Christmas was for gifts, they said. So it was natural that when Trump appeared on news headlines on Christmas, people felt cheated on their end of the deal. As expected, the comments, “Do you still believe in Santa? Because at 7, it’s marginal, right?”, triggered a fierce global initiative defending both Santa Claus’s crippled authority and the collective 7-year-old childhood experience.

It seemed that beyond its trite nature, however, that there was a lot of symbolism to the delusional debacle. The bizarre mixture of poor judgement and undesirable spontaneity resembled the cynical perceptions surrounding democracy in the world. These criticisms throughout the past year haven’t been unique to Trump: they have been shared by the disappointing fruits of the Arab Spring, 9 years on. They have been shared by the more general movement of political radicalization in the democratic strongholds of Europe and around the world. They have been shared by those looking at China as an alternative model for success.

This departure has been extremely severe: Freedom House’s 2018 Report on Democracy concluded that “Democracy faced its most serious crisis in decades.” But given that democracy has historically accomplished great deeds in the areas of human rights and the pursuit of justice, there’s been an issue of ingratitude. The same kind of ingratitude that now confronts the pessimistic children who will never believe in Santa in the first place.

Because it’s only a child like myself who’s experienced a sleepless Christmas eve who is able to appreciate the value of democracy once it is taken away from them. Although past
generations in history have experienced first-hand the terrors of dictatorship, autocracy and oligarchy, many of my generation have never lived in undemocratic worlds. And while Santa is imaginary and democracy is not, democracy resembles Santa in the ease through which one can criticize and tarnish its vague, conceptual, intangible reputation.

I strongly believe that democracy, defined as a system of government that has its foundations in politically representing the interests of citizens, plays two critical roles that are important for the lives of every individual: the ardent protection of human rights, and the persistent maintenance of social accountability. We need to return to these roots because the merits of democracy are directly proportional to how much its inhabitants ‘put in’.

Time and time again, “the interdependent and mutually reinforcing relationship between democracy and human rights” (The Human Rights Council), has been drawn evident throughout history. Given that all democracies possess a strong belief in the basic dignity and equality of all humans, they must all attempt to protect human rights. While differing levels of democratic maturity may protect human rights with differing degrees of fervour, an affirmation to human rights is a principled requirement.

Primarily, it’s important to note the incredible privilege democracy grants through freedom of opinions and representation. Fundamentally, “democracy lets people speak their minds and shape their own and their children’s futures”, as argued by the Economist. It’s an innate desire for humans to represent themselves and engage in the ‘pursuit of happiness’. Democracy also grants general freedom in society, to do however as one wants with exception, not as a privilege. It means that musicians and artists can make whatever music they’d like, without government interference, and that individuals have free access to the internet and information.

Secondly, democracy uniquely allows for significant flexibility in the notion of human rights. While flexibility is typically distant with the notion of human rights, a willingness to correct past wrongs and introduce higher standards is critical in advancing it. This was clearly demonstrated in Australia this past year, in which a referendum legalized gay marriage. Democracies allow for progress to be made because the rights of minorities cannot be overtly undermined. Similarly, abortion legislation in many democratic nations around the world has affirmed the bodily autonomy of the reproductive faculties of women, validating that the secular nature of democracy allows universal human rights to triumph in the face of differing personal values. Certainly, all these examples describe a timeline of reversibility; of the willingness to admit historic wrongs.

The progressive and daring face of democracy is demonstrated in history. As racist, immature and flawed 1965 American democracy was, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was able to propel the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights act of 1965. Dr. King was able to achieve his change because of the democratic system, as supported by his famed words, “We can’t slow up because of our love for democracy and our love for America”.

Conversely, the experiences of my grandfather under South Korean President Park Jung Hee’s dictatorship entail the outcomes of democracy’s alternatives. He remembers being at
Seoul Law School in the summer of 1974 where fellow students were tortured in ‘rehabilitation centres’ because of their beliefs in socialism. He remembers the day, 600 university students died for in the fight for democracy in May 1980, and thousands were seriously injured. And he remembers the accompanying tears with which Korean citizens finally voted, properly, on February 1993, not for the dictator, not for his cronies, but a politician that would begin an age of stable democracy.

From a different angle, democracy fosters accountability, which describes the fair and equal application of the law on all individuals in society. Because of the division of powers, it is more difficult to corrupt the government, meaning that even those in government are held responsible for their actions. The impeachment of President Dilma Rouseff in Brazil over oil corruption showed that despite attempted bribery throughout all parts of government, democracy’s sturdy pillars stood strong. Even in a weak and immature democracy such as Brazil’s, the foundational structure of democracy enabled justice to prevail.

This accountability does not only extend to those in government; it extends to keeping a check on those with all forms of power in society, as most recently seen through the #Metoo movement. The projection that the media gave to the stories of victims who had experienced sexual violence allowed society to criticize and build social movements and legislation around the significant issue of workplace sexual harassment. #Metoo showed the world that powerful, wealthy tycoons such as Harvey Weinstein are not above the law in a democratic society. This was only made possible through fair and judicious court systems that were able to prosecute the offenders of sexual crimes because of the corruption that is minimized under democracy.

However, it is true that in many younger and weaker democracies, it fails to protect human rights and maintain accountability. A poignant instance of this was seen through Aung San Suu Kyi’s brutal rule this past year in Myanmar. The state-sanctioned genocide of over 10,000 Rohingya Muslims was an inexcusable, oppressive reality that champions of democracy were forced to digest.

Yet, the voices of Burmese people don’t argue that democracy should be abandoned; rather, they argue for a change in leadership. Indeed, the Burmese people have requested help and pressure from the international community. At the end of the day, people continually seek out democracy around the world, as evident through the activism in Hong Kong, because people want their voices to be heard, their rights to be protected, and their mutual accountability upheld. It was precisely those people who had experienced the terrifying alternatives to democracy, who had believed in Santa before who chose to maintain their support towards a democratic future.

Christmas beckons a return to our roots, a rekindling of the warm ember adorning fireplaces, or more realistically, the ones visible in the screening of ‘Home Alone’. As such, a revitalization of democracy is essential; despite its failures and shortcomings, it reigns as the only framework for the protection of fundamental human rights, and the ability to hold individuals in society accountable for their actions.
Two Christmas’s ago when I had been living in South Korea, hundreds of thousands of protesters gathered in the frigid weather of Seoul Square, each holding a candlelight to call for the impeachment Park Geun Hye, the incumbent president. Political pundits claimed that in hindsight, it was inevitable in light of Korea’s shaky democratic history, and noted a “consistent theme of instability”.

But what I saw was strength: strength in the fact that an individual as powerful as Park Geun-Hye was being toppled.

Strength in the fact that Korean citizens were living in a democracy.

Strength in the fact they were fighting for it.

Citations:


