

Bush administration is endangering American democracy

By Dr. Han S. Park

After the fall of the communist bloc, faith in liberal democracy was reinforced by the global trend toward that system of government. But this democratic optimism did not last long, as the United States became the target of terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Since that tragic day, America, the only remaining superpower, has decided to wage a campaign to eradicate rogue states, dictators and terrorists, prompting the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. This well-intended campaign, however, has been grossly misguided by the carelessness and incompetence of the Bush administration.

We have heard enough about this dilemma, and I have a serious new concern: The administration's war strategies could hurt our democracy. Listening to our president, I can't stop wondering if he's aware his campaign to expand democracy abroad may be undermining the very premises upon which democracy is built at home. In these trying times, we must be alert to the possibility of compromising the quality of our democracy by the self-imposed imperative to win the unwinnable and open-ended "War on Terror."

It's this concern for the well-being of American democracy that has prompted me to spell out the common tactics and strategies that have been consistently used by numerous dictators.

The first tactic is to exploit people's fear of threats to their security and safety. Keeping people fearful for their lives has always been a fundamental source of power for the oppressive ruler.

The second tactic is controlling public information. This tactic is often used to indoctrinate the people so they believe what the ruler wants them to believe.

Third, the ruler surrounds himself with deputies who follow him with absolute allegiance, and eliminates those who disagree with him.

Fourth, the ruler "consults" others, but only those who support the policies he's already decided to pursue.

Fifth, in undermining people's opinions, he uses either the pretext that people have inadequate information or the theocratic premise that there is a higher authority mandating his governance.

These are the "golden rules" for dictatorship. All dictators use these tactics, and their power slips away as their ability to employ them wanes. As testament, consider the many dictators who've built and lost their regimes around these tenets: Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, Mao Zedong in China, Haji Muhammad Suharto in Indonesia, Syngman Rhee in South Korea, Idi Amin in Uganda, Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania and Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia, to name only a few.

Democracy is a hard-earned and precious commodity developed through a long history of trial and error. If citizens in a democracy allow their leaders to use dictatorial tactics to advance their personal or political agenda, that democracy will not survive. America is at a critical juncture in history, where the health of our democracy may be eroding before our very eyes.

Since the tragedy of 9/11 and the ensuing misguided and illegitimate invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration has managed to implement a series of policy choices and political tactics that resemble the "golden rules." Our hard-earned democracy rests on our insistence on democratic principles: that the ultimate reservoir of power and authority resides with the people; that a participatory democracy requires an informed citizenry, and information on public issues should never be withheld from the public; that a pluralist democracy should accommodate and represent diverse opinions and views, especially critical ones; that the leadership should never surround themselves with only "yes men" who make them blind and self-righteous, and that the art of the democratic process should be adhered to in both foreign and domestic politics.

The military way is not a democratic way, and should never be used unless our own territorial sovereignty is in danger. Terrorism is a political phenomenon, not a military one. In any asymmetrical power balance, the weak will be tempted to resort to terrorism, and any action that further imbalances military power will only create, not eliminate, terrorists. The only way to subdue terrorists is through the democratic means of negotiation and dialogue, not through military means.

Had the current administration heeded these important lessons of history, we might have avoided the senseless loss of more than 3,200 young American lives, many times more wounded soldiers, and countless Iraqi lives. As the death toll continues to rise, we must find a way to revitalize the principles upon which our democracy rests.

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