



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on April 3, 2013

Middle East 'Democracy'

The Obama administration treated the creation of "democracy" in the Middle East as a Good Thing. Ironically, those who created the United States of America viewed democracy with fear — and created a Constitutional republic instead.

Everything depends on how you define democracy. In its most basic sense, democracy means majority rule. But there can be majority rule in a free country or in a country with an authoritarian or even a dictatorial government.



In this age of sloppy uses of words, many people include freedom in their conception of democracy. But whether democracy leads to freedom is an open question, not a foregone conclusion.

In the United States, when the Union army of occupation withdrew from the South, years after the Civil War, majority rule returned to the Southern states — and the freedom of blacks was drastically restricted from what it had been under military rule.

Those who applauded the spread of democracy in the Middle East seemed to assume that the "Arab Spring" meant greater freedom. But there was no reason to assume that beforehand — and certainly no reason to believe it after the fact. Christians in Egypt have already lost whatever security they had under Hosni Mubarak.

The idea that "all people want freedom" is one of those feel-good phrases that some people indulge in. But you do not get a free country just because everybody wants freedom — for themselves. You can have a free country only when people are willing to let other people have freedom.

Nazis were free to be Nazis under Hitler and Communists were free to be Communists under Stalin and Mao. But nobody else was free.

Toleration for others is a precondition for a free society — and it is hard to think of more intolerant societies than most of those in the Middle East. There have been female heads of state in some other Islamic countries, but not in the Middle East.

Democracy in the Middle East context means majority selection of which individuals get the power to oppress. Why would anyone have seriously believed that it would mean anything more than that? Certainly not from the history of the region.

Too many people tend to think of democracy as a consumer good, so that high voter turnout on election day makes them happy. But the purpose of an election is not to make people feel good about participating. Its purpose is to select the best leaders available, to whom the well-being, and ultimately the lives, of the people can be entrusted. That is serious business.

Voting is not an end in itself. Had there been universal access to the ballot in Europe centuries ago, in an age of mass illiteracy, it is very unlikely that this would have led to freedom, and far more likely that the continent would have collapsed into confusion and anarchy — and been ripe to be enslaved by



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conquerors with more realistic governments.

Restrictions on who can vote have been based on assessments of who can best choose the nation's leaders. Those assessments have varied from country to country, and from one era to another, and no doubt some restrictions make more sense than others. But the fundamental point here is that elections have far more serious purposes than participation.

Most Western nations had freedom long before they had democracy. Women have been voting in the United States less than a century. But, even before women could vote in England or America, they had freedoms that women in many Middle Eastern countries can only dream about today.

"Arab Spring" democracy has certainly not increased women's freedom, nor was there ever any reason to expect that it would.

Why then was Barack Obama so hyped over his "achievement" in having helped put new rulers into power in the Middle East? First of all, this is a man with a monumental ego, to whom every avenue to self-aggrandizement is welcomed, whether it is ObamaCare or realigning the Middle East.

Either or both may end in utter disaster for others, but that is hardly a deterrent to Obama. What some see as a failure of his Middle East policy is a success in carrying out his vision of a historic realignment. The lives that are lost and the increased dangers of international turmoil are to him just "bumps in the road" on the path to his place in history.

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