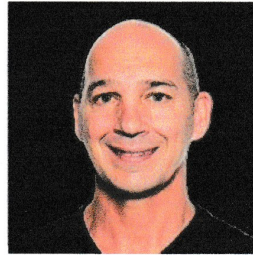


Living in true dictatorships will give you perspective on 'fascism' in America



Dan Franch

By Dan Franch Posted 11/22/2021 1:00 AM
Guest columnist

I was in Berlin last month. It's a great city with plenty of history ... kind of reminds me of Chicago in that way, though it's much older and some of its history much darker.

While there, I visited the Berlin Wall. I had seen the wall two times before. The first time was in 1984 right after high school graduation. Thanks to a military family I'd met, I passed through Check Point Charlie and entered East Germany. The second time was in 1991 while backpacking around the world. The wall had come down two years prior.

Little did I know during those first two visits that I would one day live in one autocracy (Morocco), one dictatorship (Eritrea) and one former communist country (Estonia). No wonder why I laugh outwardly and shake my head in disbelief inwardly when I read or hear people say that the U.S. is becoming fascist, authoritarian or totalitarian.

True, events occur that don't equate with democracy and the rule of law, but not often enough or severely enough to seriously consider the threat of losing individual rights or personal freedoms. In fact, just being able to say or write

negative things about the country and its leaders is evidence of a democracy. That doesn't or didn't always hold true in Morocco, Eritrea and Estonia.

Morocco

I have two strong memories from living in Morocco as a Peace Corps volunteer.

One is the police check points when traveling between cities. Police would wait on the roadside and randomly stop vehicles, check papers and harass people with little rhyme or reason. While not stressful, it was a time-consuming hassle.

What was stressful was the five passport checkpoints at the airport each time I left the country. Did I have the right documents? Was my passport stamped correctly? Would they deem my residence card to be valid? It was an unnerving crapshoot in a country where rules seemed arbitrary.

Eritrea

Eritrea, known as the North Korea of Africa, is a dictatorship. Reporters Without Borders regularly ranks the country at the bottom of the list when it comes to the Press Freedom Index. I kept a "go bag" near my bed the first year there in case I had to be evacuated quickly.

And there were nights that I went to bed scared because of something I had said in the classroom. Some students had family members imprisoned. Some had siblings who escaped, family members they will most likely never see again. During my two years, many people who I knew fled and a few unexpectedly disappeared.

Estonia

Here in Estonia, Soviet times are fading further into the past each year as the country surges forward thanks to IT unicorns and progressive-minded people.

Yet, there are still survivors of communist times, young and old, who now can speak of times when dissidence was dealt with harshly.

I am closely connected with current elders who were sent to Siberia in the 1940s and '50s and lived through the Stalin era. I recall chatting with a grandma (who has since passed away) describing living through World War, World War II, Siberia, the Stalin era and then the fall of the Soviet Empire. It was a humbling conversation.

Circling back to my time in Berlin, little did I know during my visits in 1984 and 1991 that I would one day live in three countries that the wall symbolized -- a division between freedom and oppression, openness and closedness.

Standing at the wall last month, I felt a significance and impact that I hadn't felt the two times before. It was a feeling of awareness. I don't joke about Siberia. I still wake up some nights thinking about what could have gone wrong for me in Eritrea. While breezing through airport passport control in Chicago, I think back to how nervous I was trying to leave Morocco.

In short, while being able to toss around "repressive regime" terms to describe the U.S. is a fundamental right as an American citizen, it's one I don't take lightly; one I don't misuse.

- Dan Franch, franchdan@gmail.com, a former Peace Corps volunteer, grew up in Addison and left for good in 1998. He has traveled to more than 50 countries, starting with a backpacking adventure around the world for a year in 1991.