

Three Tests for an Electorate

By CARL COHEN

ANN ARBOR—The phrase “participatory democracy,” used so often by politicians in recent days, can be deceptive. It clearly suggests that there are kinds of democracy of which some are participatory and some are not. But the participation of the members of a community in their own government is the very essence of democracy. Any government today calling itself democratic that is not participatory is either a failure or a fraud.

If a voter wants to know whether democracy is real, he must examine not the rhetoric of its leaders but the way decisions are made. Do the people, directly or indirectly, participate in directing the policies of their government? If they do, however wrong-headed their policies, they have a democracy; if not, however wise the policies chosen for them, they have none.

The hard truth is that while most of the world's political leaders profess democracy as an ideal, they do not support or practice it. Its practice requires great trust of the people, by the leaders and the people themselves. Such trust is not widespread. Most of Latin America knows no democracy today. Of the so-called “people's republics” on several continents, most give no genuine authority to the people. In China, democracy is no more real under Mao—newly proclaimed “Supreme Commander of the Whole Nation and the Whole Army”—than it was under Chiang. The “guided democracies” of Afghanistan and Indonesia are more guided than democratic.

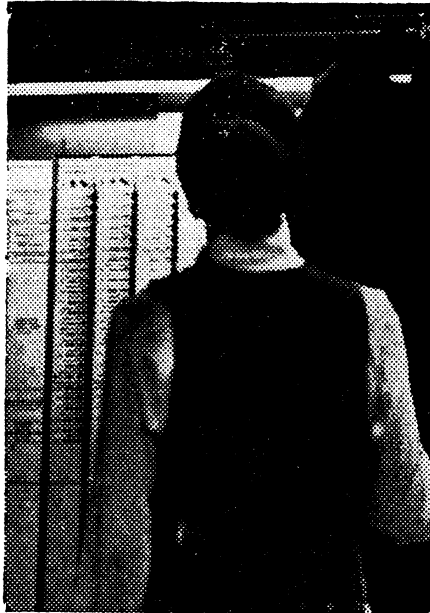
Spain and Portugal have been without democracy for decades, Greece for years. Many of the newly formed African republics have populations unprepared and unable to participate in the way democracy requires; South Africa and Rhodesia systematically prevent most of their populations from doing so. Of South Vietnam and South Korea, our allies, it is humiliating to speak of them as democracies.

Concerning the reality of democracy in our own country, I leave the reader to make his own judgment. Are the laws made and enforced by honestly elected officials? Or by an alien force, or a hidden plutocracy, working their will under false democratic pretenses? The question is not whether the people agree with the President or the Congress in this or that particular decision, but whether, over the long run, the people really get their way, have the final say.

The mistake to be avoided is con-

fusing substantive ends with procedural ideals. Democracy is a way of making decisions, a procedural ideal; peace, justice, prosperity and the like are substantive objectives distinct from it. Whether democracy is the means most likely over the long run to achieve worthy ends is a question worth worrying about, but one that the democrat usually has no need to fear.

Contrast the Governments of Cuba and India. Under the regime of Fidel Castro the drive for greater economic



William E. Sauro/The New York Times

equality and for universal literacy has rendered the life of the majority of Cubans far more purposeful and decent than ever it was under Batista.

The Indian parliamentary system, on the other hand, has often proved bumbling and ineffective, failing to come to grips with its overwhelming problems. That it is genuinely representative of a vast and heterogeneous population, however, there is little doubt.

The true relation of democracy and communism is not (as often assumed) one of simple opposition. Neither is it one of simple harmony. The one is a procedural principle some Communists adopt and many do not; the other is a set of substantive objectives some democrats adopt and many do not. Whether those objectives (or any other community objectives) are pursued as the freely chosen goals of the members to whom they will apply, is a question answerable not from theory but from an examination of the facts in that community.

First, we must ask who may participate, and who does participate. If a nation forbids those with certain politi-

cal views, as in Communist China, or outlaws some political parties, as in South Vietnam, or prohibits all political opposition whatever, as in Egypt, we have clear evidence that democracy is not being practiced. If members of racial or ethnic minorities are persecuted, or otherwise handicapped in their efforts to participate, democracy is unrealized. Even where the franchise is in theory universal, if large numbers who may participate do not do so because of pressure or negligence, democracy is imperfect. This is the *breadth* of democracy, and it is fundamental.

Second, even where participation is broad, we must ask how *deep* it is. With what vigor and fullness do those who participate, participate? How well informed are the participants? To what degree are they manipulated by a government-controlled press, or by private broadcasters? Some governments report that 99 per cent of their citizens vote, but percentages are only part of the story. The quality of that participation is also vital, and on this dimension most national democracies are a good deal less perfect than they pretend to be.

Third, we want to know whether there are certain kinds of questions on which the people never get a real chance to enforce their will. Some underdeveloped countries professing democracy never allow some issues—that of land reform, for example—to be decided openly. And in our own country matters of military policy, gravely affecting all, often seem to elude the control of the people's representatives. This is the *range* of democracy; in practice it is hardest to appraise.

National democracies, all imperfect, obviously differ in their strengths and weaknesses along these several dimensions. In judging the performance of particular communities one needs to look at the constitution and the laws, of course, and at the reality of political parties and the fairness of the representative system—but most of all one needs to determine what is really going on. Political institutions may serve democracy, but they do not themselves constitute democracy. It is the living process of citizen participation that is fundamental, not the forms through which it may be realized. In this matter we are often deceived, sometimes about the accomplishments of others, sometimes about our own.

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