared with American whites, but also compared with the citizens of China, Sri Lanka or the Indian state of Kerala, who are better provided with these public goods (despite being immensely poorer in per capita income). And some American blacks are even more deprived than others; the male residents of Harlem not only have lower survival chances than the corresponding groups in Kerala or Sri Lanka or China, they even fall behind Bangladeshi men by their late 30s.

But, again, the remedy of these failures in the practice of democracy turns, to a great extent, on the fuller use of political and civil rights, including more public discussion, more accessible information and more concrete proposals. To be sure, the difficulties in deciding on the means of eradicating these hardened deprivations remain. Still, the fact that the lack of medical care for many has become more prominent in the politics of the United States is what lends the matter some urgency, what directs new energy toward the solution of the problem. And the same grounds for hope would be true in the case of the poorer countries as well.

MINORITY RIGHTS

It is important to acknowledge, however, the special difficulty of making a democracy take adequate notice of some types of deprivation, particularly the needs of minorities. One factor of some importance is the extent to which a minority group in a particular society can build on sympathy rather than alienation. When a minority forms a highly distinct and particularist group, it can be harder for it to receive the sympathy of the majority, and then the protective role of democracy may be particularly constrained.

Consider the ineffectiveness of electoral politics in ensuring sensitivity to the rights and the welfare of separatist groups, particularly those groups that are tainted with some use of terrorist methods and with receiving assistance from beyond the border. Illustrations are not hard to find in India, particularly in the case of Kashmir, where there is increasing evidence of the violation of civil rights and personal liberties by the Indian police and military. The frustration of the Kashmiris does not seem to influence the political behavior of the majority of Indians. Even India's large Muslim population, which numbers well over 100 million, does not appear to have much interest in working for the rights of the relatively tiny Muslim population of Kashmir. There is also a basic tension between the separatism of Kashmiri Muslim activists and the deep-seated integrationist beliefs of the immensely larger Muslim population in the rest of the country.

In the rather straitjacketed models of so-called "rational choice theory," which tend to characterize human beings as narrowly self-interested, it is hard to incorporate

the satisfaction of minority needs through majority votes. To some extent this skepticism is justified. Even the plight of African Americans has something to do with the fact that blacks constitute a relatively small minority of the American population. And yet politics does not always operate in this way. Much depends on which issues are identified and politicized and made into a concern of those who are not directly involved.

Potential famine victims form a small minority in any country (a famine rarely affects more than 5 percent, and at most 10 percent, of a population), and the effectiveness of democracy in the prevention of famine has tended to depend on the politicization of the plight of famine victims, through the process of public discussion, which generates political solidarity. Outrage at famine deaths moves vast numbers of people who are in no way threatened by starvation themselves.

POPULATION AND FREEDOM

Among the developing countries, China has distinguished itself in its use of coercion to cut down the growth rate of its population, in some regions by means of such measures as a "one-child policy," and more generally by the conditioning of social security and economic rights (such as housing) on adherence to the government's rules about the number of births, the terrible predicament of children in larger families notwithstanding. There are many admirers of such harsh policies and China's success in fertility reduction is often cited as an argument for coercion. The birth rate in China has certainly come down; it is now around 19 per 1,000, which is considerably lower than India's 29 per 1,000 and the average figure of 37 per 1,000 for poor countries other than India and China.

Within India, however, there are wide variations in the birth rate, and these variations relate both to rates of mortality and to education, especially to female education. Consider the state of Kerala, which, with a population close to 30 million people, is rather larger than Canada. Kerala has the highest life expectancy in India (more than 70 years, in fact 74 years for women, considerably higher than China's), the highest rate of literacy in general, and the highest rate of female literacy (higher than that of China as a whole and higher than that of every province in China). The birth rate in Kerala has fallen sharply over the last few decades, from 44 per 1,000 in the 1950s to 18 per 1,000 by 1991. This birth rate, lower than China's, has not been achieved by compulsory birth control or by the violation of the individual's freedom to decide on these matters, but by the voluntary exercise of the family's right to family planning.

Indeed, when China introduced the policy of "one-child family" and other measures of compulsion in 1979, Kerala had a total fertility rate (roughly the number of children per couple) of 3.0, while China's fertility rate was 2.8. Between then and the early 1990s, the fertility rate in China fell from 2.8 to 2.0, while that in Kerala declined from 3.0 to 1.8, ending up as much below China's fertility rate as it had been above it in 1979. Compulsion did not help China to have a faster fall in fertility rate than cooperation did in Kerala -- quite the contrary.

The change in Kerala is owed in part to the operation of economic and social incentives toward smaller families, as the death rate has fallen and family-planning opportunities have been combined with health care. But it is also influenced by a general perception that the lowering of the birth rate is a real need of a modern family; and this perception would not have been possible without public education (especially of women) and enlightened discussion. The emergence of a resolute desire by Keralan women to be less shackled by continuous child-rearing is part of the process of the free formation of values and priorities.

The temptation to impose compulsory birth control arises when the government's view of needs differs from the views of the families themselves. Such a disjunction can lead to deeply disturbing results. Thus, while China has ended up with a birth rate only a little higher than the birth rate of Kerala, one result of official coercion in China has been a much higher level of mortality among female children, quite unlike the situation in Kerala. The traditional "son preference" seems often to have led to extreme responses in China to compulsory birth control measures, including an increase in female infanticide and in the differential neglect of female children. These horrors must be counted among the consequences of a closed society in which the reduction in the birth rate is achieved without an open and educated discussion of personal and economic needs.

While China and Kerala had similar figures of infant mortality in 1979, by the early 1990s Kerala's infant mortality rates (per 1,000) had fallen to 17 for boys and 16 for girls, but those rates for China became 28 for boys and 33 for girls. The generally higher rate of infant mortality in China (not just for girls but especially for them) were partly the result of coercive family-planning policies.

Political rights are important not only for the fulfillment of needs, they are crucial also for the formulation of needs. And this idea relates, in the end, to the respect that we owe each other as fellow human beings. In Taking Leave, William Cobbett observed that "we now frequently hear the working classes called 'the population,' just as we call animals upon a farm 'the stock.'" The importance of political rights for the understanding of economic needs turns ultimately on seeing human beings as people with rights to exercise, not as parts of a "stock" or a "population" that passively exists and must be looked after. What matters, finally, is how we see each other.

Added material

AMARTYA SEN THE FOLLOWING PIECE IS AN UPDATED AND REVISED VERSION OF A PAPER, "FREEDOMS AND NEEDS" THAT ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN The New Republic.