

Democracy impeded by unrest, conflict and politics

by MARK PAVILONS

Our love-hate relationship with democracy is unique to the western world.

While we find ourselves constantly at odds with government policies and decision-makers at all levels, we forget just how lucky and blessed we are.

We've enjoyed ever-expanding human rights under our Charter since 1982. The anniversary was April 17 and every year we quietly (very Canadian)?celebrate its anniversary. It solidifies the very essence of democratic rights ? religion, speech, media, assembly and more.

We get stuck on minor hurdles in our evolution to become truly ?woke.? But that's okay. And we constantly ask for more. And that's okay, too because we are allowed to.

Essential elements of a democracy include pluralistic political parties, fair elections, transparent governance, politically engaged citizens, civil liberties, and free media.

We have those in spade, but many, many countries do not.

According to the Democracy Index, the Scandinavian countries all rank as the most democratic nations on the globe. Canada, in 2021, was ranked 5th. That's impressive. The U.S. has the title of a ?flawed democracy.?

Believe it or not the least democratic country in the world is oil-rich Saudi Arabia.

Just recently, the African nation of Mali banned the media from reporting on political parties and associations, and also suspended all political activities.

How's that for a kick in the proverbial pants? It couldn't get more anti-democratic.

But this country is not alone.

A Freedom House report in 2019 says some 57 countries are not free because they fail to hold valid elections, don't have active independent media, and do not endow their citizens with basic civil rights.

North Korea is controlled by a dynastic totalitarian dictatorship, which maintains its harsh control with extensive surveillance, arrests and brutal punishment for those suspected of political offenses. The report adds that camps for political prisoners often implement ?torture, forced labor, starvation, and other atrocities.?

The ruling Communist Party in China has grown more restrictive with state agencies, the internet, religious groups, universities, and businesses.

Under Cuba's one-party communist rule, dissent is stifled and citizens lack basic civil liberties.

Thailand is ruled by a unit of military leaders that has suppressed political opposition and exercised ?unchecked powers? secured in the constitution that restrict citizens' civil and political rights.

In Qatar, other political parties are not permitted, and elections don't affect the highest levels of government. The report notes that

Qatari citizens are among the wealthiest in the world, but the vast majority of the population are non-citizens with no political rights, few civil liberties, and limited access to economic opportunity.

Political parties are banned within the seven Emirates and hereditary rulers hold all power, with which restrict civil liberties of citizens and visitors alike.

The Communist Party's control over Vietnam has created a dangerous environment for human rights, as citizens and activists alike face restricted freedoms in speech, press, work, and religion.

Many of these are not developing (Third World) nations and they do have modern technology, decent economies and resources.

They just look at things differently. Yes, I realize that's a massive, somewhat facetious understatement.

Most of these are rampant with corruption. It seems humankind's hunger for power and greed are alive and well, and reducing citizens to serfs.

Some of these countries are also popular among western tourists, for various reasons. We seldom look for, or care about, such things when booking a vacay. Oh, what evil lurks in the hearts of men.

According to the World Bank, roughly one-third of the world's population ??6 billion ? are not connected to the internet. The top countries with people offline include India (684 million), China (336 million) and Pakistan (131 million).

Many of these are not what we consider developing nations by any means and all have the resources to increase their country's digital literacy.

Government regulations and censorship of course impede internet access and freedom of expression in certain countries. For those with access, it amplifies marginalized voices, facilitates grassroots organizing, and fosters global solidarity around important issues. The vast source of knowledge can empower individuals with democratic goals.

By censoring the internet or barring access, authoritarian governments and dictators can more effectively keep their citizens oppressed, and people in these countries lose a vital tool that would help them set up fairer, more democratic institutions.

We see the problems; have identified the countries and leaders with poor track records. And yet, world trade, political dinners and pats on the back still take place among world leaders.

If we truly believe in furthering democratic principles around the globe, I say we take stronger actions.

I believe we should decrease ties, implement sanctions and shame those who routinely suppress human rights, imprison and harm their citizens.

I know the United Nations and its member countries have called out offenders. And yet, we still happily trade in arms, oil and goods to anyone with a cheque book.

Enjoy our freedoms and embrace them in your very soul. And, at every possibly opportunity, thank those who helped make it happen.