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Democracy Sleepwalking

By Arun Gupta
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On Sunday afternoon, as the Democracy Awakening march wound around the U.S. Capitol, I caught up with a well-known activist in the procession and asked, “What are the strategic goals of this?” She laughed and said, “Get more momentum for these bills that aren’t going anywhere.” She was referring to a series of bills in Congress intended to strengthen and expand voting rights, create a system of publicly subsidized election financing, and pass a constitutional amendment to end the dominance of big money in politics and overturn Citizens United.

These bills are backed by Democracy Spring, described by one insider as composed of the “scrappier” activists groups and Democracy Awakening, a more mainstream NGO-based

alliance. The split stemmed from political differences, such as planned civil disobedience actions. The division detracted from organizing, which hampered efforts to create traction for the bills. According to govtrack.us, the bill to restore protections afforded by the 1965 Voting Rights Act and overturned by the Supreme Court in 2013 has a 1% chance of passing. All the other acts and the amendment are considered to have a 0% chance of passing.

The groups, at least those that lent their name, include the AFL-CIO, MoveOn, NOW, NAACP, SEIU, Greenpeace, Sierra Club, Common Cause, Public Citizen, Codepink, Jobs with Justice, People for the American Way—many of which will throw their weight behind the Democratic Party in this year's election.

They are the pragmatists, the ones who back policies, however incremental, that can be enacted, rather than pie-in-the-sky idealists. Yet prior to the march, at a rally with the Capitol in the background, speakers demanded the impossible: that the bills be passed by a Republican majority that has tied up Washington until November's vote determines who wins control of all three federal branches at stake.

If these groups had a strategy to build power, it could crack open space for meaningful reforms. The events stretched over eight days and were billed as a “growing democracy movement” and “mass nonviolent action on a historic scale.” *The Nation* branded Democracy Awakening and Democracy Spring “the most important protest of the 2016 election.” But despite more than half a year of organizing, 300 endorsing organizations, and millions of dollars spent directly or in staff time, organizers could muster barely a thousand people for an outdoor rally on a gorgeous spring day.

The gathering was a throwback to soporific pre-Occupy Wall Street protests. There was the laundry list of speakers and causes. Lefty celebrities present, the Rev. William Barber of North Carolina's Moral Mondays, and past, commentator Jim Hightower, and the house protest band, Sweet Honey in the Rock. Pete Seeger was spared no rest, namechecked by a tin-eared warbler at the closing event.

The crowd was subdued, youth, retirees, and clusters of staff and interns in matching t-shirts from dozens of organizations they represented. They were passionate about the cause, and the selling of the political system to billionaires is one of the most vital struggles of our time. But on this day the generals were talking to their field officers with few soldiers present. I honed in on youth with the Andrew Goodman Foundation, named for one of three civil rights workers murdered during the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964.

Ariella, 20, a student at Pace University, said, “We need to get money out of politics.” When I asked her how, she said, “Going to rallies, meeting with our representatives. It won't happen just with protest. We can march, we can use social media, but unless we show up at the voting site, change won't happen.”

Anna, 20, from Tufts University, said that if “marginalized communities showed up to the polls, significant change would happen.” The message was the same from David Goodman, brother of

the slain civil rights worker, who said significant change could happen through the voting booth “if all the disenfranchised groups got together.”

The focus on voter registration did little to challenge the current electoral system. There were lots of Bernie Sanders, buttons, stickers, and signs, and none that could be seen for his opponent. When asked who they supported, many emphasized they would support whoever was the nominee in the fall, meaning Hillary Clinton.

It seemed churlish to point out Clinton is the most consistent Republican in the race, protector of Wall Street, enthusiastic war-monger, enemy of workers, and supporter of free-trade deals, austerity, and the war on terror.

The work-within-the-system narrative also clashed with high-stakes rhetoric. Democracy Spring likens its efforts to Ferguson and Stonewall. On the stage one speaker said, “This is our Selma,” invoking the bloody civil rights battle. Communications Workers of America President said, “What happened in this country is they’ve already stolen our democracy. ... We have an oligarchy.”

The message—democracy is defunct and these protests build on movements that exposed the violence embedded in American society—are at odds with the organizing. Interviewees adhered to talking points. Media handlers stuck like burrs, trying to direct interviews. While I talked to two youth of color from one group, the white executive director interrupted, delivered an “elevator speech,” and suggested I talk to a strapping young white male instead. Others were wary of speaking to a reporter. For a movement all about strengthening the democratic process, there was a reluctance to let people speak their minds.

Democracy Spring and Democracy Awakening left nothing to chance or the imagination. Chant sheets were circulated before the parade began. “Handmade” signs featured a similar design and the same few slogans. The de rigeur Bread-and-Puppet contraption, a corporate lobbyist, towered over the front rank. Marshalls and march leaders herded the crowd, with one squawking over his comm, “How’s the back of my march looking.” A few police cars and motorcycles with flashing lights zipped around and bottled up side streets, adding more festivity than menace.

Near the Rayburn House building a crowd stretching nearly two blocks halted. In deserted streets amid empty buildings to scattered applause protesters yelled, “If we don’t get what we want: Shut. It. Down.” At the finish, a “democracy” truck splashed with the iconic Ben & Jerry’s font passed out free ice cream, complementing the branding between product and protest on their website.

One organizer said the event was intended to show there’s a “constituency for civil disobedience that would be activated” around the issue of money out of politics, and to identify people who could be activists and leaders in such a campaign. But he also admitted the primary goal was to get “thousands and thousands arrested ... to create a crisis that the media would cover.”

By the time the week was over, perhaps 1,200 were arrested. It may have been the largest nonviolent civil disobedience in years, but this is one more metric, like number of sponsoring

organizations, to stick on a press release for media consumption. And the media know it. One high-level organizer scoffed at the mainstream media impact, noting the minimal coverage.

Why should the media care? The original vision of Democracy Spring stated, “Our target is 5000+ people risking arrest over the course of the week, joined by many others doing legal protest in solidarity. The goal: leverage a dramatic nonviolent confrontation to create an Occupy-like moment around big money in politics and political equality that shifts the media narrative and shapes the political climate of the 2016 election in favor of reform.”

This was a bold vision, but it was not created with organizing in mind, which is messy and chaotic, but a P.R. campaign in the style of other postmodern organizing such as the 99% Spring, “Fight for 15,” and the People’s Climate March. It was similar to the last big labor and liberal organizing flop, the “One Nation Working Together” march that took place in October 2010 just weeks before the Tea Party Congress swept into power. It’s telling that while liberals grumble about the right-wing’s astroturf campaigns, liberals spend more time and effort trying to fabricate movements.

The comparisons with Occupy were also off-base. While Occupy did have pre-planning and favorable historical tides with the Arab Spring, the Wisconsin uprising, and deep anger over the Great Recession, its growth was genuinely organic, growing in thousands of directions at once precisely because there was no script.

To be fair, movements can be deftly shaped. That is what the Southern Christian Leadership Conference did with Selma and Birmingham. But they acted in an epoch of radical struggle and their strategy was to show the federal government as ineffectual against the violence demanded by Jim Crow, thus provoking a crisis. Even then, the Civil Rights movement was rife with tensions because the SCLC was just one actor in addition to SNCC, local civil rights leaders, militants like Malcolm X and later the Black Panther Party, socialists and communists all pushing different strategies and tactics.

The Global Justice Movement also spent months planning to disrupt the World Trade Organization ministerial in Seattle in 1999. But what it and the civil rights movement share is defiance. The aim is to actually shut down systems or organs of repression. They are not violent movements, but they tear the mask off the state and its reflexive resort to force. In Seattle, the activists committed to shutting down the WTO were the ones who decided how to do it, not paid staffers with unions and NGOs hamstrung by legal liability, institutional responsibilities, ties to the Democratic Party, and the weight of the presidential election. No one can even agree on how many were arrested in Seattle, nor was the goal to “shift the media narrative.” It was to actually stop the WTO from striking a global trade deal. It worked and 17 years later there still is no global trade deal.

Many Americans are concerned and angry about the role of billionaires buying up the political system, but the pre-Citizens United era was hardly a showcase of democracy. And while there are many committed and hardworking activists around the country working on the issue, there is little indication a genuine movement is bubbling up.

Some of the most perceptive protesters at the Democracy Awakening were three teenagers decked out with a red-and-black flag, Wobbly t-shirts, and anarchist class-war politics. But they were not there to rain on the parade. Rob said, “I love to see people out here and standing up for democracy, but I wish there were more.” Richie said, “We have to treat the root cause,” adding that the liberal groups involved were “fighting the symptoms.” For Stefan, who supported the effort as it was “pushing politics to the left,” the missing ingredient was “worker power.”

They don’t have the answers, but they understand how power works better than the paid strategists, communications specialists, social media experts, lawyers, and organizers behind Democracy Spring and Democracy Awakening. If liberals wanted to build a movement, one that could create the type of social disputation and defiance that would lead to significant political reforms, they would fund radical, visionary organizers and give them free reign to experiment. But that movement would quickly spiral out of the control of liberal groups and unions that have been deeply invested in and reliant upon existing political and economic structures.

Little remains of the liberal world, however. With the precarity of most unions and the rule of the oligarchy, the political space for liberals has been almost completely eliminated. They seem to understand they need to take risks if they hope to counter the strength of capital and the right. But Democracy Spring and Democracy Awakening show half-hearted measures won’t work. Only by embracing the uncertainty and unpredictability genuine movements unleash, can they have any hope of outmaneuvering the ruling class.