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When Democracy Weakens

By BOB HERBERT

As the throngs celebrated in Cairo, I couldn't help wondering about what is happening to democracy here in the United States. I think it's on the ropes. We're in serious danger of becoming a democracy in name only.

While millions of ordinary Americans are struggling with unemployment and declining standards of living, the levers of real power have been all but completely commandeered by the financial and corporate elite. It doesn't really matter what ordinary people want. The wealthy call the tune, and the politicians dance.

So what we get in this democracy of ours are astounding and increasingly obscene tax breaks and other windfall benefits for the wealthiest, while the bought-and-paid-for politicians hack away at essential public services and the social safety net, saying we can't afford them. One state after another is reporting that it cannot pay its bills. Public employees across the country are walking the plank by the tens of thousands. Camden, N.J., a stricken city with a serious crime problem, laid off nearly half of its police force. Medicaid, the program that provides health benefits to the poor, is under savage assault from nearly all quarters.

The poor, who are suffering from an all-out depression, are never heard from. In terms of their clout,

they might as well not exist. The Obama forces reportedly want to raise a billion dollars or more for the president's re-election bid. Politicians in search of that kind of cash won't be talking much about the wants and needs of the poor. They'll be genuflecting before the very rich.

In an Op-Ed article in The Times at the end of January, Senator John Kerry said that the Egyptian people "have made clear they will settle for nothing less than greater democracy and more economic opportunities." Americans are being asked to swallow exactly the opposite. In the mad rush to privatization over the past few decades, democracy itself was put up for sale, and the rich were the only ones who could afford it.

The corporate and financial elites threw astounding sums of money into campaign contributions and high-priced lobbyists and think tanks and media buys and anything else they could think of. They wined and dined powerful leaders of both parties. They flew them on private jets and wooed them with golf outings and lavish vacations and gave them high-paying jobs as lobbyists the moment they left the government. All that money was well spent. The investments paid off big time.

As Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson wrote in their book, "Winner-Take-All Politics": "Step by step and debate by debate, America's public officials have rewritten the rules of American politics and the American economy in ways that have benefited the few at the expense of the many."

As if the corporate stranglehold on American democracy were not tight enough, the Supreme Court strengthened it immeasurably with its Citizens United decision, which greatly enhanced the already overwhelming power of corporate money in politics. Ordinary Americans have no real access to the corridors of power, but you can bet your last Lotto ticket that your elected officials are listening when the corporate money speaks.

When the game is rigged in your favor, you win. So despite the worst economic downturn since the Depression, the big corporations are sitting on mountains of cash, the stock markets are up and all is well among the plutocrats. The endlessly egregious Koch brothers, David and Charles, are worth an estimated \$35 billion. Yet they seem to feel as though society has treated them unfairly.


As Jane Mayer pointed out in her celebrated New Yorker article, “The Kochs are longtime libertarians who believe in drastically lower personal and corporate taxes, minimal social services for the needy, and much less oversight of industry — especially environmental regulation.” (A good hard look at their air-pollution record would make you sick.)

It’s a perversion of democracy, indeed, when individuals like the Kochs have so much clout while the many millions of ordinary Americans have so little. What the Kochs want is coming to pass. Extend the tax cuts for the rich? No problem. Cut services to the poor, the sick, the young and the disabled? Check. Can we get you anything else, gentlemen?

The Egyptians want to establish a viable democracy, and that’s a long, hard road. Americans are in the mind-bogglingly self-destructive process of letting a real democracy slip away.

I had lunch with the historian Howard Zinn just a few weeks before he died in January 2010. He was chagrined about the state of affairs in the U.S. but not at all daunted. “If there is going to be change,” he said, “real change, it will have to work its way from the bottom up, from the people themselves.”

I thought of that as I watched the coverage of the ecstatic celebrations in the streets of Cairo.

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