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News

Democratization isn't a bad word

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Last week I met a woman whose husband, an Indonesian human rights activist, was poisoned to death on an international flight in 2004, six years after the downfall of Suharto. The march of freedom seems to be flagging.

There are three main ways Canada can promote democracy in the world. It can spend on development, which encourages freedom. It can offer expertise and support to fragile democracies. And it can try to change the behaviour of less democratic governments.

The last method has gone out of vogue in the past few years, and it's not hard to see why. It's difficult. It requires picking sides and taking risks. Canada's attempts have been half-hearted, other than in Afghanistan.

There are many ways of influencing bad governments short of overthrowing them. Indeed, the failing attempt to establish democracy by force in Iraq is one reason democratization is becoming a dirty word that makes some people cringe.

In February, Ben Rowsell, a policy adviser in the foreign affairs department, spoke at a conference organized by a branch of **Canadian Lawyers Abroad**. He mentioned another reason for the "backlash" against democratization: dismay at the results of democratic processes, including the empowerment of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Hamas in the Palestinian Authority.

We don't have to go through an Afghanistan or Iraq every time we champion freedom. And we can't let pseudo-democrats such as Mr. Chavez poison us against democracy. Elections alone do not make a democracy.

Governments such as Canada's have many levers other than force: trade policy, sanctions, diplomacy, statements, international resolutions, partnerships with opposition groups. Any effort is risky: You can alienate trading partners, back the wrong horse, close diplomatic doors, make dangerous enemies, and worst of all, you can fail and be seen to fail.

But to choose not to try is the coward's way out. It's cowardly to resign ourselves to living in an insecure, unjust world. It's cowardly to wait for governments to improve on their own, or be conquered by domestic forces that might never be strong enough.

Which brings me back to the man who got on a plane and was killed by a large dose of arsenic. His name was Munir Said Thalib. His widow, Suciwati, spoke to me through an interpreter. She said the investigation into his death is a test case for democracy in Indonesia: "It's very difficult to see how democracy will succeed until basic human rights are respected."

The pilot's conviction for the murder was overturned. Now other men are under suspicion; the whole thing looks like an exercise in scapegoating, perhaps to protect the military. Until the truth is uncovered, Indonesia cannot claim to be a free country. Canada, which has regular dialogues on human rights with Indonesia, has the power to keep nudging it in the direction of freedom.

Some governments you nudge, some you push. Burma's has extended the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nelson Mandela of her country. One of her countrymen, Soe Myint, now lives in India and is editor-in-chief of a news agency in exile called Mizzima News. It's a seedling waiting to be transplanted back into native soil when Burma is free.

Soe Myint, on a recent visit to Ottawa, said that while he admires Canada's efforts for refugees and other victims, he wishes Canada would promote democracy more vigorously. "It's not only support we are seeking. It is also involvement. It is solidarity we are seeking."

Canada has made statements about Burma, including one on Friday. It can do more. One way to influence Burma is to influence our business partners, China and India. The 2008 Olympics could be the opportunity of a generation to push for change in Chinese domestic and foreign policy.

UN Watch recently published a Human Rights Scorecard: Canada at the United Nations 2006-2007. It lists many missed opportunities: "Canada took no action whatsoever at the Human Rights Council or the General Assembly against China's violations of civil, political and religious rights -- which harm over a sixth of the world's population. Canada was equally silent regarding Fidel Castro's police state, where journalists languish in jail for daring to speak the truth. It said nothing about Saudi Arabia's refusal to allow women to vote or drive a car, or its state-sponsored schoolbooks that teach children to hate Christians and other non-Muslims. Nor did it protest Robert Mugabe's repression in Zimbabwe."

The report called on Canada to speak out strongly more often and to "forge a broader alliance in support of human rights, democracy, and peace." In other words, make democratization fashionable again.

Kate Heartfield is a member of the Citizen's editorial board. Her blog is at ottawacitizen.com/worldnextdoor.

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