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## Summit a showcase of democracy in decline

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A non-event if ever there was one, Joe Biden's Summit for Democracy came and went last weekend without leaving a trace.

Marred from the outset by an almost complete absence of clear thought, the virtual gathering was a wasted opportunity. After all, Freedom House, which monitors international trends in democracy, recently recorded its 15th consecutive year of declines in freedom worldwide, while also recording the largest year-on-year drop in democracy scores since its measurements began.

Meanwhile, China's ever more pronounced authoritarianism – highlighted by the harsh prison sentences just inflicted in Hong Kong on Jimmy Lai, the founder of Apple Daily, and several others who had peacefully assembled to mark the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre – is providing dictators around the globe with legitimacy and an unstinting source of support.

Faced with those trends, one might have hoped for a realistic analysis of why government “of the people, by the people, for the people” is everywhere in retreat.

Instead, the summit delivered hour after hour of mind-bending vacuousness, interspersed with equally mind-bending (albeit somewhat more amusing) paeans to democracy from leaders

whose democratic credentials are less than threadbare.

Indeed, the only statement of any interest came from the Chinese government. Miffed at being excluded, it issued a lengthy document whose logic may be garbled but whose message was crystal clear: China is genuinely democratic while the US is not.

Now, democracy is a concept that admits of many different conceptions. But even the most capacious minds would struggle to reconcile any of those conceptions with the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (exercised, in China’s case, by corrupt millionaires) and single-party rule. On the contrary, the essence of democracy, however imperfectly realised in practice, is the contestability of power.

Claude Lefort, a French political philosopher, put it nicely when he described power in a democracy as an “empty space”: like a hotel room, its occupants periodically arrive and settle in, but they cannot alter the rules so as to prevent others from booting them out when the electorate decides their time is up.

In contrast, the stated purpose of the communists’ single-party rule is to bring the political contest to an end. Marx and Engels recognised that universal suffrage could provide communist parties with a “slower and more boring” path to power than revolution; but once a majority had been secured, the party had to use the state “not for the purposes of freedom, but of keeping down its enemies”, making the conquest of power irreversible.

Lenin was even clearer, arguing that the party’s duty, after seizing control, was to deploy “mercilessly rigorous, swift and resolute force” against its opponents, eradicating them from the political scene.

And the Chinese Communist Party, in a document that Xi Jinping has elevated into a dogma, claims those who “prate about democracy and demand that we ‘liberalise’, are, in effect, opposing socialism”. Yes, the document says, “democratic centralism must rest on a broad basis of democracy”; however, the sole aim of “socialist democracy, which should not be confused with bourgeois democracy, is (to) strengthen the Party”.

But what separates Xi's view of the world from our own runs even deeper than that. At least at a philosophical level, the communists have always contended that conflict can ultimately be eliminated: dissension, once it has been ruthlessly suppressed, will fade away as socialism's "new man" overcomes what Mao Zedong, in a famous speech at Gutian, derided as "the petty bourgeoisie's individualistic aversion to discipline".

Democracy's premises could not be more different. It accepts the inevitability, legitimacy and even desirability of conflict: matters will never be decided once and for all; rather, there will always be new problems on which opinions can quite properly diverge, reshaping old fractures and creating new ones.

By institutionalising those conflicts, and deciding them through the competitive struggle for the people's vote, democracy converts antagonists into rivals, temporarily resolving the issues while harnessing conflict as an enduring source of accountability and of social dynamism.

But precisely because democracy's primary mechanism for resolving issues is the ballot – rather than the bullet in the back of the neck – its indispensable underpinning, which determines the quality of public opinion and of the decision-making process, is the untrammelled freedom to dissent.

George Orwell expressed this with all his usual clarity in an introduction to *Animal Farm* that he drafted in his dying days. "The aim of the Party," he said, "is to bring about a state of affairs in which all people are free to say what they like and yet perfect consensus reigns: hence uniformity." In contrast, "a community of genuinely free people is not simply one in which a high level of de facto consensus has been achieved; it is one in which vigorous disagreement is welcomed as a spur to refining shared norms for resolving present and future disputes".

That Orwell's views would be anathema to Xi is unsurprising; what is shocking is that Biden, who made the assertion of democratic values a central plank of his platform, rejects them too. In effect, the summit bore no resemblance to a real contest of ideas. Instead, its invited speakers competed at mouthing the platitudes of the age on issues that ranged from climate change to global inequality.

Watching this atrophy of the political imagination, the only conclusion one could draw was that in Biden's new Eden, God's creatures move in tightly serried, politically correct, herds.

It didn't have to be this way. At the height of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union posed a formidable existential threat, the CIA, acting through the Congress for Cultural Freedom, funded hundreds of initiatives that showcased the vibrant differences of opinion in the West, highlighting the abyss that separated liberty from totalitarianism. Far from mouthing McCarthyite propaganda, the CIA insisted on the need for diversity, excellence and creativity; it knew that the best answer to communism's enforced uniformity, and the best hope of freeing its captive minds, lay in the thrill of contention, not the torpor of cant.

The Soviets, recent archival research shows, viewed those initiatives as a deadly risk; today, it would be surprising if Xi and his cronies gave this summit, with its stifling intellectual conformity, a second thought.

Little wonder then that democracy is on the wane: not even those who claim to be its staunchest champions really believe in it. And like Tinker Bell in JM Barrie's Peter Pan, once the belief in democracy evaporates, so, sooner or later, does the reality. As Jimmy Lai and his courageous colleagues descend into the hell of China's gulags, they have every right to feel betrayed.