

DEMOCRACY: IS IT NECESSARY?

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ABSTRACT

There is a great resistance from several Asian country leaders towards democracy. Basically, they view that the US has "forced" some Asian countries to implement its model of government which is thought to be a good form of government for all countries, particularly in terms of placing democracy as a "yardstick" when some of the countries need International Aids. While actually, they argue that what works for one country does not necessarily appropriate for others. Lee Kuan Yew argue that what people's real need is a "good government", whose its implementation might differ for each country and might also differ from "Western" values. Nevertheless, some observers have criticized the concept as well. They argue that it has been implemented on the expense of restricting political space available for the citizens. This essay will elaborate each of the claims and will try to provide a tentative alternative which might need further discussion.

Keywords: Democracy; Good government; Western Values

Demokrasi : Pentingkah ?

Banyak sekali penolakan pemimpin negara-negara Asia terhadap demokrasi. Dasarnya, mereka memandang bahwa A.S. telah memaksa beberapa negara Asia untuk menerapkan model pemerintahan A.S. yang dianggap bentuk pemerintahan yang baik untuk semua negara, khususnya dalam menganggap demokrasi sebagai 'tolak ukur' bila negara itu memerlukan Bantuan Internasional. Padahal mereka menganggap bahwa apa yang layak untuk suatu negara belum tentu cocok untuk negara lain. Lee Kuan Yew berpendapat bahwa kebutuhan rakyat yang sebenarnya adalah pemerintahan yang baik, yang penerapannya mungkin berbeda untuk masing-masing negara dan mungkin berbeda dari nilai-nilai Barat walaupun demikian beberapa pengamat telah juga mengemukakan gagasan ini. Mereka berpendapat bahwa demokrasi telah dijalankan dengan menyebarkan ruang gerak politik yang ada buat warga negaranya. Tulisan ini akan membahas pendapat. Pendapat-pendapat itu dan akan memberikan alternatif yang mungkin dapat menjadi pembahasan lebih lanjut.

Kata kunci : Demokrasi, Pemerintahan yang baik, Nilai Barat

INTRODUCTION

In the article entitled "Is Democracy Necessary?" Lee Kuan Yew argues that putting democracy as a "yardstick" for official development aid is inappropriate. Instead, good government should be used as an important test for such aid, whether the government is "honest and effective? Does it look after its people? Is there an orderly, stable society where people are being educated and trained to lead a productive life?" (Yew, 1993, p.20)

His argument is that, first, it is impossible to alter a nation with its specific history, culture and background of society in such a "short" time to fulfil the resolution of the US Congress. While, in fact, in two prominent democratic countries, the United Kingdom and the US, democracy took slow and delicate processes. Full suffrage was reached after the countries achieved a high level of economic growth with educated population.

Another argument is that to become a democratic county, one needs to have a sort of background for democratic government, such as habits in the people for "dissent or disagreement within a restrained and peaceful context; accountability of those in power and continuous communication with the public from whom they derive their authority; the sturdiness of civil society, etc. Those are assumed as essential preconditions for democracy. Without them, Lee believes that democracy will only bring misery for the people, as what has happened in Pakistan.

Above all, what people of all countries need are good government and what kind of good government depends on the values of the people. It might be different from Westerners who value the freedoms and liberties of the individual. Good government should be the ultimate objective, because it also includes humane and civilized standards of behavior.

In terms of putting democracy as a prerequisite for getting aid, personally I would agree with Lee Kuan Yew's statement. Democracy should not be used as an essential test in getting international aid. To become a democratic country, one should be self-evident. What the US wants is that other countries should implement its model of government which thought to be a good form of government for all countries. While in fact, what works for one country does not necessarily appropriate for another. Lee got the point I supposed, as what Kausikan also affirms that every country is unique; characterized by a specific set of circumstances, with natural, human, and cultural resources, and historical experiences that differentiate it from all other nations. Thus, every country has to have its own specific solutions to the problem of governance (Kausikan, 2001, p.24). Insisting to "copy" certain model of government will not bring any good things for a country who needs "helps" at that moment.

Nevertheless, for long term consideration, I would argue that being a good, effective and efficient government, as what Lee believes, would not be enough if it is on the expense of restricting political space available for

the citizens. As Hewitson notes, in order to create a stable and orderly society, Singaporean government has applied various strategies including:

- co-optation of potential oppositions (for example, labor unions, academics);
- legalism, including the harassment and imprisonment of opposition figures; the use of laws to limit non-governmental organizations being involved in politics and public policy; controls on professional associations; the use of internal security laws;
- control of the media and censorship; and
- careful use of incentives (or their withdrawal) to prevent opposition (for example, through government grants, housing and employment).

The implication of such strategies is limited political contestation and narrow political space, defined by the state and infiltrated by it (Hewison, 2001,p.232). Thus, on that situation, I believe that democracy indeed offers a better picture of the "good society" at least in terms of some distinctive elements below as Margaret Ng maintains:

1. It is not a matter of material goods, but democracy could embody "good society", where it provides an effective check on corruption and allows the unrestrained advancement of science and thus the maximum progress of modernization.
2. Democracy is supposed to bring a rational and reasonably orderly society in which individuals may pursue their own goals.
3. Democracy as the prevention of tyranny and facilitation of popular participation.
4. Only in democracy, that the rule of law is valued as a means of ensuring the limitation of power (Margaret Ng,2001,pp.11-12)

Despite its "positive" features, it does not mean that democracy is free from problems. Prime Minister Goh Cok Tong once mentioned that democratic government as what in the US is vulnerable to economic populism, as illustrated by the budget-deficit problems of the US. It is due to the government's role merely as of representative: the government is supposed to respond to the expressed preferences of the people (Kausikan, 2001,p.27). Other criticism comes from DR. Mahathir Muhammad. He argues that "too much democracy leads to homosexuality, moral decay, racial intolerance, economic decline, and single-parent families" (in Hewison, 2001,p.75)

Their anxieties come from the notion that democracy is emphasizing too much on personal freedom and individual rights. Indeed, "the rights to participate in political life and to shape the future course of government is essential in a free society", Dorn maintains (Dorn, 2001,p.83). However, "unlimited democracy can undermine freedom and attenuate rights. The tyranny of the majority is to be feared as much as any other tyranny". The spirit of freedom in democracy can be

extinguished if the majority is allowed to rule without limit (Dorn, 2001,p.84). Thus, what could overcome this problem? Singaporean government believes that to avoid economic populism, the government should not only act as representative, rather it should be as:

A "custodian of the people's welfare, it exercises independent judgment on what is in the long term economic interests of the people and act on that basis. Government policy is not dictated by opinion polls or referenda. This has sometimes meant overriding populist pressures for "easier" economic policies. Indeed, implementing the right policies has on occasion meant administering bitter medicine to overcome economic challenges...(Kausikan, 2001,p27)

However, as mentioned above, that practice has hampered political space for the citizens. How far we could tolerate that "bitter medicine"? Is it through constraining opposition and maintaining limited political space as what has happened in Malaysia? The answer is of course not. That is incompatible with the real spirit of democracy, i.e. freedom. To overcome such inherent limits of democratic rule, Dorn by quoting Thomas Jefferson offers a relatively "better" solution I supposed. He maintains:

The sum of good government consists of a wise and frugal government, which shall restraint men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned...the only legitimate function of government is to furnish a system of the administration of justice, and then to leave all the business and interests of society to themselves, to free competition and association (Dorn, 2001,p.84)

Thus, it is believed that in such a system, people would be able to do good things, but at their own expense. And Justice will be about how well government protects property as fundamental right, rather than how much "social justice" was achieved by legislative activism and the redistributive state. One last important factor, which I think worth to be considered, is the way we implement democratic system in certain country. Considering that each country has unique characteristics, history, culture and society, the only practical way, which would reduce any risks during the transformation to democratization, is step by step incremental approach. To become democratic, needs time. Such an approach would give opportunity to find the appropriate balance between different sets of values, that is between individual rights that guarantee personal freedom and social duties that stem from society's needs for stability and discipline. The balance will differ from country to country and there will be no perfect equilibrium (Kausikan, 2001,p.32). As Dahl also expresses that the precise shape of this "democratic bargain" will vary, depends on social cleavages and such subjective

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factors as mutual trust, the standard of fairness, and the willingness to compromise. The important thing is that everybody has strong commitment to democracy, at least as Schmitter and Karl maintain that:

In democracy, representatives must at least formally agree that those who win greater electoral support or influence over policy will not use their temporary superiority to bar the losers from taking office or exerting influence in the future, and that in exchange for this opportunity to keep competing for power and place, momentary losers will respect the winners' right to make binding decisions. Citizens are expected to obey the decisions ensuing from such a process of competition, provided its outcome remains contingent upon their collective preferences as expressed through fair and regular elections or open and repeated negotiations (Schmitter and Karl, 2001,p.82)

Thus, this could be a powerful way to prevent authoritarian regimes back on track.

CONCLUSION

Even though some authoritarian regimes have provided a high standard of living for their people, it has been done on the expense of narrowing political space for the citizens. In this sense, democracy is promising better society, where it respect individual freedom and rights as basis for monitoring government policies and performance. This could be done properly as long as everybody respects the limit of his or her freedom and rights.

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