

Is democracy the most effective form of government today?

As one may begin with the end in mind, I'd like to deduce from the big picture to the microcosm. What is democracy in essence? If I may break it down to its simplest form, it is about freedom. Freedom of expression is the most basic form of human dignity. Every human is born with the need to express his potential. Hence, freedom of speech which is the most direct and overt form of freedom of expression must necessarily take its place in any human grouping.

In order to understand whether democracy is the most effective form of government, one only needs to glean through some recent transitions from autocratic rule to democracy to denounce its over-rated benefits. Speak to any Phillipine national, he would most likely lament that the Marcos' reign was the best period of their history in terms of economic prowess and living standards. The irony of the matter is that when the tyrannical rule lost its grip with the coming of people power and the ensuing democracy, the country has slid backwards like it has never before. The same to a lesser extent, can be said of Singapore under the strongman rule of Lee Kuan Yew who made no apologies about his autocratic leadership. What about Communist China under President Xi Jin Ping which seems to be riding a golden age in terms of their economic achievements? These are but only a few paradoxical examples of how human rights can and should be put on the backburner for the greater material benefits.

On the prima facie, it does appear that all is not well and working with democracy of late. What happen to the great inspiring stories of Abraham Lincoln, John F Kennedy that shone once so brightly the beacon of human freedom? The abolition of slavery, the liberation of humans, the emancipation of women, universal suffrage were all milestones in our human march towards mankind progress. The last century has seen unprecedented growth in the living standards of people across US, Europe, the Asian Tigers where democracy was propagated though as mentioned earlier, a socialist democratic model would be more characteristic of the Singapore landscape.

Hence, the question is whether democracy works? Britain's wartime PM Sir Winston Churchill, once remarked that "Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

Scholars have long debated on the efficacy of the democratic system and I would like to submit that through the test of time, democracy is still probably the only sustaining form of government in the long haul. Is it a case of too much of a good thing that has become a bad thing? Is it the excesses of freedom of speech that has led to the malaises faced by many supposedly free countries which are constantly locked by antithetical views and forcing themselves into a "Hung Parliament" conundrum?

In my view, democracy is still the best working model in a civilised society. However, two conditions must prevail to bring out the essence of a democracy:

Firstly, democracy is built on free opportunities for all to realise their potential. Over time, there will be winners and losers in the free market. For the system to regenerate, the beneficiaries must lead in pivoting the system for the benefit of the masses through the multiplication of resources so that others may perceive there are abundant opportunities for all to succeed in their own endeavours. If there is that implicit sense of societal obligation and self-responsibility to contribute to fellow citizens what he has benefitted bountifully from the system, then there is a chance of the model functioning.

Secondly, in a workable democracy, there should never be a convergence towards an elite group in society even if that had originally been a fair race on a level playing field. This is because the fermentation of eliticism will breed a special class which slowly weeds away all competition by virtue of its power to suppress all others in the same way how monopolies are formed in the business world and can become the death knell for the free market if anti-trust laws were not put in place.

However, the narrative we hear locally in Singapore, is that if you do not let the high flyers soar, you are restricting the talented and thus it would be better to focus on lifting the others in society on the assumption that the talented will create industries, conglomerates and myriads of jobs or lead the nations to greater heights which will eventually benefit everybody. In reality, this has not played out due to the inherent selfishness of human nature. The longer the time such talented individuals or elite classes are given a carte blanche check to “deal and wheel”, the more precarious the situation must necessarily become as power corrupts power, absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Thus, a healthy functioning democracy must embrace plurality of views and continue to do so, even when the views start to get funnelled through more dominant voices due to the 80/20 rule and law of natural selection. In my view, the survival of the fittest should never be the outcome of the democratic model because that will be relegating it back to an autocratic model. On the other hand, there should be a persistent tussle of a minimum of two strong views which is the mainstay of the model creating an equilibrium tension. As long as there are two distinct dominant groups that are non-collusive, it does not matter if they were to become the defacto elite groups. Why is this so? If we were to assume the inherent selfish nature of human beings, that constant tension between the two groups will probably result in the less potent (non-incumbent) group fighting to prove itself or to maintain its position which would necessarily result in outward-looking policies for the greater benefit of the community. Hence, there will be some social graces for the rest of the world.

A healthy democracy at the national level must be built on the same foundation at the community level, town hall meetings and social gatherings. It means that the citizens are free to express their ideas. In the community, people must feel safe to contribute and critique ideas. At the workplaces and educational institutions, people must be empowered to take responsibility for themselves to use their skills and potential to make a decent living. “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country,” nation” by JF Kennedy in his 1961

inaugural address, which epitomises this grounds-up initiative that is only possible in a democractic model.

The recent US Presidential election has thrown up many flaws in a democractic process where issues can become so emotive that it is difficult to ascertain the facts from fiction. According to the Harvard Kennedy School, Prof Archon Fung in a recent CNA interview, the Republican/Democrats tussle has denigrated to the social level where 70% of relationships are influenced by party affiliation. In a similar vein, the anthropogenic vs non-anthropogenic school of thought on Climate Change is fuelling a worldwide movement where lines are drawn and even the type of diet fads are now contentious issues. These are but just some of the rising number of polemic issues that are shaping our modern age of social media.

We go back to the fundamental issue of democracy. If someone wants to have the freedom of speech, he must also be prepared to hear others - some resonating while others dissonating with his views. This is the natural order of things. In fact, again according to the 80/20 rule, it can be expected that the voices will gradually coagulate into a few dominant themes over the course of time. Perhaps, where competition is stiff, it might dwindle to two dominant voices. This is again conceivable because some of the other lesser contenders might see it expedient to align with the more dominant voices and ride on the bandwagon. Up till this point, there is no reason to doubt the existence of freedom of speech as there will still be a contestation of ideas. Freedom of speech dies the moment when there is only one voice which seeks to oppress all others just as democracy dies when there is only one party left in the game.

Hence, all things being equal, a functioning democracy with no dissipation of robust participation even on the precipice of tyrannical uprising, is the most efficient and sustainable form of government yet. Unless a better form of government can be conceived, democracy is still the best loser in the quest for the least imperfect political order.

Written by Mr Roland Tan Oct 2020 (1453 words)