

The Democratic People's Republic

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Introduction

Is our perception of it as closed up dictatorship merely a result of a lack of knowledge and western propaganda?

I admit that I don't think North Korea is a democracy, and the last thing I want to do is defend the gross human rights abuses I am more than convinced take place there. But what am I really basing these opinions on? For that matter, what is the definition of democracy that North Korea violates? These are all questions that can be difficult or disturbing to answer. A point I'm trying to illustrate in an unconventional and perhaps a bit nonsensical form.

The following text is based on Socrates' form of dialogue, as presented in Plato's *The Republic*¹. As in Plato, this is written in the form of a play, meant to be performed before an audience. For ease of reading, I have therefore also taken the liberty of deviating from the political science norm of references, including them as footnotes rather than in line.

This was written as a debate argument, not a publishable academic paper. Although the sources quoted are presented in as correct a manner as possible, their meanings are in some places intentionally twisted and misused for presenting a view that is neither acceptably documented, nor shared by me. I will therefore ask the reader to accept it for what it is – a rhetorical trick to win a debate under certain set conditions. But possibly it can also give ground for some unconventional ways of thinking of what democracy really is?

¹ Plato (2004[360BCE])

The Democratic People's Republic

Freely based on Plato's The Republic

Cast of characters:

Socrates
Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Bréde et Montesquieu
George Bush
Condoleezza Rice aka. "Condi"
Wikipedia
Louis R. Mortimer
General Hayden
Jeremy Bentham
Marsilio de Padua
John Stuart Mill
Samuel Rutherford
Alexander Hamilton
Alexis de Tocqueville
Lawrence Whitehead
Joseph Schumpeter
Kim Il Sung
Robert Dahl

This is a story told to me this morning by a friend of mine who shall remain anonymous, let's call him Socrates:

[Socrates]I went down yesterday to Dødens Dal and the opening of UKA with Tore, son of Gustav. I wanted to say a prayer to the goddess and also to see what they would make of the festival, as this was not by far the first time they were holding it. I must say that I thought the local contribution to the promenade concert was splendid, though the Thracian contingent seemed to show up just as well. We had said our prayers and seen the show and were on our way back to town when a friend of mine, let's call him Polemarchus, noticed us in the distance making our way home and sent his slave (that would be his girlfriend) running on ahead to tell us to wait for him.

And thus we went to his house where a group of philosophers and political thinkers were having a nachspiel.

First spoke my old friend, whom I have admired for long, Charles-Louis de Secondat,

Baron de La Bréde et Montesquieu, and whom our lecturer Mr. Moses deprived of one of his titles yet still had complaints about the length of his name.²

[Montesquieu] As I stated in my book, *The Spirit of the Laws*³, there are three types of government, each with its ruling principle. Of which principle would you categorize the state we label the Democratic People's Republic of Korea?

[Socrates] Well, is not your categorizing of governments in that way overly simplistic my friend?

[Montesquieu] Being a demagogue and an academic, you may think so, but for the sake of argument will you not allow us the benefit of your assessment within the framework of one of those three ruling principles?

[Socrates] Very well – for the sake of argument I might lower myself to that level, and be inclined to choose the principle of virtue.

Thus satisfied Montesquieu sat down, but was shortly followed by a creature appearing as half man and half chimpanzee. Yes so uncanny was that resemblance I was at first taken aback by it having the gift of speech. But I was relieved at hearing it could hardly be described as intelligent.

[G. Bush.] Virtue?!? The commie bastards of North Carolina

[Condi] {whispers something to him}

[G. Bush] Oh, thank you Condi. I mean the bastards of North Korea are an evil empire part of my axis. And it's a good axis. I mean not good, but it is clearly an axis. And it's got lots of evil in it, so it must be an evil axis.⁴

[Condi] {coughs}

[G. Bush] Uh.. yeah.. I'll shut up. But North Carolina is all evil terrorists!

This raised a murmur in the crowd, after which a person speaking a sone yet comprised of thousands of voices rose above all.

[Wikipedia] I have to agree with that.

² Plato (2004[360BCE]:Book I)

³ Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Bréde et (1914[1748]: Book II)

⁴ Bush, George (2002)

[Socrates] And who do I have the honor of addressing that speaks so boldly on a ridiculed man's behalf?

[Wikipedia] I am that modern embodiment of the sum total of all human knowledge. The guarantee for free speech and the essence of the modern age. I am the one they call Wikipedia.

[Socrates] And you would defend this president's statement?

[Wikipedia] I would – for such knowledge have the anonymous multitudes imparted on my electronic parchments⁵:

- “North Korea is a single-party state with a Stalinist, authoritarian, and totalitarian regime.”
- “Government is organized as a dictatorship.”
- “The North Korean Constitution forbids freedom of religion”

And would you, learned scholar, say that this is the proper description of a republic, let alone a democratic one?

[Socrates] I must say that does not seem right.

[Wikipedia] Then we can conclude that you were wrong?

[Socrates] If we accept your authority as the self-proclaimed Leviathan of knowledge, so we must. But has the whole of the people yet accepted your social contract of knowledge, or is there not yet a small community naming themselves scholars who have not yet subjected themselves to you as the ultimate source, so powerful that no one can resist? Would not you, Louis R. Mortimer, head of the research division of the Library of Congress – trusted employee of the president we just heard and least likely of all to treat the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea more lightly than it deserves – contradict some of what the ultimate repository of human knowledge has just recited us? Can you not enlighten us as to for example the content of the constitution of the Democratic People's Republic.

⁵ Wikipeda (2007). As noted in the reference list, this is based on the Wikipedia article as of October 4th. The article has later been rewritten.

[Mortimer] Yes, you are right of course. We did publish a country study on that state⁶, and I must admit to writing that:

- “The constitution provides for the Supreme People’s Assembly to be elected every five years by universal suffrage.”
- “Deputies, each representing a constituency of approximately 30,000 persons, are guaranteed inviolability and immunity from arrest.”
- “Article 91 of the constitution states that the assembly has the authority to adopt or amend the constitution, laws, and ordinances; formulate the basic principles of domestic and foreign policies; elect or recall the president of the state and other top officials of the government; approve the state economic plan and national budget; and decide whether to ratify or abrogate treaties and questions of war and peace.”

[Socrates] And are those common characteristics of a Stalinist regime?

[Wikipedia] I suppose not.

[Socrates] And you, General Michael V. Hayden, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, most assuredly not biased to treat The Democratic People’s Republic lightly – did you not publish a fact book listing the following parties as members of the Supreme People’s Assembly?⁷

- Korean Workers’ Party or KWP led by KIM Jong Il
- Chondoist Chongu Party led by RYU Mi Yong
- Social Democratic Party led by KIM Yong Dae

[Gen. Hayden] Yes, sir, we did, sir!

[Socrates] And is that typical for a one party state, Wikipedia?

[Wikipedia] I suppose not.

⁶ Pan (1993)

⁷ Central Intelligence Agency (2007)

[Socrates] And as for your final claim, that their constitution forbids free religion, will not someone read to us the first part of article 68 of the Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea?

[constitution] "Citizens have freedom of religious beliefs. This right is granted by approving the construction of religious buildings and the holding of religious ceremonies⁸."

[Socrates] And Mr. Mortimer, do you not even write that religious organizations from the Democratic People's Republic even attend international conferences?

[Mortimer] We did write that both the Korean Buddhists' Federation, the Christian Federation, and the Ch'ndogyo Youth Party do send such delegates, yes.⁹

[Socrates] Now Wikipedia, would you still claim your earlier statements are incontrovertibly true?

[Wikipedia] I guess the picture must be somewhat more complicated than I thought. But surely you cannot deny that I hold a clear indication of the impression of at least a large part of users of internet, that if they believed me to be wrong they would have corrected me?

[Socrates] That claim would be hard to deny. Thus we must conclude that what you have said is indeed the belief of a large part of the world outside The Democratic People's Republic. But if that cannot be held to be incontrovertibly true, what must we conclude about their beliefs?

[Wikipedia] That they could possibly be wrong?

[Socrates] Indeed it appears that they possibly could.

[G. Bush] But this still doesn't prove they aren't evil bastards, ready to blow my country up with their nuclear weapons programme!

[Condi] Whispers in his ear.

[G. Bush] Oh, yes. What I meant was: They're not a democracy!

[Socrates] And why do you claim that?

⁸ Constitution of North Korea (1998:§68)

⁹ Pan (1993)

[Condi] Perhaps all the gross abuses of human rights. That is not consistent with a democracy.

Suddenly rose from the crowd another man. I suddenly recognized him as Jeremy Bentham, author of *An introduction to the principles of Moral and Legislation*.¹⁰

[Bentham] Human rights. Pfah! Don't give me all that nonsense of natural laws and inalienable rights. No rights are inalienable. Law is the basis of society. And that is how rights are defined. "Natural rights is simple nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense - nonsense upon stilts."¹¹

[Socrates] And looking on their constitution, how do you find it with regard to political rights?

Then rose Marsilio de Padua who had until this point sat silently watching in the corner.

[Marsilio] The most important basis is of course that decisions must be made by the people as a whole, or a majority of it. I reference you to my most excellent work, if I may say so, *Defender of the Peace*¹² for proof of that. And universal suffrage is well rooted in the constitution of the Democratic People's Republic¹³.

[Condi] But it's all a sham! They may have universal suffrage, but they can't vote for anyone they like. There have to be pre-approved lists.

[Socrates] So you argue that in a democracy there should be no one to help the people choose, that ignorance is no excuse for imposing limits?

[Condi] Yes, exactly so.

At this point John Stuart Mill tried to get a word in to the discussion.

[J.S. Mill] I would deny that fact. As I pointed out in *Considerations on representative government*, "It is not useful, but hurtful, that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge."¹⁴

¹⁰ Bentham, Jeremy (1907[1789])

¹¹ Bentham, Jeremy (1824:L-4)

¹² de Padua, Marsilio (2000[1324]:277)

¹³ Constitution of North Korea (1998:§6)

¹⁴ Mill, John Stuart (1999[1861]:188)

[Marsilio] I do not think the modern democrats we are discussing with here, Mr. Mill, would agree that you should let the knowledgeable have more direct influence. But, as I have stated, a body of wise men could indeed draw up the proposals, then: "After such standards have been set, they must be laid before the assembled whole body of citizens."¹⁵ That, I believe is just what the Democratic People's Republic constitution prescribes.

[Condi] But that's not very democratic for elections, is it?

[Socrates] And how was your own president elected, Miss Rice?

[Condi] He was elected by the people of America fair and square.

[Socrates] Did he have a complete majority of votes behind him, then?

[Condi] No, but he did have the majority of the electors, as ordained in the Constitution of the United States of America, article 2, section 1.¹⁶

[Socrates] And are those electors preapproved by anyone?

[Condi] Yes, by the political parties.

[Socrates] As I have learned from studying the works of Professor Ellis Katz¹⁷, this does in fact amount to the people merely voting for a set of preapproved electorate college candidates?

[Condi] Yes, I suppose so.

[Socrates] And according to Katz¹⁸ the most voters are even not aware that it is so, quite unlike in the Democratic People's Republic where this is made clear. Do you disagree?

[Condi] No, I suppose not.

[Socrates] And why is it that such a system has been set in place?

¹⁵ de Padua, Marsilio (2000[1324]:277)

¹⁶ The Constitution of the United States of America (1787:§2-1)

¹⁷ Katz, Ellis (undated)

¹⁸ Ibid.

At this point, Alexander Hamilton jumped to his feet waving number 68 of *The Federalist Papers*, in which he presented an argument about this:

[Hamilton] When we drew up that constitution, we found “It was equally desirable, that the immediate election should be made by men most capable of analyzing the qualities adapted to the station, and acting under circumstances favorable to deliberation, and to a judicious combination of all the reasons and inducements which were proper to govern their choice. A small number of persons, selected by their fellow-citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations.”¹⁹

[Socrates] So it appears that America also has a system in place, in which a body of knowledgeable men elect the leader on behalf of the people, and that whoever can be placed on this body of electors is preapproved by appropriate organizations, namely the two dominant political parties, both prescribing to a similar set of values, devoted to the idea of republican democracy?

[Condi] It appears so.

[Socrates] And in the words of Hamilton as well as Marsilio de Padua, it seems there are good reasons for this, does it not?

[Condi] Apparently

[Socrates] Even if the limits on free election in America seem to be similar to those of the Democratic People's Republic, can we conclude that the United States of America is an undemocratic republic? What say you, Alexis de Toqueville, renowned as you are for your studies of democracy in America?²⁰

[Tocqueville] I must admit that although I have been critical of many parts of the American political system, it was even as early as 1840 the best democracy around. And most importantly, we must not judge a society upon the workings of another, but seek out its own virtues.

¹⁹ Hamilton, Alexander (1788)

²⁰ De Tocqueville, Alexis (2000[1840]:564-577)

[Socrates] Thus we conclude that since their systems are inherently similar, and since The United States of America is considered a democratic republic, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea cannot be discarded as non-democratic on these grounds.

[Tocqueville] But I would like to add, if I may, the following point of advice taken from my work, *Democracy in America*:

“I perceive mighty dangers which it is possible to ward off – mighty evils which may be avoided or alleviated; and I cling with a firmer hold to the belief, that for democratic nations to be virtuous and prosperous they require but to will it.”²¹

[Socrates] So it is we can claim that it is a will to be democratic that is what it takes to become a democratic republic?

[Whitehead] Gentlemen, my name is Laurence Whitehead, and I'd say it is my finding that democracy “...is not a concept with a timeless single measure that is intrinsically deivable either from logical analysis or from empirical reference. Its meaning will vary across a substantial range, depending upon historical and cultural conditions and customary usages that are malleable.”²² As I pointed out in my article “The vexed issue of the meaning of democracy” there has been some insertion of the implicit word ‘liberal’ in front of democracy somewhere in the process that is not self-evident.

[Condi] But even with all this, you cannot say that the government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is not completely different in reality from all the nations we regard as democracies?

At this, Joseph Schumpeter suddenly jumped to his feet, blurting out:

[Schumpeter] But does that mean it is not democratic? As I have tried to impress before, through my book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, “No more than any other political method does democracy always produce the same results or promote the same

²¹ De Tocqueville, Alexis (2000[1840]:577)

²² Whitehead, Laurence (1997:126)

interests or ideals.”²³ You can't mean that just because The Democratic People's Republic hasn't become like USA it isn't democratic?

[Socrates] So we must conclude that it is an inherent trait of democracy to produce a multitude of results. And we must agree that any democratic system holds within itself the power to evolve its institutions?

[Condi] Within the framework of the laws, yes naturally.

[Socrates] Then we must accept Mr. Whitehead's argument that democracy can evolve into a multitude of forms, must we not?

[Condi] It seems we must. But The Democratic People's Republic of Korea didn't grow out of a democracy, it was created by brute force.

[Kim Il Sung] “The oppressed peoples can liberate themselves only through struggle. This is a simple and clear truth confirmed by history.”²⁴

[G. Bush] Yeah, and what is your so called proof of that?

[Kim Il Sung] My people liberated itself from its imperialist colonist, Japan, with the help of another and subsequently chose for itself a whole new form of government.

[G. Bush] Yeah. Like that's a democratic way to do it. Armed insurgency, right?

[Condi] { Whispers something }

[G. Bush] Uh.. oh.. Okay then. Condi tells me America was also founded on an armed rebellion with the help of another colonialist power, France. But that doesn't change anything, you commie bastard. Socrates, his country is no democracy! There's no freedom of speech! So says for example Kay Seok of Human Rights' Watch²⁵.

[Socrates] So, freedom of speech must be regarded as a prerequisite for democracy?

So did Robert Dahl speak out:

²³ Schumpeter ([1942]1962:243)

²⁴ Kim Il Sung (unknown date)

²⁵ Kay Seok (2004)

[Dahl] So it must be. It is a part of the procedural minimum I have so clearly set down.²⁶

[Socrates] Very well. We will hold to that belief. How can we then discern whether or not The Democratic People's Republic is a state with freedom of speech?

[Condi] We have well documented that there is no voice of opposition at all! There can be no freedom of speech!

[Socrates] Let me then ask you a question: Why do you not speak up against your president?

[Condi] Why, because I think he does a good job, of course.

[Socrates] So the reason you speak is not that he has oppressed you and taken away from you the right of free speech?

[Condi] Of course not.

[Socrates] Then why are you so quick to believe that just because the people of the Democratic People's Republic do not speak, it is not because they have no wish to do so?

[Rutherford] If I may interject. My name is Samuel Rutherford, and I wrote the famous *Rex Lex*, in which I establish that the only legitimate rule can be that of law²⁷.

[Socrates] And what does then the law of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea say about freedom of speech?

[Rutherford] Apparently, in Article 67: "Citizens are guaranteed freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, demonstration and association. The State shall guarantee conditions for the free activity of democratic political parties and social organizations²⁸."

[Socrates] So the constitution of the democratic republic claims it to have freedom of speech. But since we do not know the voice of the people, we do not know if it is because they are not allowed to speak or because they do not wish to. Can we not give them the benefit of the doubt?

²⁶ Robert Dahl (1998:85)

²⁷ Rutherford, Samuel (2002[1644]:qII)

²⁸ Constitution of North Korea (2002:§67)

I am afraid, my friends, that we have seen that the Democratic Republic of Korea surely has at least the democratic institutions that the United States of America does in its constitution. I have also failed to see it proved beyond mere speculation that the Democratic People's Republic does not follow these laws.

Just because a leader is popular, we cannot rule that the people have no free will. Thus we will have to look to the will that has been expressed. And it is stated right in the very name of the state that it is a democratic republic. We need better grounds than what we have seen to reject that.

Thus I cannot but stick to my conclusion that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is indeed ruled by the principle of virtue, has the capacity and will for democracy and must thus be a true Democratic Republic.

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