

Doug Saunders

Democracy promotion? Poof, it's vanished ...

London— From Saturday's Globe and Mail , November 27 2010

In this season of summitry, as the world's leaders and ministers flit between Seoul, Lisbon, Jerusalem and Washington, it is worth tuning out the words being spoken, for a moment, and paying attention to those that have disappeared. Chief among these is "democracy." A decade or even five years ago, any major meeting to discuss the Middle East, Afghanistan, Sudan, North Africa or Eastern Europe would have been dominated by talk of democratic reform. In fact, democracy would have been the basic precondition for many of the proposals being discussed.

Today, you just don't hear it. When we deal with Sudan or Libya or China today, it is to make deals or to guarantee military support, not to demand elections in exchange for any of that. The more important goal is not democracy but stability. And, by paying large sums to sustain the rule of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq and Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank, or by paying the regimes of Syria, Libya or even Sudan to help us, we are buying stability at the explicit price of democracy. After the huge effort and attention devoted to the 2005 and 2009 elections in Afghanistan, we virtually ignored this autumn's parliamentary vote: Afghan stability now trumps democracy.

The proponents of democratization, too, are disappearing. This week, French President Nicolas Sarkozy sacked foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, a leading proponent of pro-democracy "liberal interventionism." Voters in Britain and the United States have tossed out democratic idealists on the right and left in favour of pragmatists.

It also appears that our governments are no longer giving financial and political support to democracy movements in other countries as much as we used to. Stephen Harper may make speeches in Ukraine about the need to return to full democracy, but we no longer finance or back pro-democracy opposition groups there.

On Thursday, I spoke with William Hague, the British Foreign Minister, shortly after he had held a bilateral summit in Washington with Hillary Clinton, his U.S. counterpart. Democracy, I mentioned, had only come up as an incidental matter, not as a principal goal in Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, the Middle East or most other regions discussed.

At first, he defended himself, noting (rightly) that they had discussed Burma and Zimbabwe, two countries where democratic reforms very much remain a precondition.

But Mr. Hague, a shrewd reader of international currents, knew what I was talking about, and he continued. "Clearly, we are in a different situation from 10 years ago," he said. "We have had the war in Iraq, we are heavily engaged in Afghanistan. We are emphasizing conflict prevention to a greater degree. That's been a major part of our work on Sudan, on Yemen ... we are shifting more of our attention in foreign policy to preventing conflicts. There has been that shift in the light of what's happened over the last decade." I only understood the full meaning of those words later in the day, while attending a talk by Richard Youngs, head of the Madrid-based Foundation for International Relations and Exterior Dialogue. He has examined the support by Western nations for democracy movements, and found them drifting off the agenda. And governments, he said, are "much more cautious about supporting [democracy] organizations that are not sanctioned by the incumbent regimes" in authoritarian countries. In other words, we no longer back the resistance.

He has also studied the fate of "democratic conditionality," the demand, in foreign policy, that if countries want to receive aid and assistance, or if they want to participate in military alliances or free-trade blocs, they must first show progress in making their institutions and governments more democratic. This, too, has virtually disappeared.

On one hand, democratic reform was a victim of its disastrous failures – notably in Iraq, where the U.S.-led war was the most expensive experiment in democratization ever, and unquestionably the least satisfying. Democratization, once a goal that united left and right, became a neoconservative brand. This, Mr. Youngs said, has poisoned the well.

“During the Bush years, many governments understandably lost their enthusiasm for democratization,” he explained. Both the rhetoric and the policy of democracy promotion became associated with U.S. excesses. Now, Mr. Youngs says, “there’s a disappointment in that they have not returned to the agenda after Obama has taken office ... It’s slipped down the agenda.”

We now talk about stability, or containment, or conflict prevention. Because the word was abused so violently by Mr. Bush, it may be a generation before democracy returns to that list.

Robert Zaretsky and Olivia Miljanic

Democracies can be as racist as any other state

Contributed to The Globe and Mail

Thursday, Aug. 23 2012, 4:24 PM EDT

On both sides of the Atlantic, commentators and activists have reacted with growing fury to the French government's expulsion of hundreds of Roma, or Gypsies, to Bulgaria and Romania. Many critics liken these expulsions - as well as the threat to strip lawbreakers of their French citizenship - to the deportations of Jews organized by France's Vichy regime during the Second World War.

It's hard to know what is more outrageous: the policies practised by President Nicolas Sarkozy or the analogies proffered by his critics. Vichy has no monopoly on xenophobic reflexes and exclusionary policies in the history of modern France. Over the course of the 20th century, it was the French Republic that laid the administrative and legal foundations for official discrimination against the Roma.

As in real estate, so in history: Location - in this case, temporal location - counts for a great deal. In 1912, the French republican government passed a battery of laws ostensibly aimed at vagrancy. Yet, the government revealed its hand when it created an identity card that specifically targeted Gypsies. While the French law did not specify "Gypsies," instead using the term "nomads," the instructions to local officials lent themselves to racial identification. (This has recently been repeated in Arizona's proposed anti-immigrant law.)

The identity cards allowed French authorities to track the movements of Gypsies during the First World War, but they were rarely interned in camps - a policy that soon changed. By the mid-1930s, with the great influx into France of political and religious refugees from central and eastern Europe, the republic created a new kind of identity card that, as the historian Pierre Piazza notes, sought "to delimit more rigorously the contours [of the national community] and to better locate those who did not make up part of it."

With relentless logic, there followed the creation of dozens of "special centres" - soon to become concentration camps - for refugees recently arrived on French soil. At the same time, the republic passed a law empowering officials to strip recently naturalized citizens of French nationality. Finally, shortly before the German invasion in the spring of 1940, the republican government ordered local officials to herd "nomads" into assigned areas. In justifying its action, the government declared: "Wandering individuals generally without a home, a homeland, or an actual profession, constitute a danger for national security ... that must be removed."

When Vichy came into existence a few months later, it built upon policies and structures introduced by the now-defunct republic. But the popular view of Vichy - as a rupture in history, four years that had nothing in common with what went before or what followed - cedes to a more accurate rendering, which shows important and unsettling continuities between democratic governments and authoritarian regimes in France. Of course, the republic would never have applied a racist policy toward Gypsies and Jews as Vichy did, much less participate in the systematic deportation of the two groups to the death camps. In this respect, Vichy and the French Republic have nothing in common.

Nonetheless, the continuities between democratic and authoritarian phases in French history lead to a more general observation, often overlooked: the tendency of all democracies to isolate and discriminate against certain minorities. Democracies are as likely as authoritarian states to practice xenophobic or racist politics. Mr. Sarkozy's policies may be unworthy of the French Republic, as his critics insist, but they are not unprecedented.

Thinkers from Plato to Tocqueville have commented on the dangers inherent in the rule of the majority - especially when the majority is swayed by the passionate actions and speeches of the few. The lot of the Roma in contemporary France and Romania is a case in point. While these democracies do not subject their Roma populations to the punitive, at times fatal, policies pursued by Pétain's France or Ceausescu's Romania, they do relegate them to the margins of their societies.

In present-day Romania, the Roma population has a poverty rate three times higher than the national average, with low life expectancy, low rates of literacy and 100 per cent unemployment in some areas. Since becoming a candidate and then a member of the European Union, the Romanian government has reluctantly designed initiatives aimed at facilitating integration of the Roma. Affirmative action programs and the appointment of local level educational and health mediators have been the most publicized. But the effectiveness of these programs has been limited at best, and anti-Roma sentiments continue among Romanian policy-makers, reflecting local public-opinion trends.

Romanians now see the French expulsions as proof that integration of the Roma into any European society is mere utopia. So the actions of the French government are undermining the already frail attempts at implementing policies that would target Roma discrimination in Romania.

As for France, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, leader of the European Green Party, says Mr. Sarkozy has "taken the French for fools" in pursuing his anti-Roma policy. Perhaps. But according to recent polls that reveal a nation evenly divided over the issue, Mr. Cohn-Bendit's claim means that nearly half the French population are fools.

We need only consider earlier republican laws aimed at the Gypsies, passed in 1912, 1938 and 1940, to see that xenophobia flared at those moments when France faced the threat of war. Moreover, on the eve of both world wars, France was awash in fears over the nation's declining birth rate and its capacity to maintain its historical legacy as a dominant economic, cultural, political and military power.

While the French Republic doesn't now face the prospect of war, it does face other crises: economic stagnation, decaying inner cities and a top-heavy state staggering under the increasingly unrealistic expectations of the public. It must also wrestle with perplexing questions of national identity and national security provoked by an EU that continues to extend its writ. Here's the rub for Mr. Sarkozy, and blessing for the Roma: The EU, long criticized for its "democratic deficit," may now become the defender of last resort for Europe's last stateless people, the Roma.

Robert Zaretsky is a professor of history at the Honors College, University of Houston, and with Alice Conklin and Sarah Fishman, author of France and Its Empire Since 1870 . Olivia Miljanic, born and raised in Romania, is a lecturer at the University of Houston.