Jan Ludwig: Straight Talk: Democracy

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Rough translation

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Contents

Introduction

It seems as if this country is particularly democratic: Article 67 of the constitution states that all citizens enjoy freedom of expression. They can travel freely, promises Article 75, and a people's assembly enacts laws, claims Article 91.[1]

The kind of democracy you want? Not at all. What is described here is the country of North Korea, one of the most brutal dictatorships in the world. Nowhere are people's freedoms as restricted as in this state on the eastern edge of Asia. Many people in North Korea lack everything - from enough food[2] to internet access.[3] The regime makes the population suffer and isolates them from the outside world.[4] "Democratic People's Republic of Korea": that is the official name of the country, and even the name is a lie.

This book begins with a brief excursion to North Korea, because today there are many countries, parties and even terrorist groups that call themselves democratic. But they are not.

But what exactly constitutes a democracy? When do we call something democratic and when do we not? Are real democracies simply all countries where people vote?

And are elections always democratic decisions? So why do we call some decisions made by elected governments undemocratic? And is democracy even the best of all forms of government?

All these questions are dealt with in this book. It deals with ballot papers without boxes to tick, TikTok and referendums, populism, 30 km/h and the Bundeswehr. It explains why MPs in the Bundestag often don't sit in their seats and what chocolate has to do with democracy.

A democracy, this much can already be revealed, is in any case more than parliamentary seats, court buildings and polling booths. Democracy only becomes democracy when it is lived. This book therefore also presents people who have stood up for democracy. They are people from the past and the present, adults and young people, from German-speaking countries and the rest of the world. Among these "faces of democracy" are people who did not remain silent when democratic values were betrayed, who risked their freedom or even their lives, who overcame hatred and built democratic bridges. You can find out how they did this in this book.

CHAPTER 1

How to recognise democracies

What does democracy actually mean? In everyday life, we have a pretty good idea of what we think is democratic and what is not. "Democracy is when everyone has a say" - we often hear this phrase, even from children.[5]

Defined in this way, democracy is simply another word for co-determination. We encounter this type of democracy in many places in everyday life. At school, for example, when class representatives are elected. In the city, when the main road is closed due to a demonstration. Or in a club when a new board is being sought. There is always a group of people - pupils, demonstrators, club members - who want to help decide what to do and what not to do.

There is also democratic co-determination in sport. In football and handball, players' unions are committed to ensuring that everyone is treated fairly, even in the lower leagues. And there are even democratic structures in business. In large companies, elected works councils ensure that nobody is exploited. In a functioning democracy, this co-determination also exists

in politics, on all political levels: from the local council to the Bundestag.

The counterpart to democracy is dictatorship. In this form of government, there is little or no real co-determination. Decisions are made from the top down. Opposition is suppressed, often even violently. Another word for dictatorship is "autocracy", which literally means "self-rule". Dictators exercise their power unrestrictedly because, unlike in a democracy, the people have no or only very limited participation in governing.[6] Dictatorships are sometimes also referred to as "authoritarian systems". This emphasises that a ruler restricts or does not allow democratic competition.[7]

There are, of course, gradations between a perfect democracy and a full-blown dictatorship. And these can actually be measured. The research department EIU of the British media group "The Economist Group", the V-Dem Institute in Gothenburg, Sweden, and others use various characteristics to assess how democratic the countries of the world are.[8] For example, they analyse the following:

- Is there a freely elected parliament?
- Can the judiciary pass judgements free from state pressure?
- Can the media work freely?
- Is the Internet free to use, or is there extensive state censorship?
- Are there effective laws against corruption?
- How high are the chances of political competitors

to win votes in the next election or even come to power?

These rankings differ in detail. But the trend is clear. At the top of the rankings are democracies such as Norway and Switzerland, at the bottom are countries such as North Korea, China and Afghanistan. Germany is in the top 20.

On average, people live longer[9] in democracies, they are happier[10] and more prosperous.[11] Democracies also almost never wage war against each other. And yet less than half of the world's population live in a democracy.[12] This makes it all the more important to appreciate the value of democratic achievements and to protect democracy.

Imagine waking up in the morning of your 18th birthday. What's the first thing you think about? Presumably presents, of course. You would also get something from the state, namely the right to vote - at least in almost all democracies in the world. But not in China. You would never be able to cast your vote for the president there because there are no nationwide, free elections.[13] You would probably also look forward to receiving congratulations on Instagram, WhatsApp or Facebook.

In China, you could be waiting a long time: all three services are blocked by the state censorship authority there.[14] Now imagine you had to write an exam the day after your birthday, but you weren't well prepared because the party went on for a long time. Quickly read up on Wikipedia again? Not a chance. The website is blocked in China.[15] But at least a chatbot with artificial intelligence will help, right? In China, you could try ERNIE, which is the name of the Chinese counterpart to ChatGPT.[16]

But don't prepare for a history lecture and ask the AI chatbot what happened in Beijing on 4 June 1989. "Change the topic and start again," the programme would reply. The reason: the Chinese army fired on demonstrators at the time, killing hundreds or perhaps even thousands of people. We don't know for sure because the topic is taboo in China. So taboo that even chatbots are programmed with censorship. Dictatorships lock people up - and reality out.

Fortunately, all this was just a nightmare for you, because if you're reading this book right now, you probably live in a democracy. Unfortunately, for 18-year-old Chinese women and men, this is all part of everyday life.[17]

Democracy vs. dictatorship - trust vs. fear

One of the most important differences between a democracy and a dictatorship is the peaceful transfer of power.

In a democracy, we only ever grant permission to govern for a limited period of time. We elect the Bundestag every four years, a mayoral election takes place every five to ten years. In democratic elections, there are always losers and winners. The losers have to give up their power, but otherwise live a normal life afterwards. They can trust that the state and their political rivals will do them no harm.

The situation is different in a dictatorship: a peaceful transfer of power - against the will of the ruler - is generally not possible. Dictators often rule until they transfer their power to a chosen successor, die a natural death - or are killed. Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi was killed by insurgents in 2011. Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein was overthrown after the US invasion in 2003 and was later sentenced to death and hanged by Iraqis. During the Romanian revolution in 1989, the dictatorial ruler Nicolae Ceauşescu was shot dead together with his wife after a short show trial in a so-called state court. The list could go on. The dictators of other regimes often ended up in prison or fled their country to hide elsewhere.

Dictators live a dangerous life, both during their time in office and afterwards. Their entire system is based on fear. Dictators are afraid of a military coup, they are afraid of rivals from within their own ranks or of a popular uprising. Normal citizens

fear the state, the police, the courts and the secret service. In dictatorships, people are arbitrarily arrested and sentenced, tortured or even killed. And the secret service? It is often afraid of itself. Sometimes it even spies on members of its own government, as happened in the GDR.[18]

A dictatorship works best when everyone is afraid of each other. Joseph Stalin, who ruled the Soviet Union from 1924 to 1953, practised this to the point of insanity. Out of fear, Stalin not only had political opponents arrested, tortured, imprisoned or shot, but also most of his generals, his own party colleagues and even his doctor. His fear may even have cost him his life. When Stalin suffered a stroke in March 1953, nobody dared to wake him up or call a doctor for a long time. His entourage feared that Stalin might take revenge on them for treating him incorrectly.[19] The fear of dictators can therefore be deadly.

While a dictatorship is based on fear, a democracy is essentially based on trust: Trust in the state, trust in the government, trust in civil society, trust in the media. Minorities in the population trust that they will be protected by the law. The opposition knows that it can run again in the next elections and need not fear persecution. And the state also trusts its citizens.

However, trust is not limitless in a democracy. A healthy mistrust is also part of it. The division of state power into a government, a parliament and a judicial system, for example, is a form of permanent mistrust. Transfer of power? Yes, please! But not too much power at once, please. And especially not in the long term. If, for example, politicians turn out to be corrupt or are even suspected of being corrupt, they often lose their office. That's why politicians in a democracy are afraid as well, at least on one day: on election night, they fear losing their office or no longer having a seat in parliament.

FEAR

Faces of democracy: ***Maria Kalesnikawa*** *(Belarus)* **1982*

If she still lived in Germany, Maria Kalesnikawa would be free today. She could continue to play the flute, as she did for many years. But Kalesnikawa no longer lives in Stuttgart, where she used to study and work. The musician went back to Belarus, her home country, to make a difference. Alexander Lukashenko has ruled there like a dictator for around three decades. In 2020, a few months before the presidential election in Belarus, Maria Kalesnikava began to get politically involved: for a free, democratic Belarus. She led the election campaign team for a candidate running against ruler Lukashenko.[20] But the candidate was arrested. As were others who wanted to run in the elections.[21] What happened next was historic for Belarus: for the first time, three female politicians from the opposition, one of them Kalesnikava, joined forces. Together they campaigned against Lukashenko, representing the imprisoned candidates.[22] Kalesnikawa's trademark: the heart symbol, formed from her fingers.[23]

However, the elections in Belarus in summer 2020 were neither fair nor free. On election day itself, the count was falsified.[24] In the end, the alleged winner was once again Alexander Lukashenko.

Hundreds of thousands protested on the streets of the country in the days following the rigged election. Police forces bludgeoned the demonstrators, even firing live ammunition. Tens of thousands were arrested. A few weeks later, Kalesnikava was kidnapped on the street. Lukashenko's henchmen tried to throw her out of the country by force. They drove her to the Ukrainian border. Upon arriving, Kalesnikava tore up her passport - and was no longer able to cross the border.[25] She wanted to stay in Belarus, her country of birth, after all.

Kalesnikawa paid a high price for her resistance and her determination to remain in the country. In a show trial, she was sentenced to eleven years in prison for "jeopardising national security", among other things.[26] She has been in prison ever since, even in solitary confinement for a long time. She has had no contact with her relatives for months now. She lost 15 kilos in weight and underwent emergency surgery for a stomach ulcer.[27]

There are plenty of stories like Maria Kalesnikava's in Belarus. The regime holds around 1,400 political prisoners.[28] Others, including her sister Tatsiana, are now speaking out on Kalesnikava's behalf. She lives in exile. Wherever Tatsiana appears in public on behalf of her sister, at award ceremonies, demonstrations or film screenings, she carries a photo of Maria in her hands. Below it is the hashtag #FreeKalesnikava. When Tatsiana has both hands free, she makes her sister's gesture: a heart.

CHAPTER 2

In the supermarket and on the street I: Where we encounter democracy in everyday life

Democracy therefore presupposes that people have a say. Unfortunately, this is not always and everywhere the case. The following two examples show how people who were dissatisfied with the situation demanded more co-determination.

Democracy globally ...

Did you know that chocolate often means child labour? International organisations have been denouncing this for decades. Cocoa is grown on plantations, especially in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. More than 1.5 million children work there.[29] The majority of them labour under dangerous conditions: They spray pesticides without wearing protective clothing, handle machetes or carry the heavy sacks of cocoa beans. And because they work so much, they cannot go to school, even though every child has a right to an education.[30]

The cocoa farmers are often so poor that they employ children on the plantations. From what we pay for a

bar of chocolate, only a few cents reach the farmers.[31] More than 20 years ago, the big chocolate companies committed themselves to step away from child labour. But far too little has happened since then. The children from back then now have children of their own who may be working in the cocoa plantations again.

... and democracy locally

You've probably seen a traffic sign that reads "Voluntary 30". Maybe there's even one in the street where you live, or perhaps outside the swimming pool or cinema. Have you ever wondered why it says "Voluntary" - and not just a 30? Why is this not regulated by law, like so many other things in Germany?

The answer is simple: because it is forbidden. Villages and towns are not always allowed to decide for themselves what speed limit applies on their roads.[32] According to road traffic regulations, a speed limit of 50 km/h applies in every town.[33] There are only a few exceptions on larger roads, such as in front of schools.[34] 30 km/h may also be introduced where there have been many accidents or where the health of local residents is at risk. The "safety and ease of traffic "[35]

must be guaranteed. This is literally what the law says. Or to put it another way: when in doubt, favour the car.

The municipalities are therefore not allowed to put up regular signs just like that. That's why some private individuals put up signs that you can simply google and print out: "Voluntary 30 - for the sake of the children" or "Voluntary 30 - because of us", in yellow, with children on them. However, these signs are a little tricky from a legal point of view.[36] They can not look too similar to official road signs. This means that lorries and cars continue to speed through the city at 50 km/h on many roads in Germany. This is annoying for many residents on main roads. And especially dangerous for children.

So what do we do?

These two cases show how often we encounter politics in everyday life. What does all this have to do with democracy? A lot! In democracy, the very big things are often linked to the very small things. In a democracy, we have an influence on what happens. We can decide every day

to do something that makes the world a little more democratic. And that is exactly what has happened here: many people have become active over the past few years with both chocolate and the 30 km/h speed limit. They have worked to change the world in very different ways, on both a small and large scale.

If you like, you can cheat a little and skip ahead to page 150. It describes how the problems were tackled democratically and which group used which lever to get the ball rolling. Or you could start by reading this book to find out how a democracy works. So - how could it be otherwise in a book about democracy - it's your choice!

CHAPTER 3

From the Agora to the Wahl-O-Mat: A brief history of democracy

Democracy in antiquity

It all started with a pile of shards. Thousands of male citizens of Athens gathered in the Agora, the city's dusty market square. They had come to vote. Paper had not yet been invented in the 5th century BC and parchment was too expensive. So the Athenians took shards of clay in their hands and carved a name into the shard. Or rather, they had it carved, as some of them could neither read nor write. The shards were then collected and counted. The result was then announced.

Ancient Athens is regarded as a prime example of an early democracy.[37] Even then, around 2500 years ago, there were civil servants who administered the city, there were judges, there was an assembly of the people.[38] And there were elections with referendums. There was just one catch. The shards didn't bring

luck to the chosen one. The person who received the most votes was banished from the city for ten years.

The Athenian Court of Shards, Ostrakismos in Greek, was about expelling the most unpopular person in the city. Someone whose power was feared. From today's perspective, it sounds more like jungle camp than election day. And yet much of today's democracy was already present in this election. For example, the (almost) secret ballot, as those counting the votes could not see who had written what. Or that every vote counted the same, regardless of whether someone was rich or poor, old or young. But above all: that too much power in the hands of individuals can be dangerous - and that every democracy must try to prevent this. In general, the Athenians were able to decide a great deal for themselves with a simple show of hands in the agora. For example, they could decide to go to war.[39]

However, the system in Athens was not truly democratic in the modern sense, as women did not have the right to vote. The Athenians also kept over 100,000 people as slaves at times. They were not allowed to have a say either. Overall, this meant that at most one in seven inhabitants of Athens decided the fate of the entire city.[40]

The question remains as to how the Athenians actually appointed their officials. Who appointed the civil servants in the administration, who appointed the judges? In many cases, the Athenians used a kind of lottery machine with white and black balls to determine who would hold which office.

The lottery machine worked a bit like roulette: if you got a white ball, you were elected, if you got a black ball, you were not. In principle, any citizen could be "elected" to an office. In Athens, chance ruled alongside the people.

In the 2500 years follwing the first elections of this kind, democracy has gone through an eventful period. The history of democracy is characterised by setbacks and progress. But the direction has been clear: over the centuries, more and more people with more and more rights have been able to have more and more of a say.

Even in ancient Rome, some things were democratic, others were not. As in Athens, only a small part of the population was allowed to participate in all areas of government. In Rome, they were called patricians, the nobles of the city, so to speak. They were joined by the plebeians, craftsmen and farmers who had become rich. They were also allowed to have a say. Nobility or money were the two decisive factors in Rome.

The office of dictator was a special feature of the Roman Republic. To today's ears, it sounds rather absurd to voluntarily appoint a dictator. However, the Romans believed that in times of need - such as war - state power should be concentrated in one person. This dictator was elected for six months.[42] He was commander-in-chief of the soldiers, supreme judge and head of government all in one person. He was even authorised to pass laws. The question that the Romans asked themselves more than 2000 years ago is still relevant today: to what extent may

we restrict freedom in a democracy in order to gain security? Whether in a war, in a pandemic or in the fight against extremism and terrorism: democracies have to decide time and again how much the rights of citizens can be restricted.

At some point, this question no longer arose for the Romans. They simply abolished democracy completely and submitted to an emperor. He had even more power than the dictator and even ruled for life.

The Roman statesman **Caesar** was appointed dictator for life in 44 BC. His rise to power signalled the end of the Roman Republic. Because Caesar had so much influence through his policies and writings, today's terms "Kaiser" (german word for "Emperor") and "Tsar" are derived from his name.

Democracy in the Middle Ages and early modern times

Democracy also had a difficult time in other regions of Europe in the following centuries. In the Middle Ages, counts, princes and kings tended to rule. Instead of the voters, the whims of the monarchs often determined politics. In many places, however, this was their undoing in the long run.