
Mangoes and Eggs: A Cautionary Tale

Report from the Residential Conference on Emerging Democracies and Freedom of Information, Somerville College, Oxford, 2-4 September 1994

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What do mangoes and eggs have to do with a library conference about emerging democracies? They emerged as symbols of capitalism and communism during the International Group of the Library Association's weekend school. The tone was set by Russell Bowden, First Vice-President of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). In his report on this year's IFLA conference in Havana and the "implications for Cuban democracy", Russell failed to mention the general election held in Cuba in February 1993. 99% of the population took part and only 7% spoilt their ballot papers in protest against the government. 585 of the 589 candidates polled more than 90% of the vote. The Communist Party had no role in the nomination of candidates, nor were candidates to be members of the Party. 83% of the members entered the National Assembly for the first time. 23% were women, 24% workers, 10% farmers. Only 6% were party members. Russell also didn't refer to Cuban local government, where there are Committees for the Defence of the Revolution which operate at street level and run important local services such as road cleaning and refuse collection.

Russell was more interested in the fact that he couldn't get mangoes for breakfast. To him this represented the failure of socialism. Such was the level of analysis we were to see repeated throughout the weekend. While admitting that the US blockade caused terrible problems in Cuba, Russell was critical of what he called the Cubans' "paranoia". Wouldn't you be paranoid if you were under constant threat from an immensely powerful neighbour that has: invaded your country (Bay of Pigs, 1962); threatened nuclear war (Missile Crisis, 1962); introduced disease to destroy crops and kill livestock; attempted to assassinate your head of state on numerous occasions; sabotaged factories, cane fields and power supplies; maintained an illegal presence (Guantanamo Bay); beamed in thousands of anti-Cuban broadcasts (Radio and TV Marti); all this *in addition to* the illegal blockade of all goods including food and medicines for over 30 years.

On my visit to Cuba in 1993 I saw no sign of the secret police who Russell said arrested Cubans who spoke to tourists. As for the security at hotels he spoke of, this is typical in all developing countries where the conspicuous wealth of tourists attracts criminal elements and tempts those

who have so little. Tourism is a double-edged sword in Cuba. It brings in much needed hard currency, but it has also brought back prostitution and crime.

Even the triumphs of the Revolution - universal health care and education - were given grudging praise by Russell. He noted the extent to which the Soviet Union supported Cuba, claiming that this is what paid for the hospitals and schools. But the real point, surely, is that Castro chose to spend this money on the people instead of on himself or on weapons, unlike the many tin-pot dictators propped up by the West. The Cuban health and education systems are not only better than in any other developing country, they are also better than in many developed countries. Infant mortality in Havana, for example, is lower than in Washington, D.C. Cubans live to an average age of 75 and are entitled to a free education up to graduate level. They have trained doctors and teachers to spread literacy and health care in other developing countries. The hospitals have been opened to the Chernobyl victims. They lead the world in some medical fields and have patented a vaccine for meningitis.

The criticism of socialist countries continued at the session on China. Ms. Bing Sum Lao from the University of Westminster Library claimed that China only scored 23% against a set of human rights criteria. The fact that the UK scored 93% does put a question mark against those criteria. Do they include the right to food, shelter, health care and literacy? Without these freedoms, the freedom to information is meaningless. The UK is often cited as a free country, yet Oxfam has now given it 'Third World' status and is now setting up projects to feed the ever growing numbers of poor people in these islands.

On the subject of leagues tables, 89% of children in China receive what UNESCO defines as a basic education. This compares favourably with Bangladesh (51%), Brazil (50%), India (68%), Indonesia (88%), Mexico (82%), Nigeria (71%) and Pakistan (52%). The number of children in school is also impressive. Since the founding of New China in 1949, the Chinese government has sought to provide basic education and eradicate illiteracy in a planned, incremental way. The nine-year compulsory education programme has been implemented and China's illiteracy rate has dropped from 80% in 1949 to 16% in 1990. The goal - education for all in China by 2000 - lies clearly ahead.

When the conference turned its attention to Eastern Europe a stark contrast emerged. If socialism came to be symbolised by mangoes in Cuba, capitalism was represented by a dozen eggs in Eastern Europe. Since the collapse of Communism salaries have become meaningless and the monthly salary of a professional librarian is worth no more than a dozen eggs. Alongside the collapsed economies there has been the widespread destruction of infrastructures and the ravages of war fuelled by emergent nationalism.

When considering libraries and freedom of information in so-called emerging democracies a number of contradictions emerged. Dr. Tamar Dragadze of the University of London encapsulated some of these in her talk on war, politics and the media in the Trans-Caucasus. Eastern Europe now has freedom of expression but no means to achieve it in practice (no ink, no paper, no publishing houses). There is access to libraries but no fuel to heat them. There is freedom of information but freedom also to go hungry, homeless and uneducated. Freedom

also to go to war in which communities that previously co-existed under Communism are now killing each other and burning down libraries.

Vladimir Spiridonov of Mezhdunarodnaya Knizhnoye Izdatel'stvo Publishing House looked at Russian publishing, which has collapsed since the fall of Communism. There is a serious shortage of ink and paper and frequent breakdowns of machinery. The price of books has rocketed and the market, like many others in Russia today, is run by the Mafia. The Russian people, once considered the greatest readers in the world, are now reduced to begging in the streets.

A similar situation can be found in Poland. Runnalls Davis, the Library Association's International Officer, considered the British Council's role in library development in Poland during 'the transition'. The reality is that when Council staff visited Poland they found libraries that had not had a new book in three years, where photocopiers are unusual, microfilming unknown and where hard chairs proliferate.

Sylva Simsova, a freelance consultant, told the conference that "freedom of information returns to the Czech Republic." But inflation is increasing faster than library budgets and staff salaries are very poor. There is a diminishing supply of indigenous publications as subsidies for publishing dry up. The price of books is largely beyond the reach of ordinary Czechs. As a result most are bought by the rich minority.

Is it any wonder, given the havoc caused by nationalism and the market system in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, that the people are turning back to socialist parties and voting for them in increasing numbers, as they are in Hungary and East Germany? In Albania disenchantment with the regime has led increasing numbers to

yearn for "the good old days" under Communism. Isa Zymeri, UK representative of the Republic of Kosova, considered the freedom of expression of a divided people, the Albanians. yet even members of Albania's long-suffering ethnic Greek minority, esconced in the pale stone villages around the border, now admit they would willingly vote for the former Communists. Their view is that Albania is meant to be democratic, but in fact isn't. At least under Communism the Albanians knew what they could and couldn't say; what they could and couldn't do. Now they are told: "Talk and do whatever you like" and then, before they know it, they've been put in jail.

By far the best papers of the conference were those on Islam, Kenya and South Africa. Naim Turfan from the School of African and Oriental Studies looked at democracy and Islam, the question of political obligation in contemporary Muslim society. It is possible to be both democratic and Islamic. He reminded us that not all Muslims are gun-toting fanatics. Many so-called fundamentalist states are weak and take their failings out on dissidents. A state that is self-assured will respond to change and survive. Japan is strong and can survive numerous changes of leader. Rwanda lost one leader and thousands of people were killed because of the state's weakness. What is needed is not a religious state but a state of religious people. The individual should obey the state because they consent with it, not because they fear it. The Koran has been distorted by man. The ethics of the Koran should be incorporated into secular law. Finally, he averred that there was really no such thing as western democracy.

This point was picked up by Shiraz Durrani in his paper "The Mirage of Democracy in Kenya: the People's Struggle for Information as an Aspect of the Struggle for Liberation." Class dictatorship is putting on the garb of democracy, this is the propaganda of the ruling classes. The changes introduced by President Moi are cosmetic. While we sit here in Oxford talking about freedom of information, don't forget that countries such as Britain supplied the arms to sustain dictators such as Moi in Africa. Democracy in Africa, like the death of socialism, is no more than a myth. Many speakers at the conference had tried to make out there could be no democracy under socialism, but the two can - and do - co-exist. It is CNN, Coca-Cola and McDonald's - not socialism - that are destroying democracy.

Africa is being recolonised by the IMF and the World Bank. External forces are aided by local agents of imperialism. Chairman Mao championed the rights of the masses not to be exploited. China sent many books in Kiswahili to Kenya. Democracy is a means not an end, the end being to satisfy the basic needs of the majority of the people. Democracy for the transnationals, on the other hand, means their right to plunder the Third World. Shiraz concluded his paper with a number of resolutions, calling on the Library Association to: set up a register of the oppressed; establish collections of suppressed material; send material aid to developing countries; invite victims of oppression to conferences such as this; break the information blockade of countries such as Cuba; and publish newsletters to raise awareness in the UK.

Christopher Merrett, from the University of Natal, looked at the case for freedom of information in South

Africa. Human rights abuses, social, economic and political oppression and the move from colonialism to apartheid meant that no culture of openness developed in South Africa. One era of coercion and dull conformity was replaced by another and there is a danger of this happening again. Rights to information are still limited and librarians are taking a craven attitude. Multilateral talks were replaced by a bilateral discussion between the ANC and the NP to reach a political settlement. Discourse has been closed down on the grounds of reconciliation and national unity. The recent election had a negotiated result to satisfy all sides. State broadcasting is constrained and the ANC calls for "constructive reporting".

Apartheid has gone, but new laws on openness have not yet been passed. There is a high level of violence and many grass-roots organisations are not functioning. Indemnity provisions are still in place. The ANC is fearful of its past and there are rumours that two police informers are in the Cabinet. Many documents, including police records, have been shredded and ownership of the press is concentrated. The Criminal Procedures Act forces journalists to reveal the sources of their information and the law on defamation is unreformed. NGOs which played a major role in repackaging information for peasants and the illiterate are now in decline.

The conference failed to reach any conclusions or make any meaningful recommendations. The myth that the fall of Communism equals the emergence of democracy was rarely challenged. There was a general air of self-congratulatory relief: "Thank goodness we live in a free country." The Irish question was not explored, though it was pointed that Bosnian refugees who were beaten up in Essex

did not have confidence in the authorities to help them. The heavy emphasis on Europe reflected the eurocentricity of the Library Association and its International Committee and International Group.

For a serious analysis of emerging

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democracies and freedom of information an alternative conference needs to be organised with speakers from such organisations as Sinn Fein and from such countries as Cuba, North Korea, China and Vietnam.

