2018-03-26

Democracy vs. Liberty: The Telos of Government

Ryan C. Yeazell

Xavier University, Cincinnati, OH

Democracy vs. Liberty: The *Telos* of Government

Ryan Yeazell

HAB Capstone Thesis

Dr. Strunk

March 26, 2018

Introduction

In 2005, after decades of civil war, the people of South Sudan were victorious against the

northern Republic of Sudan and created their own autonomous government. They followed the

modern trend of instituting democratic elections and a presidential system, with a bicameral

legislature and an independent judiciary. The young regime employed all the building blocks of

a modern stable democracy. By 2011, South Sudan declared its full independence from the

Republic of Sudan. The country was admitted to the United Nations and internationally

recognized as Africa's newest state.

But the stability and legitimacy of this auspicious beginning quickly deteriorated. Within

two years, ethnic tensions turned into outright conflict, the President and Vice President led

armies against each other, and all the stability that a democratic regime was expected to offer

was nowhere to be found.

South Sudan's case of democratic failure is not unique. Many countries all over the

world have made attempts to discard an old regime and install a democracy, to varying degrees

of success. Some democratic regimes have brought stable peace to their countries and freedom

to their citizens; others have sputtered out almost instantly, or flipped back and forth between

democratic and authoritarian regimes over the years. Although democracy is currently the most

preferred form of government for its guarantee of mutual peace and stability, its track record

over the past century has been noticeably spotty. South Sudan is only the most recent example

of democracy not meeting expectations; other countries in different regions with different

histories have experienced similar regime collapse accompanied by different disruptive

circumstances.

Why do so many democratic states fail? It is not difficult to find convenient answers specific to South Sudan to explain the collapse of its state. The country's lack of resources and historical ethnic divisions are clearly the immediate causes of the conflict and famine ravaging South Sudan. However, the widespread preference for democracy is based in part on the fact that its institutions should be able to withstand such transient hardships. Perhaps ethnic warfare was inevitable in South Sudan, but the democratic institutions put in place are supposed to be able to weather and maybe even ameliorate such disruptive situations. If this sort of governmental failure was a singular event, then perhaps it could be attributed to a sort of perfect storm of factors that no regime could stand against. Since South Sudan is only one of many such young democracies that have failed soon after their inception, it might be time to look past the specific circumstantial factors and consider whether the democratic institutions themselves might bear some of the fault.

Humanity's preference for democratic institutions is a very recent phenomenon. With only a few exceptions, most governments throughout history have been built around a strict hierarchy of authority that was relatively independent of the general populace. The focus of such government was on maintaining the cohesion of the state, and it was less concerned with respecting the opinions and rights of citizens. With the spread of liberalism and its individualistic view of society, the popularity of a form of government that placed those rights on a pedestal greatly increased. By making the governing hierarchy accountable to the people, democracy provided a simple way to ensure that more attention and care was given to individual citizens of a society.

But did that liberalism come at a price? It would seem that democracy, in focusing attention on the will of the people, may lose some of the ability of previous forms of government

to maintain the cohesion of the state as a whole. Though everyone enjoys the freedom of action allowed by liberal democracy, at some point the act of governing still requires certain people to have the authority to tell others what to do. To compromise, pure democracy is usually tempered into a representative republic, in which officials are ultimately dependent on the voters for their positions, but can operate relatively independently to maintain the state once in office. This republican model seems to succeed in balancing the desire for liberty and the need for authority, and so has become the staple regime type for new countries seeking a state that is both desirable and effective.

The Usual Suspects: Demagoguery and Tyranny of the Majority

Although the election of public officials by the people is intended to give the people a say in how they are governed, such a system places a large burden on the populace to select a good leader. One way in which the populace can fail to select a beneficent leader is by electing a demagogue, a leader who achieves political power through general popularity alone. By appealing to the base concerns of the general population, a demagogue can achieve a large base of support and thus become a highly legitimate leader from a democratic standpoint. But being popular does not necessarily correlate to being a good leader. On the one hand, once in power, demagogues have the opportunity to ignore the pleas of the masses and use their new authority to enact self-serving policies, reducing the liberty of the people in the process. On the other hand, a demagogue might follow through with their popular policy proposals, tearing apart the foundational institutions of the state and reducing its cohesive authority. Both of these are worst case scenarios; there is always the possibility that a populist leader could carefully maintain both the people's freedom and the government's authority. But if a demagogue turns out to be a bad

leader, there is not much that the people can do in response. The leader was very legitimately elected, and the people must wait until the next election cycle to respond to the leader's transgressions.

Another issue of placing the burden of government on the people is that they will attempt to use their political power to serve their own ends. When citizens vote, they have no reason to vote in any way that contradicts their own apparent interest. Since voting operates in such a way that the proposal with the most votes is interpreted as representative of the general desire of the people, those citizens who voted against the proposal have had their political wills essentially nullified. This phenomenon, the tyranny of the majority, can be seen at the level of the legislative assembly as well. In a two-party system, the political party possessing the majority of the seats has almost unchecked power, while the minority party can only vainly express their stances before being voted against every time. On a larger scale, the inherent winner-vs-loser aspect of voting systems creates a situation in which a large class of people can enact policies which exploit a slightly smaller class of people, and the interests of the smaller class can be ignored with impunity.

Demagoguery and the tyranny of the majority are two of the most apparent weaknesses of a democratic system, and democracies throughout history have taken steps to avoid such problems through structural systems of checks and balances. The voting power of factions and individuals can be diluted in various ways, minorities can be protected by bills of rights and proportional representation, and the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers can prevent any single leader or government branch from centralizing large amounts of government authority in themselves. The problems of voting and democratic rule are so evident that nearly

every democratic state has instituted some variation of these checks and balances to prevent such institutional flaws from damaging the democracy.

Yet modern democracies still fail at an alarming rate. Are the institutional checks and balances failing to prevent some of the expected issues with governments based on popular voting? Or is there some other cause of failure outside of the institutional structures themselves?

A Philosophical Consideration of Democratic Failure

To examine these questions, I have decided to analyze several cases of democratic forms of government and determine how well they dealt with the expected problems of voting-based governments and how they were or were not able to maintain the cohesion of such a government.

I will be comparing a few examples of failed modern democracies with arguably history's longest lasting democratic government: the Roman Republic. While longevity does not guarantee an ethically good regime, it does suggest that the regime was able to resist becoming so unbearable that was overthrown by its citizens or so weak that it was toppled by external threats. In this way, longevity can signal an effective balance between government authority and citizens' freedom, and thus it will be used as a measure of a successful regime. Despite the eventual fall of the Republic, its stability over nearly five centuries of existence makes it as close to a success story as can be found in the real world.

Unlike the gradual democratization of many successful modern Western democracies, the Roman Republic transformed particularly suddenly from a monarchy to democracy. The beginnings of many failed modern democracies bear much more resemblance to the sudden birth of the Roman Republic than to the slow introduction of democracy in countries such as America. Though America would be an obvious choice for a case study about democracy and freedom, it

does not fit the particular paradigm that I have chosen to investigate; while Rome and the two failed modern democracies set up democratic institutions practically from scratch, America was built on a foundation laid by centuries of British democratic reforms.

Although separated by over two thousand years of political and philosophical developments, the basic governing structures of both the Republic and modern democracies are remarkably similar, and had to confront similar difficulties. All of the governments in question possessed checks and balances, a mixed constitution, and participation by the citizenry, while dealing with remnants of foreign rule and warring neighboring nations. Yet the modern democratic governments fell apart after no more than a decade or two, while the Roman Republic was able to sustain its institutions for half a millennium. What did the Republic do differently than the modern democracies in its early years that could account for such longevity?

The most relevant differences between the Republic and modern democracies may turn out to be their specific conceptions of liberty and its relevance to democratic institutions. Both make the freedom of the individual a priority of the government, but to different degrees and by different means. In the first two chapters, I will explain how their different approaches to balancing individual liberty and governmental authority allowed the Roman Republic to succeed and several modern democracies to fail as sustainable forms of government.

The final chapter will look back at the issues of democracy through a philosophical lens. Though an overwhelming number of philosophers throughout history have written about the ideas of freedom and democracy, I have chosen to focus on the two thinkers whom I believe are most relevant to my comparison of ancient and modern democracies: Aristotle and John Stuart Mill. Aristotle provides a thorough consideration of government forms in the ancient world, at a time when democracy was not viewed as favorably as it is today. Mill writes at a time when

liberal democracy is just beginning to be recognized as a triumph of human achievement, and he considers such representative government to be the best possible government form. Despite their contrasting historical perspectives, Aristotle and Mill are connected by their belief that the purpose, or *telos*, of government is what determines its success. By looking at various democratic institutions and underlying philosophical theories, this paper will consider the relationship of democracy and freedom with regards to the best form of government.

<u>Chapter One: Roman Liberty</u>

"Quirites, regem create!"

After the death of its founder Romulus, the Roman throne lay empty. With no established plan for succession, the hundred senators decided to split themselves into ten "decuries," with one senator chosen from each decury to wield the power of a king. These ten *interreges* exercised their authority in rotating shifts: each one was granted unlimited power for a span of five days at a time. This distribution of power continued for a full year, but eventually the Roman people began to chafe under what they called a "multiplied slavery, a hundred men made masters instead of one." (Livy, 1.17) In anticipation of the growing discontent, the Senate freely bestowed on the people the power to elect their own king. Livy describes the populace as so grateful for the ability to choose their own monarch that they immediately voted to give such authority back to the Senate.

Under the guidance of the Senate, the Roman monarch continued to be elected by the people for the next several generations. The last popularly-elected king, Tarquinius Priscus, even went so far as to campaign for the position and give stump speeches to earn the favor of the crowd. (Livy, 1.35) This democratic system seems to have been pleasing to the people and an effective form of government for two centuries, until the final king seized his throne by force and without election.

But even when they were under the rule of the benevolent, democratically-elected monarchs, Livy asserts that the Roman people were not free. Their dissatisfaction with the interregnum rule of the decuries may have been a foreshadowing of future desires for freedom, but at the same time, the Roman people wanted to consolidate power into a single person, the opposite of the eventual Republican trend of distributing power. Livy dismisses the people's

petition to restore the unitary monarchy through election as naïve, attributing their desire for election to the fact that they had "not yet experienced the sweetness of liberty." (Livy, 1.17) Livy seems to consider popular elections to be an insufficient instrument of freedom when viewed in relation to some more general and preferable concept of liberty.

The shift from rule by ten unelected *interreges* to rule by a single elected king seems like both a step toward liberty and a step away from it; the Roman people gained the ability to choose who governs them, but lost the distribution of power inherent in the five-day shifts of the *interreges*. Admittedly, the desire for change might have been born out of frustration at the inconstancy of having a different executive leader every week, rather than from a budding desire for political efficacy; as Livy notes, the people were quite willing to renounce their newfound right to vote after the Senate assured them that the unitary monarchy would be restored. Whatever the motivations of the Roman people under the monarchy, the juxtaposition of free elections and a single supreme ruler raises many questions about the Roman concept of liberty and how it was translated into their political institutions.

Two Types of Freedom

After considering the distinctive government of the Roman monarchy, it would seem that there exist two different concepts of freedom which are not mutually necessary. On the one hand, there is the freedom to participate in government. The ability to gain political office, serve on a jury, and have a say in the creation and enforcement of laws are all aspects of this type of freedom. On the other hand, there is freedom from the tyranny of government. Systems of checks and balances, the separation of power, and guarantees of individual rights comprise this concept of freedom.

There seem to be some apparent overlaps between the two conceptual freedoms; for example, free individual expression can be both a tool for civic participation as well as a right that might need to be protected from governmental overreach. However, Berlin, in his essay "Two Concepts of Liberty," claims that there is no necessary connection between freedom from tyranny (which he calls negative freedom) and freedom to govern oneself (positive freedom). He explains that a "liberal-minded despot" might very well allow his subjects plenty of rights and freedom to do as they please, though they have no say in how the nation is governed.[1] Berlin takes this separation of the two types of freedom to its logical conclusion: "For the 'positive' sense of liberty comes to light if we try to answer the question, not 'What am I free to do or be?', but 'By whom am I ruled?' …the connection between democracy and individual liberty is a good deal more tenuous than it seemed to many advocates of both."[2]

The Roman people under the monarchy possessed the right to vote for their king, a rudimentary form of the freedom to participate in government. Livy, however, denies that the people were free to any degree before the founding of the Republic. What, then, is the Roman idea of liberty that Livy believes to be lacking under the monarchy? And how does the transition to Republic fulfill his vision of freedom?

The Importance of Imperium

Two ideas at the root of Roman sociopolitical institutions must be defined. The first is *imperium*. At its simplest, it is the power to rule over others. This idea was present from the very beginning of Roman government, since there can be no government without an ability to execute the law and maintain the existence of the state. While every government has some such

---

[1] Berlin 1969:22.
[2] Ibid.

basic principle of rule over others, the uniquely Roman aspect of *imperium* was its limitlessness. He who possessed *imperium* was above the law, and was "over all people and all causes supreme."[3]

The basis of this unconditional authority can be found in the ancient customary designation of *paterfamilias*: the father of a Roman family held the power of life and death over the rest of his household, and was expected to rule over them responsibly. Since the first of these *patres* became the first senators, it made sense to the Romans that the Senate should hold fatherly power over the Roman nation. This is the first of many examples of how the Roman state is more of a reflection of the familial and social relations of the Roman community than the product of abstract political theorizing. Maintaining the analogy to the *paterfamilias*, the Senate placed their collective authority into the king, ensuring the absolute power of a single father of the nation. For both the monarchy and most of the Republic, the Senate is the ultimate receptacle of *imperium*. When the individual executive holder of *imperium* (whether king, consul, or emperor) dies or otherwise loses his authority, the *imperium* goes back to the Senate. As seen in the opening anecdote of this chapter, keeping *imperium* in the hands of the senators can only ever be a short-term solution. Just as it is hard to govern a family by committee, so the Romans accepted the fact that government simply works better when *imperium* is consolidated into as few individuals as possible at a time. Even after the monarchy was dismantled, *imperium* continued to be granted to usually no more individuals than the two consuls (and sometimes only to one, in the case of dictators), though with strict term length limits. Whatever the political situation, some individual or group had to possess *imperium* at the risk of the entire government falling apart. Thus, even at its weakest moments in Roman political history, the Senate still

---

[3] Adcock 1959:6.

retained the final possession of *imperium* so as to ensure the continuing stability of the Roman state.

Although such unconditional authority could be and was abused, the Romans seemed to trust an *imperium*-based government because of its effective management of the nation and its similarities to Roman familial relations. Since *imperium* is so intertwined with the existence of the state itself, it is easier to understand why the Romans accepted a monarchical system for so long despite its tyrannical disadvantages. For a fledgling city-state like Rome, survival is the highest priority, and granting unlimited authority to the government enables the administration to more quickly and efficiently respond to potentially nation-ending disasters. There would be much less concern for individual rights when there is a significant risk of losing a secure territory for the community. Some minor oppression was most likely seen as an acceptable price to pay for stability and security.

After two centuries of monarchy, however, the need for unfettered power in the hands of a single man lost its existential edge. With Rome now an established kingdom with less risk of being suddenly annihilated, its citizens may have begun to see the unchecked nature of the king's power as less necessary. One of the primary purposes of *imperium*, to prevent Rome from being conquered by a foreign power, could also have been thrown into question by the presence of foreign Etruscan rulers on the Roman throne in the latter half of the monarchy. When those same foreign rulers began to disregard the electoral process and use violence against their own citizens to maintain their power, *imperium* began to seem insufficient as the sole governing principle of the nation.

With that theory in mind, it would seem that the end of the monarchy was a long time coming, despite its portrayal in literature as an unexpected and quite sudden sort of revolution.

Livy portrays Lucius Junius Brutus's ousting of the last king as a rather spontaneous event, with Brutus so overcome with emotion at the rape of Lucretia that he suddenly decides to overthrow the entire governing system. The strangeness of his actions is emphasized by the reactions of his friends, "wondering at the marvelous situation, whence arose a new character in the chest of Brutus." (Livy, 1.59) If we are to believe that the Tarquin family's oppressive actions, of which the rape of Lucretia seems to have been the final straw, were the sole motivation for Brutus's uprising, then it would seem reasonable for him to simply depose the Tarquins and initiate an election for a new king. Instead he goes further, ending the whole institution of the monarchy and establishing an entirely new system of government, complete with a public oath to never have a king ever again. Though rage may supply the weapons, revising a political system takes a calmer mind; Brutus probably did not suddenly invent the idea of a republic upon seeing Lucretia's corpse. Such liberal aspirations must have been brewing for quite some time, and it would seem that Brutus's greater accomplishment was the recognition of the perfect sociopolitical moment to make significant changes to Rome's relationship with *imperium*. Lucretia's death and Tarquin's temporary absence from the city allowed Brutus to capitalize on the citizens' latent outrage and peacefully adjust the employment of *imperium* in Roman government.

Libertas of the State

At this moment in Roman history, *imperium* becomes tempered by a second governing principle: *libertas*. Both Livy and Tacitus state that Brutus established *libertas* concurrently with the Republic, as if the concept of freedom did not exist in the Roman consciousness before the Republic. (Livy 2.1, Tacitus *Ann*. 1.1) More accurately, it would seem that Brutus is the one

who decided that *imperium* is no longer so valuable to the Roman state that there is no room for *libertas*.

But what is *libertas*? At its most simplistic, it describes freedom from a master. From Tacitus' perspective, it entails both the negative and positive aspects of liberty: freedom from being ruled as well as freedom to participate in ruling.[4] This absolute definition would place *libertas* directly at odds with *imperium*; there cannot be one person ruling over another if everyone is free from being ruled by anyone else. Since the two concepts are incompatible as absolute principles, and *imperium* is necessary for the survival of the state, it becomes very easy for a young Rome to choose *imperium* as the founding principle and not give *libertas* a second thought.

But as the benefits of *imperium* gradually decreased, its cost (measured in oppression, or lack of *libertas*) increased, until Brutus took the opportunity to place the two concepts on separate spectra in the Republic. He did not replace *imperium* with *libertas*; to do so would have dismantled the government and might have reduced the scope of political authority to individual families and tribes, back to the original *paterfamilias*. Brutus maintained *imperium*, but, paradoxically, limited the government's use of unlimited power. When a single king possessed *imperium*, there was no legal way that anyone could tell him not to do something. But with the *imperium* granted to two people, they each possessed unlimited power, including the power to veto the actions of the other. These two people would be the consuls. In the beginning of the Republic, the consuls were different from kings only in their term length (one year) and the fact that there were two of them. The Senate remained the same supreme background authority it had always been, and the people's assembly continued to elect executive officials just as they had

---

[4] Strunk 2017:24.

elected the monarchs, although now there were a few more types of electable magistrates and the assembly also now voted on laws.

The changes seem few and technical, but they seem to be the first step toward building a culture of *libertas* where once was only *imperium*. Even Livy, after praising the advent of *libertas*, admits that Brutus may have gone too far in giving the appearance of *libertas* in every little detail. He allowed only one consul to carry the *fasces* at a time, lest the people think that there was now double the tyranny; he gave most of the king's ceremonial duties to a separate official called the pontifex maximus; and he even recommended that his fellow consul resign the office since he bore the name "Tarquin." (Livy, 2.2) Brutus's paranoia at even the small aesthetic details was not completely unjustified. The Roman Republic was surrounded by kingdoms ruled by kings who had an interest in squelching such radical political innovations, and there was a serious concern that the Etruscans would bribe their way back into kingship. As odd as it sounds to modern ears, strict ideological conformity was necessary to maintain a state that made room for *libertas*.

The existential crisis that arose from being surrounded by opposing regimes may have prevented Brutus from enacting as many substantial liberal reforms as he might have envisioned; *imperium* would have regained its former importance in the face of such threats. Safeguarding *imperium* was so important that even having just two possessors was considered a potential Achilles' heel of the new government. If the nation was in imminent danger, and both consuls vetoed the actions of the other, the government would be hamstrung and unable to protect the state. This concern led to the creation of the position of dictator, a temporary wielder of unchecked power whose sole purpose was to steer the nation through crises. Obviously, this is a terribly similar role to that of the king; even with a six-month term length, a dictator could

potentially be just as tyrannical as he operates above most of the laws. The delicate balance between *imperium* and *libertas* characterizes the specific political institutions of the early days of the Republic. Adcock succinctly explains the disparate motivations of the Republicans: "…the Romans contrived to preserve the absolute efficacy of the *imperium* while providing safeguards against the dangers of lasting disunion through plurality and of lasting autocracy through indivisibility."[5]

Libertas of the Individual

The careful separation of powers and maintenance of a strict hierarchy helped to balance *imperium* and *libertas* on a national level, but what does *libertas* mean for the common Roman citizen? He ought to be enjoying the simple pleasure of not having an oppressive ruler, but theoretically the consuls, dictators, and Senate have just as much potential to encroach upon a poor plebeian's life. The new culture of *libertas*, however, becomes not just a check on tyranny at the national level, but a protection against oppression on a more interpersonal level. The first concept of inherent individual rights in Roman society has arisen. Previously, any rights granted to the citizens were at the whim of the king, and could be just as whimsically revoked. But with the new cultural emphasis on *libertas*, the common man now had a baseline for how much freedom he possessed merely by virtue of being a Roman citizen. One of the earliest accomplishments in codifying such a sense of rights was the creation of the Twelve Tables in 450 B.C.E. As one would expect from a Roman legal document, the Tables are entirely practically-oriented; any abstract ideals about freedom and justice must be derived from the solutions that the Tables provide for day-to-day disputes. Many of the Tables deal with property rights, which has been a significant foundation for free societies throughout history. Others

---

[5] Adcock 1959:9.

provide protocols for remedying interpersonal injuries, laying out specific penalties for stealing and forbidding the killing of anyone without a formal trial. Though rather minimalistic by modern standards, this new basic set of expected rights extended "freedom from tyranny" down to the most mundane interactions between citizens, preventing people from building pyres less than sixty feet from one's house and introducing harsh penalties for enchanting someone with an incantation.

The Republic seems to have a solid foundation on which to build a comprehensive "freedom from tyranny," from the checks on *imperium* to a rudimentary acknowledgment of inherent individual rights. Freedom to participate in government, however, initially seems to be roughly the same as during the monarchy. The Centuriate Assembly and the Tribal Assembly were both carried over from the monarchy, though the Republic granted them more power. Since they are no longer beholden to a king, the Assemblies now play a larger, more uninhibited role in the enacting of legislation. But the composition of the Assemblies still heavily favors the upper-class Romans; citizens with more property and a patrician bloodline are much more likely to be able to enact their will in the Assemblies than someone poor or plebeian. The unequal representation of classes in the Assemblies leads to a period of time called the Conflict of the Orders, which was either a serious situation of civil strife with multiple plebeian uprisings[6] or just a series of gradual adjustments to the Roman constitution with little actual conflict,[7] depending on different scholars' perspectives. However dire the struggle was, it resulted in some significant gains for plebeians in the realm of civic participation. The most notable is the creation of the Plebeian Council, a plebs-only Assembly in which there was no (direct) way for patricians to trample on the views of the common people.

---

[6] Abbott 1901.
[7] Mitchell 1990.

But most such governmental adjustments still fall more within the purview of freedom from tyranny than freedom to participate; with their Council, the plebs are now more protected from the potential tyranny of the patricians. In general, it seems that the early Republican Romans valued freedom from tyranny much more than freedom to participate. Though the Roman people used to vote for their king, the position most similar to a king in breadth of power, the dictator, is appointed without the will of the people. It would seem that giving up the ability to vote in that case is considered an easy price to pay for severely restricted term lengths. In few areas was the use of popular elections expanded during the transition to Republic; the system remained rather rigidly hierarchical, with the Senate remaining above and behind all other aspects of government. It would seem that Lucius Junius Brutus made the Roman state so antagonistic, both culturally and institutionally, toward tyranny that voting and other forms of political participation never came to be seen as necessary for the protection of *libertas*. If anything, it was the system of voting in the Assemblies that caused most of the plebeians' anxiety, worried that the patricians were becoming a collective tyrant. The Roman idea of *libertas*, in preventing incidents of tyranny on the large scale, also gave the Roman people a sense of trust in their government, lessening the need for mass direct political participation.

In his outsider's perspective on the Roman state, the Greek historian Polybius describes the unique Roman situation in a way that captures the apparent tension between executive *imperium* and the participation of the citizens. He portrays the Roman state as a combination of the three archetypal government types: rule by the one, rule by the few, and rule by the many. "For if one fixed one's eyes on the power of the consuls, the constitution seemed completely monarchical and royal; if on that of the senate it seemed again to be aristocratic; and when one looked at the power of the masses, it seemed clearly to be a democracy." (Polybius, *Histories*,

6.11) Although the consuls and Senate seem to have almost unlimited power in their respective spheres, Polybius places great emphasis on the power of the people as the lynchpin that holds Roman society together. Besides the aforementioned legislative duties, the Roman people "bestow office on the deserving, the noblest regard of virtue in a state… Thus here again one might plausibly say that the people's share in the government is the greatest, and that the constitution is a democratic one." (Polybius, *Hist*., 6.14) Polybius sees the imbuement of the government with virtue as the most noteworthy effect of Roman democracy. The relationship between virtue and government will be investigated further in the final chapter, but insofar as increased public virtue was a notable benefit to the Roman Republic, the detriment of its absence in the following two cases ought to be considered.

Chapter Two: Failures of Modern Democratic Transitions

The Roman transition from monarchy to republic was remarkable in its swiftness, originality, and resulting stability. The Republic lasted for nearly 500 years; after that much time, it seems safe to conclude that its collapse was not due to some inherent weakness in their governing institutions. Such a transition from an authoritarian government to a free society ought to be even easier in modern times, since we have contemplated democratic political philosophy for centuries and there is a good handful of countries with stable traditions of individual liberty. One might think that any modern country attempting to transition to a republican form of government should be able to simply institute copies of the democratic institutions that have worked so well in other established democracies.

However, since the end of World War II, the success rate of such democratic transitions has been hit-or-miss. Many developing countries have cast off their colonial overlords or local monarchs and attempted to instantly take up the democratic institutions that have worked so well in some of the world's most powerful countries. But their role models, countries like the United States and Great Britain, took centuries of growing pains to reach the fully operational democracies that they are today; the sudden transitions in many developing countries seem to lack certain stabilizing factors that the developed democracies took a long time to achieve.

One of those stabilizing factors might be the gradual introduction of popular voting into established republics. Electoral systems are often seen as the most essential aspect of democracy, and thus are one of the first institutions created when a modern country declares itself to be a democracy. It is evident that many societies in the world have elections and are patently not democracies; sham elections are often implemented by openly authoritarian regimes in order not to appear completely deviant from international norms.

But many well-intentioned electoral systems also seem prone to rapidly devolve into a less-than-free society. Though the voting is relatively free and fair, the resulting governments seem to take the support of the people as a mandate to ignore constitutional restrictions and favor consolidating their own *imperium* over the *libertas* of the populace. By the time the people become frustrated with the elected ruler, the demagogue has gained enough power to influence the electoral system and maintain his power indefinitely.

By this point, formal democracy has been abandoned, and the people often turn to the military to use raw force to change the regime. After successfully overthrowing the elected leader, the military then installs a new president for the restored "democracy," legitimized by the people's support of the military. In such scenarios, the monolithic "people's will" is wielded by those in power like a blank check; the government is a democracy insofar as its *imperium* is derived from the people, but the individual citizens have no power left to influence those governing them. The pendulum of governing philosophy has swung from a monarch whose power is completely removed from the populace to a series of dictators whose legitimacy is drawn from some impersonal, collective spirit of "the people." Somewhere in the transition from one extreme to the other, the ideas of individual liberty and political efficacy were passed over and discarded.

Although there are many additional factors that influence the success or failure of nascent democracies, this chapter will focus on the contributions of voting itself to the stability or chaos of specific democratic regimes in the past century. After becoming independent sovereign nations, countries such as Zimbabwe, Cambodia, South Sudan, and South Vietnam attempted to establish democratic institutions. All of these four cases either failed or are currently failing to maintain stable and free democratic governments. For two of these cases, I will examine the role

of voting in the initial selection of the regime as well as the particular moment when the individual power of the voter was either effectively nullified or transformed into a collective "people's will."

Mugabe's Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's transition to a sovereign democratic government was not a clean-cut transformation from pure autocracy to democracy. In 1965, a white minority in the country declared independence from Great Britain under the name Rhodesia. Rhodesia had all the ingredients of a republic, with a parliamentary system and voting and a codification of equal rights. However, the requirements for eligible voters were constructed so that the black majority of the country would be excluded, giving most of the governing authority to the white minority. Though nominally a democracy, Rhodesia was clearly in the hands of an oligarchical white minority. The prime minister, Ian Smith, and his party held onto power for the entirety of the government's 15-year lifespan. His administration showed no intention of implementing universal suffrage, despite urging by Great Britain, who saw "majority rule" as necessary for newly independent colonies.

Such a concentration of power with the outward appearance of democracy seems to resemble the voting of the Roman people for their monarchs, who were confirmed by the unelected Senate. With the black majority chafing under the oligarchic oppression, the Republic of Rhodesia eventually yielded to majority rule after a costly war against several revolutionary guerilla armies. But simple concessions to the majority were not enough; the entire Rhodesian governing system was thrown out, and the new country Zimbabwe was formed with an entirely new democratic government.

The initial creation of Zimbabwe seems like a carefully planned and designed implementation of a well-oiled democracy. The official terms of Zimbabwean independence were overseen and officially recognized by Great Britain. A constitution was drawn up, creating a House of Assembly comprised of 100 members, 20 of which were reserved for white elected officials. In 1980, the first elections were held, overseen by British officials and approved by the international community.

When he was deposed in late 2017 after 37 years of rule, the Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe was the world's oldest living head of state. In the late 1970s, he entered politics as the leader of one of the victorious guerilla armies in the war against the Rhodesian government, and was therefore hailed as the hero of the revolution by his country's people. Just as Lucius Junius Brutus led the Roman people to freedom and was then elected their first consul, Mugabe's election as Zimbabwe's first prime minister makes sense as the outcome of the country's first act of voting. Since this was the first time that the black majority of Zimbabwe had the power to influence their national governing officials, it was only natural that they would vote for a party and a leader whose platform focused on giving power to the majority. The new electoral system, with its universal suffrage, seemed to directly result in the expansion of personal liberty.

Once in power, however, Mugabe and his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), began to bend democracy to their will. Although competing political parties are usually a sign of a healthy democracy, relations quickly became heated between the ZANU, the white minority Rhodesian Front, and another revolutionary party called the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). Political and ethnic differences came to a head in 1983. In an event

called *Gukurahundi*, ZANU-affiliated paramilitary troops murdered tens of thousands of "political dissidents" allegedly connected to ZAPU over the course of several months.[8]

What happened? The liberty that was supposed to be granted by a democratic form of government seems to have run out after only a few years of Zimbabwean sovereignty. The elections of 1980, so carefully set up and successfully carried out, somehow resulted in more oppression, not less. The system of checks and balances, so important in the Roman Republic, seem to be broken in the case of Zimbabwe. If a government leader breaks the law, a citizen of a free society would expect the police or military to arrest him and enforce the law. But what happens when the bearers of military force simply go along with whatever the leader says? Mugabe, as a former military leader, seems to have had enough sway with his old troops that they were more willing to follow his commands than obey the restrictions of a constitution created through compromise with their rivals.

Does it take only one charismatic leader and a group of loyal followers to throw a wrench in democracy? So far, it would seem so. But the massacre of *Gukurahundi*, however heinous and unthinkable, was still carried out by a democratically-elected government, chosen by the people from among several competing political parties. It is not until 1987 that the democratic institutions in Zimbabwe begin to thoroughly crumble. Despite their previous disputes, the ZANU and ZAPU parties reconciled by combining their parties into the Zimbabwe African National Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). Since they were already the two largest parties, the new combined party would seem to eliminate any possibility of other parties competing with ZANU-PF for governing power. By itself, though, the creation of a vastly dominant political party is not necessarily the death knell of democratic freedom; plenty of parliamentary governments in other countries can get things done only when competing parties form large coalitions to pass

---

[8] Mashingaidze 2005.

legislation. The truly anti-democratic aspect of the situation is explicitly stated in the Unity Accord, the agreement which formed the ZANU-PF. Among other declarations of intent, the sixth statement announces, "That ZANU-PF shall seek to establish a one-party state in Zimbabwe." (Unity Accord, 1987)

This blatant disregard for competing political positions removes any last hope that democracy in Zimbabwe would safeguard freedom. In the same year, Mugabe created the office of the president as a separate executive branch, granting himself further governing authority and freedom from the parliament. With such sweeping institutional changes, Zimbabwe would become a democracy only in the sense that Mugabe derives his power from the support of his followers, and just as he used them to consolidate his power over the decades, so could anyone else overthrow Mugabe's regime with enough of their own loyal supporters.

And so the cycle of oppression and violence would continue, with democracy never more than a façade. After struggling for so many years against a government that oppressed one portion of the population, President Mugabe swung the pendulum in the other direction. Since white citizens owned a vast majority of the land in Zimbabwe, Mugabe made efforts to redistribute the land more equitably. Unfortunately, his "fast-track land reform" program eventually became nothing more than a way to centralize more power; land confiscated from white farmers was nationalized and placed under the control of Mugabe loyalists. After several decades of pressuring and harassing white farmers, by 2013 there were no white-owned farms left outside the control of the government.[9] No compensation was given for the confiscated land, and the white farmers were left with nothing.

Just as the Rhodesian government excluded the black majority from most political participation, the Mugabe administration was able to discriminate against the white minority.

---

[9] "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013: Zimbabwe." 2013.

This time, however, being in the minority, the white citizens had no hope of successfully mounting an armed rebellion, and several attempts to sue the government resulted in the white farmers getting beaten up in their homes. Although there are codified rights and laws that ought to have protected the white farmers, there is not much a minority can achieve in the face of a majority that believes the minority is getting its just deserts.

After being under the rule of a de facto dictator for several decades, however, even the majority of Zimbabweans began to tire of Mugabe's attempts to bend the rules and accomplish his goals through force. In the elections of 2008, a new presidential candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai, received the support of the majority. Mugabe allegedly manipulated the final election and reinstalled himself as president, but the will of the people had turned away from him. He and Tsvangirai signed a power-sharing agreement, allowing Mugabe to remain in control of the military while the general populace was mollified by having Tsvangirai as prime minister.

The arrangement shows that the people of Zimbabwe do still have some political clout; even if the freedom-ensuring aspects of democracy are gone, the collective will of the people still has the ability to affect the governing authority. But what good is it? If the Zimbabweans had voted Mugabe completely out of power and Tsvangirai assumed the presidency, there seems to be no assurance that Tsvangirai would be any less authoritarian than Mugabe. In the case of Zimbabwe, democracy seems to be less "rule by the people" and more "rule by the most popular person at the moment." Once the people have voted, they seem to give up their political efficacy until the next presidential election. At this point, a government based on voting seems to breed just as much oppression and violation of rights as the prior monarchical or colonial administrations, and seems to be even less stable.

The removal of Mugabe from power does not seem to have improved the situation in Zimbabwe. His replacement, Emmerson Mnangagwa, was installed after a military coup and is nicknamed "The Crocodile" for his cunning political maneuvers and his record of gruesome atrocities. Even an official of the ruling ZANU-PF party expressed concern about the future leader: "You think Mugabe is bad, but have you thought that whoever comes after him could be even worse?"[10] The role of the individual Zimbabwean citizen has been marginalized, and though the democracy remains in name, the future of the country seems solidly in the hands of those individuals with the most power.

Sihanouk's Cambodia

A similar situation of democracy gone bad occurred in post-colonial Cambodia. Just as Zimbabwe was preceded by a pseudo-republican government, so did Cambodia have voting and elected assemblies under French colonial rule. After achieving independence in 1953, however, the Cambodian electoral system became even less free and fair. Despite the oversight of an International Control Commission, the initial elections in the sovereign Kingdom of Cambodia provide some of the most blatant examples of disregard for the individual rights and freedoms that we have come to expect from democracy.

The king of Cambodia, Norodum Sihanouk, stepped down from the figurehead position in order to directly participate in the first elections in 1955. He formed his own right-wing political party, the Sangkum, in order to combat the popular Democrats. Sihanouk then proceeded to use his influence as former king to intimidate the voters and manipulate election results. Many voters were not allowed to cast secret ballots, instead casting votes with colored pieces of paper in view of Sihanouk's police force. The Sangkum won with a suspicious 83% of

---

[10] "Emmerson Mnangagwa: The 'crocodile' who snapped back." *BBC World News*, 2018.

the vote and gained all the seats in the assembly, effectively taking complete control of the government.

With the right amount of charisma and personal supporters, it would appear to take only a single brief occurrence of electoral democracy for a demagogue to coopt the entire government. Sihanouk carried much gravitas as the former monarch who gained Cambodia's independence, and his Sangkum party platform was extremely nationalistic. Writing in 1967, Smith describes the relationship between Sihanouk and the Cambodian people: "So much has Sihanouk identified himself with his country and people that any criticism of them is regarded by him as a personal affront, and any attack on him is considered as an insult to Cambodia's dignity and honor."[11]

If the people truly did love him as a leader, then was the Cambodian democracy a success? Just as in Zimbabwe, Cambodian democracy succeeded only in selecting a ruler with an incredible amount of sway among the majority (though with such fraudulent elections, the will of the actual majority is difficult to determine). Though Sihanouk seemed to have widespread support, it helped that he brutally harassed and intimidated leading members of the opposing Democratic party. Within two years of the first elections, the Democrats had disbanded as a political party, with the last few leaders begging to be admitted into the Sangkum.

To further solidify his authority, Sihanouk emphasized the nationalistic aspects of Buddhism, the majority religion in Cambodia. The idea was to encourage the wealthy to give to the poor, but in practice the wealth was seized by the state and then distributed to Sihanouk's loyalists, in much the same way that Mugabe "redistributed" white farmers' land in Zimbabwe. By playing different segments of society against each other, both rulers were able to reward the loyalty of their supporters and utterly marginalize their opponents.

---

[11] Smith 1967.

After proclaiming himself permanent Head of State and becoming increasingly brutal in silencing political dissidents, Sihanouk was eventually deposed in a military coup. Cambodia was then plunged into a multi-faceted civil war, and all semblance of democracy disappeared with the victory of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge.

How Do Democracies Survive?

With Zimbabwe and Cambodia as our examples, it would seem that democracies are a disturbingly tenuous form of government. In each case, the groundwork for a democracy was laid quite meticulously. Each country had legislative assemblies, multiple political parties, a constitution, and laws protecting the rights of its citizens. The initial elections in both countries were even supervised by an international third party to ensure fairness.

In both cases, the elections were won by the party of the leader who gained the country's independence. There is nothing ostensibly wrong with the people voting into power a person whom they believe will be a good leader; in fact, that seems to be the best outcome that a popular democracy can hope to achieve. But this best-case scenario does not prevent these national heroes from becoming demagogues, using the mandate of the people to perform whatever actions suit them.

Are there not checks and balances included in the building blocks of democracy that were present in these countries? Theoretically, the legislative assembly should have some sort of power to restrict the actions of the executive. The judiciary, likewise, should have the power to point out when the legislature or executive are out of line with regards to the constitution. And finally, the military and police ought to be subordinate to the duly elected government and not take it upon themselves to "fix" the government by force.

In the face of such catastrophic governmental failures, however, these checks seem like pure wishful thinking. As soon as some really charismatic person and their party of diehard followers gains a majority of power, the whole system falls apart. When all the "separate" powers are working toward the same goal, there is no reason to restrict the power of another branch. The legislators know that the executive is working in their interest, and the military know that the leader will use his power to "redistribute" the country's wealth in their favor. A few choice minorities end up trampled, but the majority of the populace remains complacent, happy with their choice of administration and confident in their ability to change things the next time an election comes around (though by then it will probably be too late).

Thus it would seem that democracies are only as democratic as the current administration wants them to be, and voting seems to lead the populace into a false sense of political efficacy. If a popular government comes into power and decides to outright ignore the constitution, there seems to be nothing that can prevent such a decision. There may be some public outcry, but the administration has the support of the majority, and the military can silence any dissidents. Though it sounds extremely cynical, it seems like the success of a democracy depends entirely on whether or not the citizens and administration decide to act like it is a free democracy. If even just one influential person decides to treat their country like their own personal monarchy, Zimbabwe and Cambodia have shown us how quickly the thread of democracy can be pulled and unraveled.

Chapter 3: The Value of Democracy

From the examples in previous chapters, it can be seen that democracies can last

hundreds of years or fizzle out in an instant. Representative government is hailed for its inherent

stability, yet seems just as vulnerable to chaotic regime change and authoritarianism as any other

government structure. When comparing the successes and failures of different democratic

regimes, it can be difficult to fully separate the outcomes from the specific circumstances under

which the government operated. Though the individual cases offer concrete examples of

democracy's benefits and shortcomings, such pros and cons must now be examined in the

abstract.

Determining the worth of democratic government in general first requires the answering

of a few philosophical questions. First, what is the purpose of government? If an objective

purpose of government can be agreed upon, then the structures of various forms of government

can be judged according to how well they align with that general purpose. Is democracy the

form of government which best effects the purpose of government? And if it is not, what

changes ought to be made to it?

Aristotle and John Stuart Mill both propose intriguing answers to these questions.

Despite being separated by thousands of years of history, each philosopher provides methodical

analyses of the issues of democratic government irrespective of any specific historical regime.

Their explanations of the purpose of government are particularly potent because each is founded

on that philosopher's peculiar system of ethics. We might expect, therefore, that Aristotle's

virtue ethics and Mill's utilitarianism would produce vastly different premises for a purpose of

government. However, both Aristotle and Mill base their ethical systems on the inherent value

of happiness, and thus their political philosophies emerge from similar roots.

Aristotle's Virtuous Purpose

The link between happiness and the purpose of government in Aristotle is not immediately evident in his writings and requires some explanation. For a book primarily concerned with how people ought to interact in community with each other, Aristotle's *Politics* spends little time discussing what makes individual humans happy. At first glance, Aristotle's humans can seem like mindless cogs in the machine of society. So what place does happiness have in Aristotle's view of politics? Despite his limited explanation of happiness itself, many of Aristotle's ideas would work only in a world where humans make choices based on what would benefit them the most. Though Aristotle describes it using objective, impersonal terms like "virtue" and "best," his political philosophy is founded on the idea that each human yearns to work toward higher happiness.

First, let us examine Aristotle's connection between happiness and the "best" things. Aristotle's main goal seems to be to create the best possible city with the best possible regime ruling the best possible people. But what does he mean by "best"? At one point, Aristotle discusses the possibility that the most choiceworthy regime is the best. This seems like a direct appeal to human happiness: whatever one desires, it is best to have. And at first it seems like this version of "best" would be a relative term; surely the Spartans believed that their military oligarchy was the best regime, and other nations consider their own regime the best, leaving no measure for an objectively best regime. But Aristotle explains that the Spartans incorrectly believe that domination over others to be choiceworthy. He refutes this domineering sense of the word "best" when he claims that, "to assign what is not equal to equal persons and what is not

similar to similar persons is contrary to nature, and nothing contrary to nature is noble." (*Politics* 7.3.1325b8-10)

So the best things are still the most choiceworthy, but Aristotle has narrowed the definition of what is truly choiceworthy: a choiceworthy action is in accordance with nature and strives toward higher goals. Actions based on a desire to hold power over other human beings are not worthy of choice because it goes against our nature, which urges us to strive for things which will give higher pleasures. Does this stifle the human yearning for happiness at all, by restricting desires to only "natural" and "noble" ventures? Aristotle would disagree, for the nobler pursuits of happiness are worth far more than any low brutish desire for dominance. But nonetheless, humans seem to have such contra-natural desires anyway, distracting them from their longing for greater happiness. To discourage ignoble choices and encourage noble ones, Aristotle relies on virtue.

Virtue, as described by Aristotle, is the means by which the common man can achieve the greatest happiness and the best things. Rather than assuming humans will automatically become idealistic nationalists when placed in a political environment, Aristotle knows that humans will work the best when they are working for their own good and happiness. He is so sure of this that he declares it "evident" in order to use it as a premise for the rest of the discussion: "Now that everyone strives for living well and for happiness is evident." (*Pol.* 7.13.1331b40) To focus this innate yearning for nobler living, Aristotle lays out a two-step process in order to guide people from their barbaric lives of unfocused passions toward a life lived well: "…one of these is in the correct positing of the aim and end of actions; the other, discovering the actions that bear on the end." (*Pol.* 7.13.1331b29-30) It has already been established that the ultimate end is happiness, and Aristotle claims this can be achieved by living virtuously.

But simply being told that one must be virtuous to be happy is often not enough to convince one to take action toward becoming virtuous. Aristotle explains that people must be reasoned with so that they realize the greater happiness that can be gained by living virtuously. According to Aristotle, there are three things by which man becomes excellent in virtue: nature, habit, and reason. With regards to nature, someone must "develop naturally as a human being and not some of the other animals." (*Pol.* 7.13.1332a41-42) Presumably this is required so that the person possesses the peculiar innate longing for greater happiness. If they have this inherent desire, then "living virtuously" becomes a matter of honing this desire for higher things through habit: "certain qualities are ambiguous in their nature, and through habits develop in the direction of worse or better." (*Pol.* 7.13.1332b2-4) Once a human reaches adulthood, most of their conceptions of what makes them happy are set in habit.

But through reason, humans can still work towards nobler goals and higher happiness which they have not yet made into habit: "For men act in many ways contrary to their habituation and their nature through reason, if they are persuaded that some condition is better." (*Pol.* 7.13.1332b6-8) So while it is clear that all well-developed and habituated humans want to perform actions which will move them toward the end goal of highest happiness, they may have disordered ends and be working toward a lower form of happiness without realizing it. Aristotle's solution to misguided happiness-seeking humans is education. He believes that if children are educated with a view to the noblest of ends and the actions and virtues which will take them there, they will certainly choose to live virtuously as adults, since the highest happiness is always choiceworthy once people are pointed in its direction.

Keeping in mind this premise that people will choose higher goals over baser desires, we must see why they would choose to live in a city and how the best city stands in relation to

happiness. Aristotle asserts in one definition of the city that "…the city is a community of similar persons, for the sake of a life that is the best possible." (*Pol.* 7.8.1328a35-36) Assuming that these similar persons all have a view to the higher good, the city itself will be directed toward noble goals. With this in mind, then, the best city is the one in which every citizen is encouraged to live virtuously.

Aristotle contrasts this ideal version of a city with the contemporary cities of Greece, which are not made up of people who are similar in virtue. The contemporary cities are made up of many people of differing views with regards to what is choiceworthy and what will make them happy. Therefore, the Greek cities do what seems immediately best in such a situation: they focus on the things that are evidently useful to all citizens, and ignore nobler goals which must be discerned through education. The Greek cities in this way encourage happiness, but only in the forms which immediately appeal to their citizens' baser conceptions of happiness. Sparta, Aristotle's perennial example of a seemingly-successful city, focuses primarily on honing the natural drive toward warfare in its citizens. Fighting and conquest is easily seen as a good thing because domination provides happiness, but since they have focused solely on that and neglected nobler goals, the Spartans have been stunted in their approach to happiness and are not on the virtuous path to higher goals. If we are trying to create the best possible city, as Aristotle describes, then it must be focused on encouraging and developing noble virtues in its citizens in order for them to attain the highest happiness.

Virtue in Democracy

So if the purpose of government is to cultivate virtuous excellence, how well does democracy carry out such a task? Although he lives in democratic Athens, Aristotle has some

serious misgivings about the effectiveness of democracy as an agent of virtue and producer of happiness. In his description of the different types of possible constitutions, Aristotle places democracy on a spectrum of "government by the many." At one end of the spectrum is "polity," which he defines as the many ruling for the sake of the common interest. Presumably this common interest is the highest happiness previously mentioned. On the other end of this spectrum is what Aristotle calls "democracy," the many ruling for their own self-interest. He claims that the self-centered goal of a democratic regime is a perversion of the morally-good and selfless polity regime.

This distinction between common and self-interest ought to raise eyebrows. If we are to take Aristotle's thoughts on virtue seriously, then such a distinction between common interest and self-interest should be nonexistent. Both the common interest and individual self-interest ought to be striving for the highest happiness. Thus, a regime directed toward the common interest and a regime directed toward many different individual interests ought to be indistinguishable in their actions and policies.

Since Aristotle does draw a distinction, however, it must be assumed that such self-interest is not merely the striving of an individual toward the highest good, but rather the fulfillment of an individual's baser desires. A society based on such fulfillment could rightfully be distinguished from a regime that focused on the common good, since the former would result in the chaotic fulfillment of whatever whims each individual might have. And since individuals are often selfish, only a polity focused on the common interest would be able to promote the highest happiness in every individual. Though he recognizes and criticizes the weaknesses of democracy, Aristotle seems to believe that such a certain type of democratic regime could still fulfill the purpose of government: to encourage virtue and strive for the highest happiness.

Mill's Virtuous Purpose

John Stuart Mill comes to a conclusion similar to Aristotle's with regard to the purpose of government. After discarding several popular notions of the goal of government, Mill gets to the root of what allows any government to operate: the quality of its citizens. He explains that no government can reach any end without its citizens performing their duties in accordance with the regime's institutions. Mill offers examples of the many ways in which any government institution would fail if its constituent citizens decided to ignore procedure and do as they please: "How can a representative assembly work for good if its members…, uncorrected by public discipline or private self-control, …resort to manual violence on the floor of the House, or shoot at one another with rifles?" (Mill, *Considerations*, Ch. 2) In the same way that government in general is contrived solely by humans working in community, specific regimes only work if humans agree to make them work.

In this way, Mill arrives at his own ultimate goal of government, which bears a striking resemblance to that of Aristotle: "…the most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves." (Mill, *Cons.*, Ch. 2) Mill's concept of higher and lower pleasures is almost identical to Aristotle's ideas concerning noble and base desires, and thus Mill comes to the same conclusion: a good government is one that promotes virtue and consequently strives for the highest happiness.

Virtue in Representative Democracy

Though Mill and Aristotle agree on the purpose of government, Mill has some notable disagreements with Aristotle about the best form of government. In Aristotle's explanation of the various constitutions, he suggests that the "good" forms of rule by one, the few, and the many are all relatively equally valid as methods of achieving the highest good. Monarchy is as good as aristocracy, and aristocracy is as good as polity, as long as they do not slip into tyranny, oligarchy, or democracy, respectively. Mill, however, takes a strong stance against rule by the one or the few in favor of rule by the many.

Mill begins by dismissing the popular idea of a beneficent monarch as the ideal form of government. (Mill, *Cons*., Ch. 3) He points out that, even if such a ruler existed and was practically able to rule a state directly and alone, such a regime would be detrimental to the general citizenry. Mill explains that placing all the concerns of the nation in the power of one man reduces the rest of the citizens to passive observers, unable to make their own decisions and thereby live virtuous lives. Though they may have their baser desires sated by the beneficence of the monarch, their moral efficacy has been removed and they would be unable to cultivate their higher, more preferable faculties.

Therefore, Mill places high value on political participation. He sees a fully participatory democracy as the only way in which the entirety of the population can exercise their political wills and work toward general virtue. Mill argues that without such participation, citizens would probably never look beyond their own self-interest and consider themselves as part of a greater community. And if the citizens are purely self-interested, then the government cannot perform in accordance with its goal of encouraging virtue and the highest happiness. Thus, democracy is

the best way to ensure that people have the ability and moral duty to individually pursue the highest good.

Despite his ringing endorsement of popular sovereignty, Mill does acknowledge the potential weaknesses of a democratic government. Though rather than blaming the symptoms, such as tyranny of the majority or election of a demagogue, Mill addresses what he believes to be the root of those problems: the inability of the citizenry to responsibly handle liberty. "When the people are too much attached to savage independence to be tolerant of the amount of power to which it is for their good that they should be subject, the state of society… is not yet ripe for representative government." (Mill, *Cons*., Ch. 6) At first it seems strange that such a strong proponent of individual liberty should start pointing fingers at "savage independence," but Mill distinguishes between the two types of freedom that have been discussed earlier: freedom from oppression, and freedom to participate in government.

Mill never places freedom from oppression in any doubt; he has no issues with personal protections against the government. However, despite his promotion of full participatory government, Mill acknowledges that there must be limits on the scope of this freedom to participate. If people hold their ability to participate politically as their highest value, they will be unwilling to allow any institution of government to effectively wield power over them. As soon as an institution is put in place to exercise governmental authority, a savagely independent people might become suspicious of the institution and use their newfound political power to undermine it. Thus, a potentially significant factor in the success or failure of democratic regimes could be the people's attachment to their own political freedom.

Conclusion

The political philosophies of Aristotle and Mill might shed some light on the intriguing cases of Republican Rome and modern Zimbabwe and Cambodia. Each state attempted to create a democratic government, but Rome was far more successful than the other two. Setting aside historical and circumstantial factors, was there any inherent difference in their implementations of democratic government that could have contributed to the states' success or failure?

Aristotle and Mill suggest that the intended purpose of the government can be a significant factor in the success of the regime. The best government, according to their ethical philosophies, is that which encourages the whole community to strive for virtue and the highest happiness. Freedom is a necessary part of living a virtuous life; without freedom, one is unable to make moral choices and actively strive toward nobler things. Democracy is the form of government most conducive to freedom (and, according to Mill, the only option that allows true freedom), so it seems to be the obvious frontrunner for best possible regime.

Freedom, however, is like food. It is necessary to live a good life, and it makes us happy. But gluttony is looked down upon as the satisfaction of a base desire, and no moralist would suggest that food is the ultimate good in life. In the same way, freedom gives us the agency to live virtuous lives and attain happiness, but our appetite for freedom is not one of the nobler pleasures. Therefore, freedom should not be placed on the pedestal of the highest good, and ought not be considered the purpose of government.

Perhaps, then, democratic governments' success or failure is dependent on whether they view public virtue or freedom as their highest good. The Roman Republic, created in the instant after one of its most public symbols of virtue was brutally raped, clearly decided that the virtue of the community was a worthy reason for discarding the old regime and installing a new form of

government. The Romans did not seem to create a Republic for the sake of individuals' freedom to participate, but rather used the ability of citizens to participate to ensure that the regime continued to encourage communal virtue. *Libertas* was not enshrined as a replacement for *imperium*, but as an instrument to keep *imperium* focused on the virtuous purpose of the Republic.

Many modern democracies, however, seem to have founded their system of government on the idea of replacing all authority with the free participation of the people. Unfortunately, as Mill pointed out, the concept of government relies on the ultimate exercise of authority by some certain institution. At worst, the free political participation of all individuals becomes simply anarchy, and at best large numbers of people throw their political weight behind a single demagogue. Mugabe gave many Zimbabweans the political satisfaction that they desired in the moment, but the regime lacked a focus on the higher communal good and could not maintain a free society. Sihanouk demonstrated that the institution of voting should not be hailed as an end in itself, since it can be manipulated by nefarious parties; rather, democracy requires a substantial commitment on the part of all citizens to creating a virtuous political community. Cambodia's experiences emphasize Mill's premise regarding the foundation of government: governments are made up by humans, and can work only when humans decide to go along with them.

Despite the many pessimistic claims in this essay, it will conclude on a hopeful note. Though individual democracies may fail, we can take heart in the idea that humanity has reached the point where we can experiment with (according to Mill) the best possible regime, representative democratic government. The fact that democratic institutions do not guarantee a successful government by their very nature does not mean that democracy itself is a faulty system; rather, given the cases outlined in this paper, it would seem that the fault lies in people's

misguided use of democracy. Of course, there are a multitude of other possible reasons for the collapse of democratic governments, and simply orienting the regime toward the encouragement of virtue certainly does not guarantee success. But insofar as a sense of virtue balances the government's need for authority and the people's desire for freedom, virtue seems to be necessary to prevent a democratic regime from collapsing on account of its own self-destructive behavior.

Bibliography

Abbott, Frank Frost. 1901. *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*. Boston:

Ginn & Company.

Adcock, Frank E. 1959. *Roman Political Ideas and Practice*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan

Press.

Aristotle. *Politics*. Trans. by Carnes Lord. 2013. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Berlin, Isaiah. 1969. "Two Concepts of Liberty." Oxford: Oxford University Press.

"Country Analysis Report for Zimbabwe." *United Nations Zimbabwe*, 2010.

https://web.archive.org/web/20150114214750/http://www.undg.org/docs/12123/Zimbab

we-Country-Analysis-2010-Report_05-09-11.pdf.

"Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013: Zimbabwe." *Bureau of Democracy,*

Human Rights and Labor, 2013.

http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2013&dlid=22017

6.

"Emmerson Mnangagwa: The 'crocodile' who snapped back." *BBC World News*, 2018.

http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-41995876.

Livy. *Titi Livi Ab Urbe Condita*. 1974. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mashingaidze, Terence M. 2005. "The 1987 Zimbabwe National Unity Accord and its

Aftermath: A Case of Peace without Reconciliation?" *From National Liberation to*

Democratic Renaissance in Southern Africa. Cheryl Hendricks and Lwazi Lushaba, eds.

Dakar: Codesria.

Mill, J. S. 1861. *Considerations on Representative Government*. Ed. By Curtis A. Weyant and

David Widger. 2013. Project Gutenberg.

Mill, J. S. 1861. *Utilitarianism*. Ed. by George Sher. 2001. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing
    Company, Inc.

Mitchell, Richard E. 1990. *Patricians and Plebeians: The Origin of the Roman State*. Cornell
    University Press.

Ncube, Welshman. 1997. "Lawyers Against the Law? Judges and the Legal Profession in
    Rhodesia and Zimbabwe." *The Zimbabwe Law Review* 14:108-125.

Polybius. *The Histories*. 1922. Loeb Classical Library.

Ross, Russell R., ed. 1987. *Cambodia: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of
    Congress. http://countrystudies.us/cambodia/.

Smith, Roger M. 1967. "Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia." *Asian Survey* 7.6:353–
    362. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2642610.

Strunk, Thomas E. 2017. *History After Liberty: Tacitus on Tyrants, Sycophants, and
    Republicans*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Tacitus. *Cornelii Taciti Annalium*. 1906. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tevera, D. S. 1989. "Voting patterns in Zimbabwe's elections of 1980 and 1985." *Geography*
    74.2:162-165. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40571607.