



# Stages in the Evolution of Democracy

By Richard Barrett

Recent events in the Middle East and their repercussions in other parts of the world have refocused global public attention on the unfolding story of democracy.<sup>1</sup>

Democracy is far from mature as a concept. It is poorly understood, open to misinterpretation, often abused, and almost exclusively birthed through public unrest, violence, or civil wars. It always has to be taken; it is never given. It always requires a confrontation between the masses and the powerful elites; and it is almost always bloody.

Once the confrontation is over and the masses have established their will over the elites, there are seven distinct stages in the maturation of democracy. Each stage is represented by a specific value. The value of a particular stage must be fully embodied in the workings of the democracy before the next stage can be attained.

The seven stages in the evolution towards a mature democracy are represented by the following values: freedom, equality, accountability, fairness, openness, transparency and trust.

**Freedom:** One of the two fundamental values on which democracy is based is freedom—the freedom to voice your opinions and the freedom to vote for a candidate of your choice to represent you in a local or national election. For freedom to be fully embodied, anyone in a given community must be able to put themselves forward for election.

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<sup>1</sup> Democracy as a concept is not new, but the practice of democracy is. One hundred years ago the only women allowed to vote were those living in New Zealand, Finland, and two island communities. Women are still not allowed to vote in Saudi Arabia and the Holy See.

**Equality:** The second fundamental value on which democracy is based is equality—the recognition that, if you have the right to freedom and everything that comes with that right, then all others who live in the same community should have the same rights as well. No individual or group should be marginalized or treated differently from all other groups.

**Accountability:** This naturally leads to the value of accountability—the practice of responsible freedom. If everyone agrees that freedom and equality are important, then everyone must take responsibility and accountability for making sure that all their actions are in support of these values. This includes those who are elected as representatives of the people, those in position of public authority and the population themselves. Furthermore those who serve at the pleasure of the people must be fully accountable to the people who elected them for how they discharge their public responsibilities.

**Fairness:** This naturally leads to the value of fairness—the practice of being accountable for living the value of equality. Unfairness arises when people are not held accountable for ensuring that their actions support the value of equality. Fairness requires that there is no discrimination in any community against persons of different races, religions, political affiliations, ages, genders and sexual preferences.

**Openness:** This naturally leads to the value of openness—the process by which fairness can be guaranteed. Openness requires that those in authority fully disclose their motivations in making decisions. Motivations must be disclosed for openness to be lived. Decisions cannot be made behind closed doors in an open society.

**Transparency:** This naturally leads to the value of transparency—the demonstration of openness and the disclosure of all documents and materials that indicate how decisions have been made. The best way to ensure transparency is to make sure that every aspect of the process by which decisions are made is open to public view. Nothing must be hidden for transparency to be lived.

**Trust:** Only when the values of freedom, equality, accountability, fairness, openness and transparency are collectively embodied in the systems processes and policies of governance and individually embodied in the elected representatives and those in authority can trust be established and democracy be regarded as mature.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, which claims to measure the state of democracy in 167 countries, only 26 countries are categorized as full democracies. The remainder are either flawed democracies (53), hybrid democracies (32), or authoritarian regimes (56).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy\\_Index#2010\\_rankings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_Index#2010_rankings)

Among the full democracies, the United States ranks 17 and the United Kingdom ranks 19. A cursory examination of the quality of democracy in these countries based on the stages of evolution described above shows that both countries are wrestling with issues of accountability and fairness. The widespread abuse of expenses by British MPs brought to light in 2010 throws into question the ethics and motivations of the British elected representatives. In the United States, lobbyists representing the business elites are highly influential in manipulating the process of governance. Not surprisingly there is little trust among the populations of these countries in their Governments.

Both these so-called “pillars” of democracy have much work to do on their values. It is clear to everyone that they are light years away from embodying openness and transparency, and still have much work to do on embodying accountability and fairness.

Based on the stages of development where would you place the country you live in?

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