September 20, 2010

Democracy Still Matters

By ROGER COHEN

LONDON — One mystery of the first decade of the 21st century is the decline of democracy. It’s not that nations with democratic systems have dwindled in number but that democracy has lost its luster. It’s an idea without a glow. And that’s worrying.

I said “mystery.” Those who saw something of the blood expended through the 20th century to secure liberal societies must inevitably find democracy’s diminished appeal puzzling. But there are reasons.

The lingering wars waged partly in democracy’s name in Iraq and Afghanistan hurt its reputation, however moving images of inky-fingered voters gripped by the revolutionary notion that they could decide who governs them. Given the bloody mayhem, it was easy to portray “democracy” as a fig leaf for the West’s bellicose designs and casual hypocrisies.

While the democratic West fought, a nondemocratic China grew. It emerged onto the world stage prizing stability, avoiding military adventure and delivering 10 percent annual growth of which Western democracies could only dream.

China’s “surge” was domestic. It was unencumbered by the paralyzing debate of democratic process. When the West’s financial system imploded in 2008, the Chinese response was vigorous. A “Beijing consensus” gained traction.

The borderline between democracy and authoritarianism grew more opaque. The dichotomy between freedom and tyranny suddenly seemed oh-so 20th century. The new authoritarianism of China or Russia was harder to define and therefore harder to confront.

“Regimes like the one in Russia are stabilized by the fact that they have no ideology,” said Ivan Krastev, a fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. “There is really no ideological means to attack them.”
They also derive resilience from the fact that their borders are open. “The middle class is not interested in changing the system because if they don’t like it they can fly to London,” Krastev noted.

Having grown up in Communist Bulgaria, he believes democracy was oversold in the 1990’s. All good things, at the Cold War’s end, were shoveled into the democratic basket: prosperity, growth, peace. When democracy stopped delivering in these areas, it suffered. Too little was said about democratic values, including freedom.

Meanwhile technology kicked in with what the author Jonathan Franzen has called its “trillion little bits of distracting noise.” People, synched with themselves, retreated into private networks and away from the public space — the commons — where democratic politics had been played out.

Democracies seemed blocked, as in Belgium, or corrupted, as in Israel, or parodies, as in Italy, or paralyzed, as in the Netherlands.

There were exceptions, particularly the heady mass movement that brought Barack Obama to power in 2008. But Obama soon found himself caught in the gridlock of the very partisan shrieking he had vowed to overcome. Less than halfway through his presidency the prospect of legislative paralysis looked overwhelming. The world’s most powerful democracy, its promise so recently renewed, seemed mired once more in its frustrations and divisions.

So what? So what if money trumped democracy and stability trumped open societies for hundreds of millions of people? So what if the rule of law or individual freedom was compromised, the press muzzled, and media-controlling presidents thought they could use “democracy” to rule for life with occasional four-year breaks.

So what if people no longer thought their vote would change anything because politics was for sale? Perhaps liberal democracy, along with its Western cradle, had passed its zenith.

Wrong. It’s important to stanch the anti-democratic tide. Thugs and oppression ride on it.

If anyone needs reminding of that, read the remarkable Tony Judt, the historian who brought the same unstinting lucidity to his death last month from Lou Gehrig’s Disease as he did to the sweep of 20th-century European history. Judt was a British intellectual transposed to New York whose rigorous spirit of inquiry epitomized Anglo-American liberal civilization. Nobody knew better the repressive systems that create captive minds. Nobody wrote more persuasively about the struggle against them for pluralism, liberty and justice.
Judt died as I moved the other way, from New York to London. It’s a move across a continuum of language — even if I can’t get used to “letter box” or “white” coffee — but also, still, across the continuum of Anglo-American civilization, the civilization of Locke and Adam Smith and Isaiah Berlin, however marginalized those dead white men may appear in the dawning Asian century.

So I’m grateful to Timothy Garton Ash, in his tribute to Judt in The New York Review of Books, for finding in the words of a 17th-century Englishman, Colonel Thomas Rainsborough, a quintessential expression of the democratic idea:

“For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he: and therefore truly, sir, I think it’s clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government.”

From that utterance in 1647 to Lincoln at Gettysburg in 1863 — “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” — is a natural progression. And democracy is still an idea worth the fight.