

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. In this paper, I will argue that while the democratic rights and entitlements of people are important, it matters how people are really able to fully use them, and how they use them depends on their sense of self-worth. The basic point is that to make democracy work, it must be stressed that democratic procedures alone do not guarantee the creation of a just or well-ordered society. In this sense, I will explain the important distinction between procedural and substantive democracy. If democracy is meant to serve the moral ends of society, then it must benefit ordinary people. Human development begins with the kind of choices people make and these choices are a reflection of the substantive freedoms people have and enjoy. Democratic institutions need to be repaired and strengthened, but this requires more than the improvement of constitutional provisions. The value of true democracy then depends on how people value their dignity as human beings.

Keywords. Human development, substantive democracy, procedural democracy

Introduction

The dynamic interplay of people participation, empowerment and moral governance or, in the words of Dr. Gaston Ortigas, the “democratization of development”, is only possible when people come to realize the moral ends and value of just political institutions. People participation is not only about citizens following democratic rules and procedures but also about “how people use their just entitlements and rights in order to secure for them their well-being” (Sen 1999, 155).

If power is the true essence of the political apparatus, then it is important that such power is not to fall in one sector, which in most cases, the oligarchy that controls the economy and those in government. Human development is only possible if people have a

say in the lives in which they live. Beyond mere advocacies for growth and change, people should become real contributors and stakeholders in laws and public policy by fully exercising their rights, just entitlements, and democratic duties. Thus, realizing the vision of human development is only possible under a mature and functioning democracy.

A true democracy requires, fundamentally and as matter of principle, the basic respect for the dignity of the human person, anchored in the strong belief that a life lived in dignity is a human life lived fully and well. Hence, the basic structure of government owes to each and every one of us that it works for the “whole person” and for “all persons”.

Justice as Fairness

If “people are the real wealth of a nation”, as former UNDP Director Mahbub Ul Haq declares, then the most disturbing question is: why is it that even with the tremendous economic wealth around many people are still so impoverished in the third world?

John Rawls in *A theory of justice* argues that the distribution of social primary goods is the basic principle in creating a just society because “equal opportunity does not fully compensate for the unequal circumstances men and women are born into” (Rawls 1999; Kymlicka 2007). The so-called natural lottery determines people’s initial status in life. As such, to work out a social contract, people should at least have the opportunity to possess some goods that would be of value to him or her in making and realizing his or her life-plans or goals. Recognizing that the person has a right to social primary goods indicates society’s respect for basic human value.

The above necessitates that “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to be of the greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle)” (Rawls 1999, 61). The difference principle requires that the worst off in society must be favored primarily to make the sharing of social primary goods fair. In “justice as fairness”, Rawls attempts to reconcile the idea of freedom and equality. Human freedom can enable the individual to achieve more, but since the starting point is uneven, say in the natural lottery of human talent and intelligence,

this will mean that others can have more because of their abilities and others less because they do not possess the same set of positive attributes. To solve this, fairness in the liberal sense therefore means that justice is served when we treat people as equals, “not by removing all inequalities, but only those which disadvantage the worst off” (Kymlicka 2007, 55).

People can pursue their life-plans and profit from the same, but they must contribute through taxes to serve the worst off, so that they worst may have the opportunity to improve their lives. This is what the difference principle calls for. Individual achievement needs to be protected, but the worst off must also be fully secured. Now, it is the function of the basic structure to ensure that the difference principle works. For this reason, the government should serve the interest of the public. The individual, being free, can still pursue wealth, but this must not make the initial position of the disadvantaged more difficult.

In the ideal sense, this means that “justice as fairness” requires that no person should be used as a mere means to an end. This necessitates that in the actual scheme of things, no individual should be disadvantaged by the social apparatus. Justice requires that each person is given his or her due as a human being by the social arrangement people come to establish. This is the fundamental role of justice. Justice ultimately means serving the disadvantaged, whose misfortune in the natural lottery is not their fault. Recognizing this is the moral end of the public sphere. Ultimately, the task of social and political institutions is to deliver the poor from abject misery. But of course, human institutions are limited by bureaucratic procedures. The choice of right principles is affected by the self-serving motives of those who are in power.

Rawls and Sen: Between procedural and substantive freedoms

The basis of liberal democracy is human reason. The basic structure of government exists by virtue of this “reasoned consensus” – men and women come into an agreement that they will be governed by “fair terms of cooperation”. Rationality is a moral requirement to be able to engage in any democratic political intercourse. But this requirement proves to be very limiting. The basic

point is that the “capacity of reason” favors some and undermines the uneducated, those with mental disabilities, and women who are marginalized by their cultures. Equality, hence, may not be clearly manifest in the public sphere for this arena may be ruled by those who belong to the elite.

In *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Rawls acknowledges Amartya Sen’s critique of the difference principle, noting that “primary goods themselves should not be viewed as the embodiment of advantage, since in fact advantage depends on a relation between primary goods and persons” (Rawls 2004, 168). Rawls replies to Sen that “it should be stressed that the account of primary goods does take into account, and does not abstract from, basic capabilities: namely, the capabilities of citizens as free and equal persons in virtue of their two moral powers” (Ibid., 169). These moral powers refer to a person’s “sense of justice” and “conception of the good”. Rawls adds that “it is these moral powers that enable them to be normal and fully cooperating members of society over a complete life and to maintain their status as free and equal citizens” (Ibid.).

Initially, it can be stated here that the above moral powers are crucial in all democratic engagements, but as to how people are able to fully use them, first there is a need to elaborate on the content of one’s “sense of justice” and “conception of the good” because it matters in the end how people value their freedoms and rights. The person’s “sense of justice” and “conception of the good” require a greater sense of self-understanding. It must be clearly established what people expect from their government, and this requires “self-understanding” in order to have that basic recognition of the value of one’s life. The achievement of justice and equality is affected by a people’s sense of identity or lack thereof, and while Rawls sets forth the criteria for social and political cooperation, there is no guarantee as regards their applicability and success in a multiplicity of rationalities which can define for people their “sense of justice” and “conception of the good”. This multiplicity of rationalities connotes the diversity of cultures, customs, traditions, and way of life.

Rawls adds that the index of primary goods is to be construed as flexible, and are not to be specified in detail, and that the “further specification of those rights and liberties is left to the constitutional,

legislative and judicial stages” (Ibid., 172). He suggests further that the index of primary goods “is an index of expectations” (Ibid.). Thus, Rawls argues that the difference principle should allow for basic provisions in terms of the needs of people, i.e., health and education for the least advantaged.

But Howard Handelman, for instance, notes that “democracy is characterized by the essential procedures governing the election and behavior of government officials” (Handelman 2009, 29). Democratic elections are construed as integral to the promotion of democratic ideals. In addition, Handelman adds that “full liberal democracy requires not only freely contested elections but also respect for civil liberties” (Ibid.). Respect for human rights, for instance, is a standard by which democracy is measured. Thus, under the rule of law, there exists the constitutional essential of “respect for due process”. This is necessary to protect people from political persecution and from the abuses of those who are in power. However, Handelman notes that “procedural democracy alone does not guarantee a just society; it is merely a step in the right direction” (Ibid., 30).

Thus, the idea of a just or well-ordered society that Rawls envisions, anchored in the principle of justice as fairness, seems to be more of an ideal. Rawls provides a theoretical argument for the basis of a society where the terms of cooperation are fair and fully defined. But owing to the difficult experiences in the third world, it is always necessary to give a more substantive elaboration of the harsh fact of power politics.

Rawls sets a criterion, for fair distribution and fair democratic procedures are meant to guarantee that incomes and other social goods are distributed to the worst off. But as Des Gasper asserts, “equal benefits to people with unequal needs will not produce equal well-being” (Gasper 2004, 107; Sen 1992). Rawls’s difference principle justifies inequalities as long as the worst off can benefit from them, but this kind of egalitarianism seems to give more weight to quantity rather than the “quality of human life”. While it is important that people possess a “sense of justice” and a basic “conception of the good,” it matters more basically that people have “substantive freedoms,” and this is something that should be seen in “just policy outcomes” (Handelman 2009, 30).

Substantive freedoms enable people to give value to their lives. Their autonomy constitutes their integrity and basic dignity as human beings. Capabilities therefore have an existential worth. They are not just economic or political, for beyond the economism one finds in human life, there exists an individual who dreams, desires, and hopes. Choosing the kind of life one wants to be in is not just a matter of a legal entitlement, but it is fundamental constitution of one's basic humanity. It matters that we ask in the beginning if people value their lives. Thus, self-worth is the first basis for a life that is well-lived. If one does not see the meaning of one's life, then one cannot have a life that is worth living.

Rawls writes that "each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override" (Rawls 1999, 3). Social arrangements are meant to protect the dignity of the person from being unjustly taken advantage of by others. But the reality is that third world poverty thrives while the profits of multinational corporations rise. A more detailed or elaborate understanding of human behavior suggests that individuals would prefer more than less for themselves. In the first place, some sectors are already powerful. It makes no sense to make them a party to the original position of "initial equality". Hierarchies, be it social or corporate, are a fact of life. The challenge, hence, in the words of former Philippine National Security Adviser Jose Almonte, is "leveling the playing field..

If democracy can have any meaning at all, it must work for the greater good of ordinary people. The rule of law is meant to protect the weak and innocent. Just economic policies must benefit the poor and vulnerable. In a democracy, people are above all other values. The speech of former President Fidel V. Ramos at the Australian National University, as quoted by Sen, clarifies this: "Under dictatorial rule, people need not think—need not choose—need not make up their minds or give their consent. All they need to do is to follow. The political challenge for people around the world today is not just to replace authoritarian regimes by democratic ones" and he adds, "beyond this, it is to make democracy work for ordinary people" (Sen 1999, 155).

Sen thus provides a more comprehensive approach to human development. Development, Sen argues, “can be seen [as] the process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (Sen 1999, 3). The value of democracy should come from the fact that it enables ordinary people to achieve the kind of life that is worthy of their dignity as persons. For Denis Goulet, as quoted by Gasper, “the most basic human need of poor people is the freedom to define their own needs, to organize to meet them, and to transcend them as they see fit” (Gasper 2004, 171; Goulet 1983, 620). Development, to truly address the sector that needs it, should be people-centered, that is, people should be given the freedom to define for themselves the kind of life they want. While attention should be given to “redefining the quality of human life” as Gasper notes, “freedom in the sense of autonomy gets priority because it is seen as the basis for the pursuit of all other goals” (Gasper 2004, 171). Thus, in a democracy, “consent of the governed as an obvious benefit” (Handelman 2009, 45) manifests the respect given to each individual.

Sen writes that freedom depends on elements such as social and economic arrangements, as well as political and civil rights (Sen 1999, 3). For instance, the positive freedom to participate in public discussion is something that provides the atmosphere for people to demand from their government the realization and enjoyment of just entitlements. While the prevalence of poverty can be attributed to “the presence of dictatorships, systematic social and economic deprivation, and the apparent neglect of provisions for public facilities, as well as intolerance and repression in many states” (Ibid.), the oligarchic arrangements in third world economies deprive the poor of the opportunity to determine their goals in life. People are powerless in leveling the playing field. They have no real voice. Equality in this sense cannot only be in terms of primary goods, but of “basic freedoms” or capabilities (Sen 1999; Sen 1992) that empower people in creating just institutions and fighting bad governance.

For Sen, the substantive freedoms of the people are instrumental in maintaining a better social, economic, and political life, and this happens because “people become part of the process of democratic participation” (Ibid., 4). This seems to go beyond the formalities of the basic structure, for while representation can

empower some sectors through their elected representatives, the political reality however, is that when their duly elected representatives are already in power, public interest becomes secondary. The perpetuation of one's political career becomes the priority of their elected leaders.

Substantive Democracy and Human Development

The gargantuan task at hand in the effort to rectify formal democratic institutions is the overcoming of human impoverishment. Oswaldo de Rivero notes that “by the end of the twentieth century, the process of economic non-viability had left most of the underdeveloped countries with nearly forty percent of their population in a deplorable state of human development (Rivero 2001, 123). Rivero adds that “the main disease that is infecting with increase virulence the vast majority of the misnamed developing countries is scientific and technological poverty” (Ibid., 118). Institutions are weak not only morally but also intellectually. This lack of competence is not acknowledged by those who are in power, who seem to believe that their election is a license to dictate what is right.

Procedural democracy is valuable but this is distorted by the tendency of the elitist few to dominate. There exists the “inevitability of the elites as a fact of life” (Knuttila and Kubik 1999, 65). Because of their power and influence, politicians abuse democratic procedures and the electoral processes. Politicians cling to power not only because of the huge perks of the position but also because of the enormous advantage it gives to their business interests, including those of their benefactors. Thus, leaders are always vulnerable to individualism and selfishness. This puts at a disadvantage the poor and weak to no end.

Political freedom should be substantive and not just procedural. Elections are not really “fair” because the playing ground is not level. Depth in terms of a person's political maturity matters in the kind of institutions people establish. Gasper thus adds “skills in learning, reasoning, valuing, deciding, operating, and cooperating” are critical to well-being achievement (Gasper 2004, 181). People need to understand issues and evaluate their judgments. These are crucial in

confronting the complications of modern social and political existence in order for the individual to realize his or her goals.

Nonetheless, democratic institutions and procedures are of paramount importance. For instance, development theorists note that in the Philippines, “two critical government institutions that are central to addressing the problems of poverty and income inequality—the bureaucracy and political parties—are particularly weak” (Intal and Largoza 2004, 19). However, it needs to be said that the kind of institutions people establish are only as good as the people who manage and constitute these institutions. Institutions are not like robots that do not make choices for themselves. Institutional decisions are based on the choices made by individuals. As such, it matters how the population choose their leaders and those who formulate policies that affect them.

Thus, substantive freedoms are constitutive of the individual’s real opportunities for well-being. The intrinsic value of freedom, e.g., a person’s education, dwells in its being able to empower the individual in his or her choices. Expanding freedom, according to Sen, “does not only make the life of the person more unfettered, but more importantly, it allows him or her to experience his or her social life fully” (Sen 1999, 15). At this point, it can be said that the attainment of well-being is something that directly depends on the person’s capability to function, and this includes, the intelligence and skills required in the scientific discipline. Here, the level of freedom, i.e., education and health, an ordinary person enjoys plays a direct role in his or her well-being achievement. An electorate should not only vote, but should “vote wisely”. He or she needs to understand that his or her vote has an implication for his or her well-being and that of others as well. Freedom, in this sense, is a value in itself, for through it the individual realizes his or her potential as a member of society, capable of enriching, not only his or her life, but that of others as well. This freedom, which is expressed through the “political maturity” of the person, is one important factor in his or her “pursuit of happiness,” of what is worth living for in his or her life. Thus, the idea of “strong demands, weak institutions” (Intal and Largoza 2004, 84) as the real challenge for Philippine society need to be re-framed in

terms of the weakness not only of political leadership but of people's will as well.

Freedom is pursued as an end in itself precisely because ethical social arrangements give value to the life of each individual. For instance, Freedom House, a think-thank group that measures democracies, evaluates the quality of democracy, and therefore of the kind of freedoms people enjoy, in terms of political rights and civil liberties (Handelman 2004, 35). Political rights and civil liberties are crucial because any social engagement requires a level of self-confidence on the part of the individual. This sense of self-confidence gives the person a sense of moral worth. This means that a voter does not only go to the precinct to exercise a right but that more importantly, he or she understands that his or her vote means something so much to him or her for he or she stands to benefit from the government he or she chooses to elect. This means that his or her political rights and civil liberties can be truly translated to well-being achievement.

Sen writes that "political freedoms, broadly conceived (including what are called civil rights), refer to the opportunities that people have to determine who should govern and on what principles, and also include the possibility to scrutinize and criticize authorities, to have freedom of political expression and an uncensored press, to enjoy the freedom to choose between different political parties and so on" (Sen 1999, 38). But being able to build parties or improve on political mechanisms requires a sense of maturity on the part of the people. This means that their decisions matter because these are the building blocks of a mature democracy. Only a mature democracy can enable people to pursue development that addresses their most pressing needs. Democracy is of value because human life is worth living. Each person should be able to realize the value of his or her life in the society in which he or she lives if that society is to mean anything to him or her at all.

Conclusion

Democratic procedures do not guarantee well-being achievement. I have tried to show in this paper the basic difference between procedural and substantive democracy. Beyond Rawls, I

have stressed that Sen's concept of substantive freedoms is crucial in the achievement of human well-being. While Rawls clearly elaborates on the importance of specifying the index of primary goods as an index of expectation in any democracy, suggesting that the difference principle should be flexible in its being able to provide an account of social primary goods, the big problem lies in how the equitable distribution of these goods can be achieved in the first place.

In fact, people are fettered by inhuman conditions that deprive them of the power to assert for themselves what constitutes the good life for them. It is important, in this sense, that we ask how it is best to place people at a condition where they will have real choices in life, and this requires the expansion of their substantive freedoms.

It is of course critical for any democracy to rectify institutional failures, but these failures are human, and as such, bad institutions are a by-product of bad choices by people themselves. For ordinary people to make real choices, maturity in terms of their sense of self-worth is fundamental. Democratic processes, i.e., fair elections, and the principle of "due process" can give people opportunities for greater freedom, but it matters how people use these opportunities, and this requires some kind of moral and intellectual competence. The kind of society and political institutions people establish is a reflection of the kind of people therein.

Human development therefore requires that we move beyond procedures and pay more attention to ourselves, in an existential way, for it matters how people value their lives if they are to really empower themselves towards the achievement of a dignified human existence. If people value themselves, then they will value their freedoms. It is only when people realize this that true democracy is achieved.

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