The Asan Institute for Policy Studies,
Friday, March 13th

What to Fear and What to Hope for from Democracy Today?

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What to fear and hope for from democracy is a severely practical question that can only be answered instructively for particular times and places. It has one answer now for the Republic of Korea and another for the still precariously United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It has one answer today. It had another answer thirty years ago, and it will have yet another in thirty years time wherever democracy is a meaningful name for the way those places are governed.

In itself democracy is just a form of government, but it is one that professes to open up the process of government to the will and judgment of each one of its citizens and to endure whatever the consequences prove to be. Because of what government is like as an activity and because of what citizens are like in their purposes and judgments that is either a pretty indiscreet commitment or a manifestly insincere assurance. Because no coherent practice of government can be created through mass citizen deliberation and decision it is always in practice an insincere assurance and never more than fleetingly a truly radical commitment. Given the exigencies of everyday life, that is just as well.

The best to hope for from democracy today, as at any other time, is that it ensures that those who govern cannot govern for any length of time in defiance of the definite wishes and judgments of the majority of those they govern, that the purposes of the latter are not practically absurd or actively malign, and the judgments behind those purposes not so erratic that they can only disorganize and frustrate the better judgments and more benign purposes of those who are trying to rule them. Citizens often suspect the benignity of their rulers' purposes and fear the quality of their judgment, and rulers in their turn all but invariably more than return the compliment. Government is almost always a fraught relationship both ways on.

The strength of contemporary democratic government is its professed commitment to do as the people wish. Its weakness is the implausibility of that commitment as seen and felt by those to whom it is professed. Neither strengths nor weaknesses are reliably related to its continuing consequences in action. The electoral practices through which it draws its authorization to govern look increasingly cynical and manipulative to those who must confer that

authorization by their choices, so the authorization is seldom intended by those who cast their votes to last for long, and often effectively withdrawn well within a year of the time of election. This is important because it explains why it is so harmful to think of democracy as a guarantee of legitimacy or a magical mechanism for ensuring good outcomes for a population over time.

The real problems facing modern populations cannot be solved by tinkering with their systems of government, still less by transforming them radically in some wholly unspecified way. They can only be solved practically by acting in a way which has more and better good consequences than it has bad. Democracy in itself is neither an aid nor an impediment in achieving this. Its distinctive merit is merely that, insofar as it really does obtain, it guarantees a population against protractedly unwelcome and increasingly alien rule. It provides one form of insurance against a single terrible risk. It is not in itself a coherent plan for living well together: merely a frame within which a population can find out for itself how well it can learn to do so.