

Authoritarian vs. totalitarian

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 3, 2009 NCR Today

You have to keep an eye on Michael Gerson. In his column today [he writes movingly](#) [1], and somewhat convincingly, about the need to keep a concern for democracy promotion in our foreign policy mix. Yes, we feel that those in the Arab world who yearn for justice and democracy are our kindred spirits, and yes, pure realism has been a curse to the world since the age of Metternich. But, we must also seek joy where joy may be found.

One sentence, actually one adjective, especially caught my attention. He refers to Egypt as "an authoritarian society." And so it is. (Elsewhere he labels Egypt an autocracy.) The distinction between an authoritarian and a totalitarian society has a history and it lives in the party which employed Gerson before he went to the *Washington Post*. Jeane Kirkpatrick, a hawkish Democrat who worked for the Republicans, first articulated the distinction in the late 1970s to justify American support for repressive regimes that were non-communist.

The Reagan administration used Kirkpatrick's distinction to arm the contras in Nicaragua, which overlooked other agents of change, such as the church, at work in the country. But the theory has even greater applicability to the Mideast today. The problem with demanding free elections in a country like Egypt is that the radicals will win. This is what happened in Gaza where Hamas won the elections. The choice in the Arab World is not between an authoritarian regime and an American style democracy, not even a Tammany Hall style democracy. The choice is between what we have and theocratically inclined radicals.

I am no Mideast expert but I wish we would spend more time building schools in the Arab world and aiding their universities so that they can become what some of their heroic men and women already want them to become, free and just democratic societies. If the Iraq War has proven anything it is that Jeffersonian democracy cannot be shipped elsewhere with the 101st Airborne. The work of building just and free societies is as noble a work as there is. It must also be a patient work.

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[1] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/02/AR2009060202966.html?hpid=opinionsbox1>