

Dictatorship, democracy and society's well-being

The dream of dictatorship

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Bonn, 24 April 2024. 'Under certain circumstances, a dictatorship is the better form of government.' Only six out of ten people eligible to vote in Germany reject this statement outright. More than 20% at least partly agree, as a representative survey has shown. A common assumption is that we would just need a good dictator, a benevolent one, who could then finally take robust action, ensure law and order and implement sensible policies much more efficiently and with a longer-term outlook.

Let us suppose for a minute that there was in fact a genuinely benevolent dictator who was not merely thinking of his – or her – own power but primarily had the interests of the population at heart. What would the consequences be? The dictator would carry out politics to the best of their knowledge and belief, perhaps supported by a capable circle of advisors. Decisions would be implemented quickly and efficiently without any resistance. The question arises, however, who these policies would benefit. Anyone more or less open to the idea of a benevolent dictator no doubt dreams of the ‘right’ policies finally being implemented efficiently. They may imagine someone with a dictator’s powers finally taking resolute action to halt climate change. Finally closing the borders and stopping migration. Finally cutting back on public spending. Finally stepping up investment in education and other public goods. One person’s ideal scenario is another person’s nightmare.

“The most important issue here is to improve the process of recognising refugees’ property rights to the resources they bring with them (human, financial and social).”

Society is diverse – and so are its interests and preferences. It is impossible to suit everyone, as we keep on seeing in the arduous negotiations within and between our political parties and in the difficult compromises that ultimately seem unsatisfactory for all sides. Democratic politics involves arguments and is often slightly chaotic – a laborious process in which different options and consequences are discussed, weighed up against one another and negotiated. Democratic politics ideally ends in a result that takes the preferences and interests of all groups into consideration, combining them and striking a balance between them with a view to designing policies that suit the majority of society without placing too much of a burden on individual groups.

This does not always succeed: democracy can result in bad politics too. But then there is the option of drawing people’s attention to the problem, pro-

testing against it and ultimately voting the government out of office and bringing about a change of policy – by peaceful means. That cannot be done in a dictatorship. What happens if a dictator perhaps implements ‘good policies’ at the beginning but at some point stops doing so? Power corrupts, as countless examples from history show. What happens if the individuals directly subordinate to a dictator abuse their power even if the dictator does not? What incentives does a dictator have to do politics ‘for the people’ and not for themselves or for people close to them? He (or she) is only human after all – and in this case a human being with absolute power.

This power is not based on legitimacy drawn from the will of the people. It is based on the fact that no one can challenge the dictator’s power or pose a threat towards them. Potential rivals representing different interests or putting forward alternative policy options are neutralised. Or they are appeased with lucrative posts. That means that policies are pursued in the interests of a small group of elites who help the dictator retain power. Critical voices are suppressed, if necessary by violent means and with complete disregard for human rights. This affects minorities in particular. Law and order is established, but at what price? There are no universal rights to which individuals can lay claim and that can be enforced – against the state or the government if needs be. In contrast to a democratic system, there are no mechanisms for removing a dictator from power by peaceful means. The dream of a benevolent dictatorship could – and would – therefore very quickly turn into a nightmare. No democracy is perfect. But it is the best we have.