◀ REVIEW ESSAYS ▶

Democratic Procedures Are Not Inherently Democratic *A Critical Analysis of John Keane's The New Despotism (Harvard University Press, 2020)*

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In his latest opus, *The New Despotism*, John Keane continues to challenge existing wisdom in the field of democratic theory and comparative political studies. One of the key insights of the book is that there is nothing inherently democratic about democratic innovations and procedures, and thus they can be used to prop up despotisms, rather than usher in democracy. While this insight comports with existing misgivings about elections, the book stands out in the way it explains the sustainability of using the democratic procedures in the new despotisms. For democratic procedures to further the aims of the new despotisms, the condition of “voluntary servitude” needs to be met. “Voluntary servitude” means that people willingly give in to political slavery, and become accomplices in maintaining the illusion that democratic procedures are implemented (215–222). Keane’s achievement is that he creates an analytical ecosystem of interlinked assumptions, observations, conditions, and other logical connectors, which make his model of the new despotism so robust.

One of the reasons why Keane’s model is so convincing is that it is empirically and methodologically innovative. Empirically, it provides a large volume of empirical material, which political science and democratic theory have not traditionally conceived as the object of their inquiry. Information about the infrastructure of Abu Dhabi, the public

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image of Turkmenistan's elected leader, and the favorite chat application of the Chinese rarely make it into scholarly works on democracy. Yet, this level and volume of careful observations have produced what methodologists call new data, and testing and proving existing propositions with new data constitutes one of the chief ways to advance science and revise paradigms.

The second pillar of Keane's model of the new despotisms is his interdisciplinary approach. Instead of following the conventional path and limiting the discussion of the regime type within the familiar confines of political science concepts, such as political power, political institutions, political repression and political protest, Keane seamlessly and logically weaves concepts usually situated strictly within the domain of political science with at least four kindred (sub)disciplinary fields: economics (in the way the new despotism's economy works); media studies (in the way the new despotisms cultivate their public image); anthropology (in the way the book observes the livelihoods of the population in the new despotism); and political theory (in the way Keane implicitly draws on a novel conception of human nature).

This review article seeks to elucidate the pillars of Keane's concept of the new despotism, and to situate it in the broader scholarship of democracy and authoritarianism. Its purpose is to identify the subtle contradictions in the literature that require further debate and to lay out the parameters of this debate. The article proceeds as follows: the first section systematizes Keane's view of elections in the new despotisms and compares it to the view of elections in the existing literature. It suggests that the latter purports that democratic procedures have a democratizing effect, while Keane presents elections as a despotism-enhancing and despotism-legitimizing device. Consequently, the question emerges: under what conditions are democratic innovations democratizing, and when do they serve despotic goals? The second section juxtaposes the new despotism with electoral and competitive authoritarianism. It argues that the two regimes operate with a similar view of elections, but they differ in postulating the conditions under which elections and despotisms co-exist. The article contends that the new despotism can abuse elections only under the condition of voluntary servitude. The third section looks closely at the state of "voluntary servitude" as defined by Keane and discusses the two conditions under which it prospers, namely media spectacles and a state-regulated capitalist economy. The final section suggests that the new despotisms work with a different version of human nature than those used by most existing models of democracy.

Elections “License” the New Despotisms

One central takeaway of *The New Despotism* by John Keane is that democratic procedures in and of themselves have no democratizing power. Their qualities can be used and abused, depending on how elections are executed and who implements them. Democratic procedures are like a flashlight – you can use it to show someone the way but you can also blind someone’s eyes by pointing it at them. For example, Keane strongly contends that the new despotisms take full advantage of the ability of elections to legitimize their rule: “They [elections] license the rulers. They lend them authority. The razzamatazz of elections is an awesome celebration of the mighty power of the regime. It may even offer its subjects a chance to behave as if they believe in the regime, through something like an ‘election contract’” (108).

Using democratic procedures to achieve non-democratic ends is not a trick that only new despotisms employ. In democratic history, elections, which are the biggest and most consequential democratic invention, have not always been intended to give free voice to the people. J. R. Pole reminds us that the early constitutional period in America gave “tremendous authority to arguments against individual representation, and in favour of ... differing property qualifications, or other devices for the distinct purpose of institutionalising the representation of property” (1966: 25). So if in America elections were initially used to stifle individual voices and legitimize private property, then it is no surprise that “in China, the Party’s support for local elections was initially driven by the need to rebuild its damaged legitimacy in the countryside following the large-scale violence and social disruption of the Cultural Revolution” (105). Similarly, Karl Marx argues that political and human rights were initially connected to the idea of property rights, which in turn were meant to legitimize primitive property accumulation (Brenkert 2013). The bottom line is that democratic practices and notions, which we in retrospect interpret as inherently democratic, did not always originate as such. It should come as no surprise, then, that elections, or the illusion of elections, are an attractive option for new despotisms with no democratic intentions. If the landed and commercial interests in America and England could abuse democratic notions to create the veneer of legitimacy, so can Iran and Vietnam. If democratic innovations started as nondemocratic, then they may indeed lack any inherent democratizing potential.

It is remarkable how Keane’s new book, in my view, upends the academic narrative about the democratic potential of the electoral procedure. Keane challenges notions, which perpetuate the inherently

remedial, redeeming, community-building, issue-defining, and self-fulfilling democratic promise of voting. His view of elections appears to be at odds with that of Nadia Urbinati, who states that “elections are truly the means to a government of opinion as a government responsive to, and responsible toward the public” (2014: 229). Urbinati appreciates elections because she believes in the overall normative value of the procedure of elections, a phenomenon she calls “democratic proceduralism”: “I have argued that democracy is its procedures and in this our liberty as citizens rests” (2014: 214). Unlike Michael Saward (2010), Keane does not seem to believe that elections in the new despotisms necessarily presuppose some sort of an enlarged dialogue during which the people’s representative claims are crafted. Instead of serving the demos and enabling it to express its grievances, the electoral procedure in fact can benefit the elites by making them aware of the level of toleration in society and whether they need to readjust the level or scope of repression. Instead of actually including the citizens and making each vote count, the electoral procedure has a way to create the illusion of inclusion while effectually excluding the citizens. Instead of addressing social concerns, the electoral procedure can mute and suppress them by granting a transient feeling of elation. Proponents of elections advocate that electoral campaigns and electoral debates constitute information dispensing mechanisms that provide to the electorate crucial information enabling them to make well-informed and self-benefiting choices. By contrast, Keane points out that elections can supply useful information to the rulers, who use it to lengthen and tighten their despotic grip. Here are some examples from Keane’s guidebook of the use and abuse of elections in the new despotisms:

1. Elections are “a way of publicly binding together the polity, a method of making the subjects of the realm feel included in the affairs of state, despite the fact that most people are excluded from the hallways and backrooms of governmental power” (99).
2. “Elections function as weapons for periodically cheering up disappointed citizens” (103). Through elections, citizens “let off steam” (103).
3. “Elections can create opportunities for spotting new talent (that is, budding accomplices of the ruling power)” (107).
4. They distribute patronage to supporters and potential supporters, and serve as early warning detectors of disaffection and opposition (107).
5. Elections provide much-needed information to those who govern (107).
6. Elections ... enable[e] rulers to keep an eye on current and potential dissidents” (107).
7. Elections are path dependent, so that once implemented out of convenience, it would be very costly to cancel them (106).

Whether the democratic procedures ultimately benefit the despotic elite (Keane) or the demos (Urbinati, Saward) depends, largely, on the way we define and operationalize the democratic procedures themselves. In this sense, Keane's book should be used as a platform to start a conversation about the possibility of using and abusing elections and other democratic inventions *across regime types*. There are at least three reasons why elections serve the elite, and not the demos.

The first option is that elections serve the elite, because even when they are free and fair, they suffer from inherent shortcomings. From the most systematic study tellingly titled *Why Elections Fail* (Norris 2015), we already know that the electoral procedure has fundamental flaws, even in the most advanced of democracies. These electoral shortcomings include gerrymandering, dark money in political campaigns, manipulative media campaigns, and spinning. I, too, in earlier work (Dimova 2019) take issue with the fact that elections are rather infrequent and that electoral options present overly blunt choices, as they combine bundles of issues and people, which are sometimes ideologically incompatible.

The second option is that elections serve the elite, even when they are free and fair, when they are not accompanied by sufficient contextual enhancements per Robert Dahl (1973): universal suffrage and the right to run for public office, free speech, free access to alternative information, the right to join autonomous organizations, responsiveness of parties and governments, and executive accountability. If this is the reason why elections can serve the despots, then the new despotisms reveal themselves to be similar to Schumpeterian minimalist democracies, with just the electoral procedure in place and the passive electorate in the backseat (Schumpeter [1942] 2010).

The third option is that elections serve the elite because they are not free and fair.

Elections are not the only democratic innovations that Keane believes to peacefully coexist within the new despotisms. Keane gives the following "examples of these people-centered innovations": "e-consultation exercises, online public forums, and small-scale informal consultations conducted by government ministers and known as Tea Sessions, Dialogue Sessions, Policy Feedback Groups, and Policy Study Workshops. The rulers operate Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts" (95). Despite listing the existence of myriad of such people-centred innovations, Keane does not make the argument that they improve the quality of citizenship or the quality of democracy. On the contrary, these innovations dumb down the critical ability of the participants and seduce them into a state of quiet servitude.

Keane's argument that democratic procedures in and of themselves have no democratizing power, and in fact often have the opposite effect, puts him at odds with scholars who suggest that participation in various procedures has an enlightening and educational effect on the participants. His model challenges assumptions made by deliberative democracy, for example, that people's preferences change as they become more considerate and more enlightened when participating in deliberative forums. It is in this vein of thinking that Bernard Manin suggests that "it is the process [of deliberation] by which everyone's will is formed" (1987: 359). Claus Offe agrees that "the opportunity to participate in the collective affairs of the political community will actually have a virtuous formative impact upon citizens." Similarly, Marian Barnes argues that deliberative spaces and social movements are "emotional spaces in which identities are negotiated, constructed and possibly transformed" (2012: 21). The "participatory turn" (Fung 2004) suggests that participatory initiatives have an educational effect for the participants and thus help formulate their demands. And "attitudinal changes [are thought to] occur" in the course of participatory practices (Della Porta 2013: 197).

By juxtaposing these two very different views of elections and democratic innovations, this review article seeks to open up a dialogue along the following queries: (1) Do democratic innovations have inherent democratic qualities? (2) If they do, under what conditions is their democratizing potential ignited, and under what conditions is it extinguished? In short, why is it the case that some scholars believe that deliberative forums and other innovations improve the quality of democracy, while Keane argues that the same forums prop up the new despotisms? Future research should list, juxtapose, and discuss these queries.

The Concept of the New Despotism: What Is Its Value Added?

One criterion for assessing the value added of a new concept in democratic theory should be whether it says something that other notions do not. Keane argues that the concept of the "new despotism" surpasses its biggest conceptual rival, "authoritarianism," in several essential ways, which I will review below. First, Keane claims that the concept of the new despotism avoids the unnecessary dichotomous perception that "divides the world into 'bad' authoritarian regimes and 'good' democracies" (213). Furthermore, he claims that the concept of authoritarianism "wrongly supposes that the new despotisms are devoid of democracy" (212). Perhaps this criticism is less valid for the notions of "competitive authoritarianism" and "electoral authoritarianism," at least insofar as they admit of

the presence of elections as a semi-democratic element. The democratic element in competitive authoritarianism is evident, as the regime is explicitly defined as a “hybrid type with important characteristics of both democracy and authoritarianism” (Levitsky and Way 2010: 6). Electoral authoritarianism, very similarly to the new despotism, uses elections to “obtain at least a semblance of democratic legitimacy, hoping to satisfy external as well as internal actors” (Schedler 2002: 36). In a similar vein to that of the new despotism, electoral authoritarianism flags an inherently non-democratic view of elections: “Historically ... elections have been an instrument of authoritarian control as well as a means of democratic governance” (Schedler 2002: 36). Thus, Keane joins the ranks of scholars who have thought of “elections without democracy” (Diamond 2002) as a distinct phenomenon.

What Keane’s notion of the “new despotism” achieves for understanding China, for example, is very similar to what the notion of competitive/electoral/hegemonic authoritarianism achieved for categorizing countries in Latin America a decade ago, namely it shifts the academic discourse from a discussion of “democracy with adjectives” (Collier and Levitsky 1997) to a dialogue that I would call “despotisms with adjectives.” As such, Keane revives and gives new empirical data to review the crucial question in democratic theory: at what point do we stop thinking of a regime as a democracy gone awry and start thinking about it as a despotism with democratic leanings? Where is the boundary between a façade democracy (Milton-Edwards 1993) and a new despotism? The most distinct analytical value added by the notion of “the new despotism” is introducing the idea of voluntary servitude. Voluntary servitude is what makes “the new despotism” so qualitatively different from various versions of authoritarianism that it justifies the coining of this separate term. Each model of hybrid regimes has a different answer to the question of how to navigate the boundary between implementing democratic norms and transgressing democratic norms. Competitive authoritarianism couples the procedural minimum of the definition of democracy with the condition of a “level playing field between the government and the opposition” (Levitsky and Way 2010: 36). Andreas Schedler (2002) compiled a comprehensive list of conditions on how to maintain that balance. The list includes coercion, corruption, and suffrage restrictions. In contrast to these models of authoritarianism, and this is where his new book stands out, Keane argues that people enjoy and willingly embrace the new despotism; they are not coerced into participating in it. “The paradox of voluntary servitude is absent in such terms as ‘autocracy,’ ‘tyranny,’ and ‘authoritarianism,’ all of which have strong connotations of rule through heavy-handed force. By contrast, and put simply, despotism is a hard

government in soft velvet form. It lures subjects into subjection” (215). Authoritarianism lacks the aspect of seduction, and that is why the new despotism adds value to the discussion of non-democratic regimes. One of the biggest achievements of the book is that it puts together a number of assumptions, conditions, and outcomes in which voluntary servitude is a sustainable reality. I outline those below.

Voluntary Servitude Sustains the Illusion of Democratic Procedures in the New Despotisms

If Keane’s idea of “voluntary servitude” constitutes the key analytical component that makes the notion of the new despotism different from the concept of authoritarianism, then it is important to understand what factors lure people into political slavery. Voluntary servitude helps maintain the illusion of democratic procedures in the new despotisms under two conditions: savvy media deflections and state-regulated capitalism.

Before analyzing how voluntary servitude helps manage the abuse of democratic procedures, it is important to point out that this is an extremely precarious task. The most important challenge for the new despotisms is how they can maintain the allure of democratic procedures without actually fully implementing democratic procedures. The most ominous peril, for them, is that by practicing these democratic procedures, people may acquire a taste of freedom. They may take real advantage of their rights. They may start protesting, rioting, dissenting. They may take it to the next level and seek to overthrow the regime.

This feasible perspective of democratic procedures benefiting the demos, and not the elites, is what despotisms fear the most. Their fears are justified. Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms set a precedent showing how borrowing some (but not all) democratic procedures could lead to the implosion of the whole regime. Gorbachev started the *glasnost* reforms with the idea to introduce *some* openness and transparency into the political system. He meant to reconstruct the old communist regime (the Russian word *perestroika* means restructuring or reforming the economic and political system), but there is no indication that Gorbachev meant to demolish it entirely. The process that Gorbachev initiated led to his ousting. The system imploded. This denouement is what the new despotisms are most apprehensive of. The Soviet Union is not the only historical example that teaches us that once you let the genie of democratic procedures out of the bottle it may be hard to get it back. The Middle East is also a case in point. Daniel Ritter (2015) argues that empty rhetoric may bind the new despotisms into a “discursive trap” of the

iron cage of liberalism. The use of elections by façade democracies may open them up to global supervision of democracies. The new despotisms may fall into the democracy trap.

Ironically, perhaps the new despotisms' best hope for bending elections to their advantage comes from the process of democratization during the Third Wave in the early 1990s. The end of the transition paradigm in Eastern Europe saw the failure to successfully implement Western-based democratic innovations. The transitional paradigm taught us that elections are not teleological (Carothers 2002). Thus, the issue of maintaining the illusion of democratic procedures, without slipping into a fully fledged democracy, is one of the most throbbing inquiries that Keane's book posits and, I argue, answers well.

Keane suggests that it is voluntary servitude that sustains the illusion of democratic procedures in the long run. Those who have made themselves slaves are more likely to entertain the illusion, and vice versa. Keane's achievement is to explain how that elaborately constructed ecosystem of voluntary servants taking part in illusionary democratic innovations works. The conditions that perpetuate the life of the new despotisms are twofold: heavily choreographed media spectacles and an enjoyment of a selection of material comforts. *Panem et circenses*, bread and circuses, is not a novel strategy to distract and appease the masses, but it was masterfully implemented in the new despotisms, and Keane explains exactly how.

One important condition for enabling voluntary servitude is that the state in the new despotisms can provide some material comforts to its citizens. It is important to understand that the citizens in the new despotisms buy the illusion of democratic procedures because they have a material interest in it. The key to satisfying this material interest is the state-regulated capitalism elaborated by Keane. In the new despotisms, the state-regulated capitalism functions at two levels: big businesses are entirely subjugated to patron-client relations managed by the state, while smaller businesses admit to a degree of laissez-faire economics. Keeping big conglomerates close to the heart of the state through "legal loopholes," "embezzlement of state funds, and graft and kickback arrangements on government contracts" means that the new despotism "privatizes profits and nationalizes costs" (46).

In the state-regulated capitalism of the new despotism, there is something to make everyone keep quiet. Elites revel in riches. Because of the degree of economic freedom, small-business owners enjoy the chance to benefit from their profits and to feel vested in the economy. Importantly, the system ensures that the middle classes possess a small but tangible degree of material comforts, such as annual vacations and trips to the shopping mall (98). The relative well-being of the (professional) middle

classes is strategically significant both because it neutralizes dissent among their ranks and because it serves to prove to the poor that the economic system works.

What about those who are left out of the economic profits, and those who do not belong to the ranks of the elites, the small owners or the middle classes? The state regulated capitalism is profitable enough to provide for them as well. In a marked contrast to the collectivized economies of the communist regimes, which are characterized by empty shelves and hour-long queues for bread, state regulated capitalism does not deny the profit-making impetus of capitalism. On the contrary, it embraces it and takes delight in it to the fullest. Keane debunks the myth that there is “no necessary affinity between capitalism and power sharing democracy. To the contrary, these years of the twenty first century suggest that despotism has a special fancy for the risk taking and profiteering of capitalism” (248). The takeaway is that the economy in the new despotism is strong enough to neutralize various layers of the population politically by satisfying their consumerist instincts.

The second condition that perpetuates the illusion of democratic procedure and voluntary servitude is the media spectacle orchestrated by the new despotisms. This is also a novel insight, as it challenges the assumption that it is only democratic rulers that are cautious of being caught in unguarded moments (Green 2010). Keane dispels the myth that the despots try to conceal their depraved ways by hiding from the spotlight. He argues that new despotisms in fact actively seek to take control of the media narrative because they realize that moments of quietness breed questions and doubt. The new despotisms are motivated to arrange elaborate media feasts because they believe that the messages they send through symbols can compensate for the message they cannot send through their policies (123). In other words, they believe that the media can create an imagined reality that can fully compensate for the deficiencies of the reality of direct experience. “The message of the ‘pomp and circumstance of grand sporting events and other entertainment spectacles’ is that ‘life is good and progress is happening on all fronts’” (116). The overriding objective, of course, is to entertain and deflect attention so that they “gaslight their subjects into bemused submission” (126). A bored citizen may turn into a thinking citizen. An entertained citizen is less likely to be critical of the regime. Amusement fortifies authoritarianism. The “light entertainment ... has the serious effect of putting blinkers on the eyes of public doubt” (123). Taken to an extreme, this approach would imply that, no matter how despotic a leader is, he (usually it is a he, not a she) can get away with it, if he is entertaining enough, or if he is wise enough to provide entertainment. This insight is perhaps worth

pondering in considering the importance of amusement in eroding established democracies as well.

The anthropological breadth and detail with which the book documents how the new despotisms have mastered the entertainment industry are impressive. The most intriguing example of this strategy, to me personally, is the case of “Turkmenistan’s elected leader, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, [who] races fast cars, rides horses, publishes books, performs hospital operations and rap videos, writes serenades for women, strums his guitar at workers’ rallies, and hands out televisions and other gifts to local citizens” (123). My curiosity was triggered enough for me to Google the image of Mr. Berdymukhamedov, who I was convinced would be some variety of a Hollywood actor. Upon seeing the images, I was astounded just how much he resembled the Bulgarian communist leaders from my childhood. I narrate this personal experience to show just how the dimensions that one would have thought to be incongruous are reinvented in the new despotisms. Hollywood and communism have merged in the media. Keane must be right that the new despotisms have invented “the new Hollywood without the old California” (118). This revamped Hollywood is just as entertaining as the original, with the important difference that it comes in a package with a different religion (usually), lots of oil money, and is meant to distract from the self-serving ends of the new despotism.

By laying out the affinity of the new despotism with communicative abundance, Keane once again proves two points that he made convincingly in his book *Democracy and Media Decadence*: that democracy does not have ownership of communicative abundance and that communicative abundance in and of itself is neither good nor bad. It can achieve democratic or nondemocratic goals, depending on who manages it and how. Keane has previously made the argument that communicative abundance provides multiple channels of information and *may* lead to monitory democracy. So, when Keane wrote that communicative abundance “produces permanent flux, an unending restlessness driven by complex combinations of different interacting players and institutions, permanently pushing and pulling, heaving and straining, sometimes working together, at other times in opposition to one another” (2011: 231), he was preparing the other side of the argument, namely that communicative abundance also goes well with the new despotism.

The combined effect of these two conditions, *panem et circenses*, or state-regulated capitalism and media spectacles, is that it discourages people from participating in public life. Most surprisingly, the new despotisms discourage any face-to-face contact. Lavish manifestations and exultant forms of admiration for the regime, which traditional authoritarianisms have nourished, are considered a political atavism by the new

despotism. Perhaps they fear that face-to-face interactions may create political or social capital. This apprehension may not be so far-fetched. Neils Weidmann and Espen Rød (2019) have recently established that once on-line acquaintances meet up in person, their anti-regime stances solidify. For people to stay off the streets, they need to be engaged at home. They must be kept willing captives in their own private spheres. This is how the new despotisms fool people into not only voluntary servitude but into a quiet servitude.

Democratic Procedures in the New Despotisms: A New Assumption about Human Nature

The model of the new despotism advances a new concept of human nature. For the illusion of democratic innovations and voluntary servitude to thrive, they need to be premised on a particular view of what people naturally are like. This view of human nature is implicit, but it permeates the book and drastically differs from the view of human nature that Western democracy usually operates with. Human subjects in the new despotism are not driven by the “animal spirits” (Keynes 1936: 161–162) that can upset stable (economic) cycles. Neither are human subjects in the new despotism in an emotional *status naturae*, which needs to be tamed through the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism (Weber [1930] 2001). Nor do they strive for freedom to realize their human potential. In the new despotism, human nature is actually afraid of and anxious about the freedom to choose. The existential anxiety that underpins the democratic and globalized citizen, as detailed by Zygmunt Bauman (2007), is actually ameliorated in the new despotisms. The model of the new despotism is premised on the assumption that people do not want to constantly evaluate reality, analyze it, and criticize it. They do not want to be self-critical and to constantly improve themselves. To them, the security of having no choices and being told what to do is both soothing and reassuring. Scholars of “audience democracy” (De Beus 2011) and “attention deficit democracy” (Berger 2011), for example, worry about what has gone wrong with people in regards to what has made them disinterested and apathetic about their freedom. Others wonder what aberration explains why people support strong or authoritarian leaders. The new despotisms assume that citizens are not rocket scientists, not even political scientists. Citizens *enjoy* being a part of the audience in a democratic setup, and their attention deficit is permanent, not an aberration that can be fixed. People enjoy consumption but feel that industriousness is very unnatural. They like relaxation. They like to be idle. The new despotisms

work with this version of the human condition and exploit it to their advantage.

Rather than forcing people to be cheerful, cordial, and optimistic, the new despotisms encourage people's moaning and complaining. Because the citizens engage in moaning, and even self-pity, their energy is gradually neutralized and wasted. The constant small acts of complaining sap political enthusiasm. Complaining constitutes a venting-out exercise, so people feel less burdened; simultaneously, moaning informs the power-holders of the public's anguish, which makes the incumbents better informed and more capable to control it. This arrangement serves the new despotisms well. Keane astutely points out: "Grumblers license the power of the powerful" (89). In doing so, he dispels the expectation that grumblers are somehow incipient rebels and harbingers of democracy. History will show whether the new despotisms work with a more realistic version of human nature than democracies.

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