

Tienanmin Square

John Hyde

A year from the Tienanmen Square massacre the West still has little idea how to react to that huge repressive regime that is China. Most ordinary, ignorant, decent Western citizens are horrified by the bloody repression of kids who only asked for democracy. But Europeans forget their own history and forget that murder is the stock in trade of all totalitarian governments.

Indeed, the murder of a mere thousand or so is small beer by the standards of Communist states in general. I don't know a Tibetan, but, if I did, I imagine he would be rather cynical about the fuss the West is making over Tienanmen Square, when it has largely ignored the slaughter of his countrymen. It seems that Western TV watchers don't mind mass murder so long as it does not disturb their viewing. And I am sure the Beijing regime has resolved that next time it will not be filmed.

More thoughtful TV watchers may wonder why such government-inspired murders do not occur in Hong Kong or in Taiwan. It is not because these Chinese states are fully-fledged democracies. While it is true that no democratic state is as murderous as the average totalitarian regime, plainly, more than democracy distinguishes tyrannies from relatively benign governments. Democratic rules won't stop a government that feels no other reason not to kill a thousand or more inconvenient youths---why not kill as many inconvenient electoral officials. And, obviously, totalitarian regimes don't fall over whenever a few people shout at them---not in Beijing in 1989, in Budapest in 1956, nor in Prague in 1968.

Totalitarians give up only when the cost of power becomes too high. This is what happened in Eastern Europe in 1989. With the withdrawal of Russian support, the regimes lost the ability to murder their opponents without starting a civil war---and that they might lose. The situation in China now is not similar; nor is it in the Soviet Union.

The market for power, like the market for anything else, however, has a demand as well as a supply side. It is true that when unpopular Governments start to run out of ammunition they become more likely to abdicate peaceably. However, they are also more likely to cede power peaceably if they won't lose everything by doing so. Defeated western democratic politicians, who do not lose their honour, their fortunes and certainly not their lives, leave office with nothing more dangerous than a few grizzles and their pensions. Neither do their supporters lose much. Indeed, when political supporters gain privileges such as those enjoyed by party members in communist states, we describe our politics as 'corrupt'--that was what was wrong with WA Inc., the white shoe brigade, etc..

Thus enduring democracy is possible only in societies which enjoy the other liberal characteristics. People naturally form associations with those politically-effective groups that they feel will serve their interests. These groups may be formed around ideology---the British Labour Party; race---the parties in Fiji; culture---the French Canadians; geographic location---the National Party in Australia; religion---as in Ireland; or something else. A characteristic which they have in common is that members will defend group interests with passion and with blood. Democracy can work only when the losers don't lose too much. Only then will people support the democratic system in spite of losing.

What is more, there is nothing inherently right about majoritarian decisions. Indeed, with hindsight we often change our minds about them. Further, majorities can sometimes be very hard on those minorities who are consistent losers such as the aborigines of fifty years ago and the severely physically or mentally handicapped of today.

Members of losing interests, who feel that they are losing too much, and who are able to organise, are more than willing to toss democratically-arrived-at rules out of the window. Potential conscriptees for the Vietnam war provided an Australian example of this fact. They set out to end conscription by making a mockery of parliament's vote. The point is that minorities, when they have enough at stake, rightly or wrongly, wisely or unwisely, resort to civil disobedience and worse.

Disobedience often becomes violent---the throwing of petrol bombs in Korea and recent violence in Rumania, Yugoslavia and several Republics of the USSR all testify to this. When substantial minorities feel that they are not fairly treated, particularly as regards economic opportunity, people end up obeying governments only at the points of bayonets, wielded by the ruling clique. Governments which govern by the bayonet and the gun are unlikely for long to feel that they can afford to seek democratic mandates.

One of the prerequisites of democracy is thus a government that does not have to decide who will succeed and who will fail. Democracy works only where an impersonal system, rather than political whim, determines personal fortunes. Only then do losers in the political game accept the outcome. It is no coincidence that there are no long-standing democracies that do not also enjoy the main elements of market capitalism.

The reverse is not wholly true but, as capitalist nations become prosperous, their people demand democracy. What is more, for two reasons, the ruling cliques tend to grant it. First, the old rulers can grant it without losing their fortunes or their lives, and second, a literate middle class that is bent on something is rather hard to stop.

What then should the West do about China? Sanctions such as the Moscow-Olympics boycott don't seem to work.

Surely we should maintain a dialogue of talk, trade, and verbal condemnation (while keeping our powder dry) in the belief that in their search for prosperity the Chinese will gradually establish the preconditions of democracy. The strategy is only partly flawed by the fact that the average Westerner has so little understanding of what makes his own liberal democracy possible that he cannot explain it to a Chinaman. In the meantime the presence of Western Liberal democrats within Chinese borders should give many more Chinese access to the truth about their own government, and do something to discourage wholesale murder.

John Hyde is Executive Director of the Australian Institute for Public Policy

ENDS