

CHAPTER 6

Democracy and good governance

Up until the 1940s, it was still a matter of debate what constitutes the best form of government: communism, fascism, democracy or some type of autocratic rule. This debate was literally fought out in Europe but was also very pertinent in the colonized lands across the world for whom independence was impending. After 1945, a lot of states opted for a democratic state model, but its opposite – some type of autocratic rule – was also very popular around the world, especially from the 1960s onward. One of the reasons for the wide spread of autocratic regimes is that the great powers of the time – the United States and the Soviet-Union – allowed it, preferring a controllable dictator over an unpredictable democracy. In the famous words of an American president about a South American dictator: “He may be a son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch.”* As long as rulers made a clear choice for one side or the other in the Cold War, they could get away with almost anything.

The popularity of democracy

This changed in the 1990s with the implosion of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War. From that moment onwards, democracy was promoted worldwide as the best form of government. To some this was for reasons of idealism, to others the reasons were more pragmatic (‘democracies don’t wage war’ was an often used maxim), and yet others thought democracies would be the best way to promote international cooperation and prosperity.

Why democracy?

“Democracies, after all, are more likely to be stable, less likely to wage war. They strengthen civil society. They can provide people with the economic and political opportunities to build their futures in their own homes, not to flee their borders. Our efforts to help build more democracies will make us all more secure, more prosperous, and more successful as we try to make this era of terrific change our friend and not our enemy.”

(President Bill Clinton’s address to the UN General Assembly, 1994)

The popularity of democracy from the 1990s onwards was shown by the widespread demonstrations of that time calling for democracy. Let’s make a quick tour to get a

* Franklin D. Roosevelt about Nicaraguan president Somoza, in 1939.

feel for the unprecedented extend of these demonstrations. It started in 1989 with revolts in several countries that until then had been satellite states of the Soviet Union: Poland, the Baltic states Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Romania. In all these countries the mass demonstrations and civil resistance led to a non-violent overthrow of the regimes (except for Romania where the Romanian dictator, Ceausescu and his wife were tried and executed on live television). In the same year of 1989, on the other side of the world, similar demonstrations were taking place in Mongolia and China. Elsewhere in the world, in the years of 1989 and 1990, several African and Central and South American countries also made the shift to a more democratic state system.

These changes of governance did not always go smoothly, but they did create a world-wide sense of optimism and consequently were a source of concern for dictators still in power. After a decade of silence, a new round of mass demonstrations against dictatorial regimes became world news, this time with poetic names: the Rose revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Orange revolution in the Ukraine in 2004, and the Tulip revolution in Kirgizia in 2005. All these revolts led to a non-violent overthrow of the sitting regimes. And after the 2009 mass demonstrations in Iran in support of a liberal candidate for the presidency, a series of uprisings happened in 2011 that became known as the Arab Spring, toppling the long sitting regimes of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen. (Similar demonstrations in Bahrein and Syria were oppressed.)

There was again a lull until 2019, when the world witnessed a new series of non-violent mass demonstrations, mostly driven by young people, and this time all over the world: the most famous and lengthy one was in Hong Kong, but protracted mass demonstrations also took place in Algeria, Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Morocco and Sudan in the Middle East, Bolivia and Chile in South America, and Catalonia in Europe.

Revolt or revolution?

Many of the mass demonstration since the 1990s were referred to as 'revolution.' However, in most cases the aim of these demonstrations and uprisings was to topple the regime, not to replace the entire political system. The apt term would then be 'revolt', that is a popular uprising against those in power. Complete overturns of political systems ('revolutions') are rare, the main examples being the revolutions in America (1775), France (1789), Russia (1917), China (1949), Iran (1979).

The globalization of mass protests

All these protests were national, that is: they took place within a single country and mostly called for fairer and more democratic governance. But thanks to the advanced possibilities of social media, the protesters of the 2010s were keenly aware

of each other. They were not only watching each other, they were also learning from each other, inspiring each other, using each other's techniques, as well as slogans and symbols. The Spanish slogan *No Paseran* ('They shall not pass!') was not only spraypainted on the walls in Catalonia and Chile, but also in Hong Kong and Iraq. The defiant gesture of raising one's hands to indicate peaceful intent when facing the police during demonstrations was copied from the Black Lives Matter protests in America. And the conscientious act of cleaning up after the demonstrations could be observed from Hong Kong to Lebanon.

Regardless of these global connections and inspirations, the protests mentioned so far had distinctly national aims. This was different for other types of protest movements that were global in both their aims and character. It is perhaps not surprising that the most prominent of them emerged in the same period of 2018 and 2019: #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, and Fridays for Future. These protests took place on social media as much as they did on the streets and were of a regional and global rather than national level. The reason for the global scope is that these movements addressed issues that are relevant for people all over the world: climate change, power and violence based on gender and race.

The building blocks of democracy

It's one thing to demonstrate for democracy, it's quite another to know what democracy entails. This is not the place to elaborate the political history and philosophy of democracy, but a brief explanation of recent developments is needed to understand the global complexities of today. Four elements jump out: sovereignty of the people, elections, civil society and good governance.

Sovereignty of the people

Most demonstrations against governments today are not meant to turn political systems into democracies (because most of these countries are formally already democracies) but protest the ways in which these political systems have become corrupted and abused. The demonstrators claim a democratic right, namely that they are entitled to have a say in the governance of their country. This right is embedded in the radical political changes that have taken place since the late nineteenth century, whereby most countries became republics and most kingdoms submitted themselves to some kind of constitutional and parliamentary control. Moreover, almost all countries have enshrined rights and freedoms of their people in their constitutions. That means that, at least on paper, almost every state in the world adheres to the precept of governance by the people, for the people and of the people. And while reality can be quite different, this clearly did not deter millions

of people worldwide to take to the streets to claim a restoration of their sovereignty in matters of state.

Sovereignty of the people

Of the 193 member states in the United Nations, 159 states call themselves 'republic', 17 call themselves 'kingdom' and the other 17 states use names like emirates, sultanates, states, principedoms, duchy. Only 9 countries use 'democratic' in their official name, although most of these are not deemed democratic in practice.

(These figures date from 2024 and are subject to change as states regularly change their official name)

Elections

One way to give expression to the sovereignty of the people are elections. In the 1990s, the world witnessed a whole series of first-time national elections in countries all over the world. Western countries as well as the United Nations and the European Union aided these elections by convincing governments to hold them, by providing practical and financial assistance with the logistics, and by sending election observers to monitor them. However, elections were not sufficient to buttress democratic governments. First, because many an autocratic regime managed to either rig the elections or implement election laws that prevented full participation. The resulting election victory allowed them to claim that they were elected as the leader of a functioning democracy even though everyone knew that the reality was different. The other problem was that elections do not make a democracy. A democracy is a system of checks and balances that gives the majority vote the right to govern during a given period of time while maintaining the rule of law that guarantees certain rights and freedoms for everyone. Autocratic regimes, after winning the electoral vote, used their democratic mandate to rule as they wished.

Civil society

Another approach undertaken in the 1990s to enhance democracy, was the notion of civil society. It was argued that a democracy can only function if government maintains a continuous conversation with the population. For this to function, it was considered best if people are organized in parties, unions, societies, organizations, churches, communities, clubs. These organizations generate discussions among the population that, in turn, can fuel the decision-making processes of governmental institutions of the state. In addition to elections whereby the population has the opportunity every so many years to express its political preferences, civil society is a means to stay in continuous dialogue with the government.

The concept of civil democracy provided a new approach to states and governance: rather than the top-down approach of governments telling people what to do, civil

society is the bottom-up approach that ideally gives people more sovereignty in governance. In the 1990s, it was argued that most dictatorial regimes lacked a functioning civil society, either because the state had become the guiding power, as was the case in most communist and socialist countries, or because dictators had assumed all power. Even if they were overthrown and replaced by a democratic system, so the argument went, such a democracy could not function without a thriving civil society. The advocates of civil society saw their reasoning justified in the collapse of so many countries after their regimes had been overthrown: the social movements that had achieved the downfall of their regimes did not have the organization to install and uphold a democracy, and the society of these countries clearly lacked the infrastructure for supporting a democracy. To make sure that newly installed democracies are successful, the reasoning went, a civil society must be formed prior to the downfall of a regime.

It was mostly Western societies that adhered to this view, and from the 1990s onwards they started to invest in civil-society-building in countries that were considered undemocratic. While civil-society-partners on the ground often welcomed this support, the regimes saw it as foreign intervention meant to undermine the state. The countermeasures – penalizing the acceptance of foreign funds or the cooperation with foreign representatives – were usually effective in thwarting the efforts to build civil society in these countries. But even if the civil society efforts were successful, the bottom-up approach of civil society only rarely managed to permeate into the echelons of the state structure.

Democracy-building: Germany and Japan versus Iraq and Afghanistan

After the Second World War, the United States was instrumental in reshaping Japan and Germany into functioning democracies. Similar efforts in Afghanistan (2001-2004) and Iraq (2003-2004) failed completely, however. Scholars are still trying to understand the reasons why:

“The sharp ethnic and religious differences that divide the Iraqi and Afghani peoples are key impediments to the success of the current efforts to develop and sustain fully democratic political institution.” (Andrew J. Enterline and J. Michael Greig Source, ‘Against All Odds? The History of Imposed Democracy and the Future of Iraq and Afghanistan’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2008).

“Among other things, it is the level of forethought and preparedness and levelheadedness revealed by the administrator-training program in 1943 that made the nation-building and democratization experiments in Japan and Germany after 1945 so successful. And it is, I fear, the level of unpreparedness and muddleheadedness that (...) puts at great risk the experiments with nation-building and democratization in Iraq and Afghanistan.” (Stanley Nide Katz, ‘Democratic Constitutionalism after Military Occupation: Reflections on the United States’ Experience in Japan, Germany, Afghanistan, and Iraq’, *Common Knowledge*, 2006)

Chinese warning against democracy and civil society

In 2013, the Chinese government issued an official 'Communique No.9' in which it warned against the following "false ideological trends, positions, and activities":

1. Promoting Western Constitutional Democracy:
2. Promoting "universal values"
3. Promoting civil society
4. Promoting Neoliberalism
5. Promoting the West's idea of journalism
6. Promoting historical nihilism
7. Questioning Reform and Opening and the socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

(Excerpt from Communiqué No.9 (22 april 2013) by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China)

Good governance

The unsuccessful results of the civil-society approach of the 1990s and later, led to new views on what is essential in a democracy. For instance, could it be that 'state society' was neglected too much by overemphasizing 'civil society'? In other words, maybe the most effective way of transforming a state into a democracy would be top-down rather than bottom-up. This is when the concept of 'good governance' was introduced. Good governance takes a broad view on governance, which should not be limited to political governance, but also include social and economic wellbeing. Because of its broad meaning, there are many definitions that emphasize one or the other aspect of what good governance should be.

Looking back, it is surprising that these two concepts, good governance and civil society, were not discussed in conjunction, as they are complementary. But for a long time they led separate lives, being promoted by separate actors and agencies. Civil society was the domain of policy makers active in politics, while good governance was the domain of policymakers active in development work, and these two domains hardly interacted. Nowadays, the combination of both concepts is considered important to human wellbeing in general, as will be discussed in the chapter 'Sustainable Development'.

While the notion of good governance may receive international approval, it was mostly promoted by Western countries. This had a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, it reinforced the image and position of the state, allowing dictatorial types to stay in power in exchange for promises to improve their governance. On the other hand, the dictates made by Western countries in exchange for money would

contribute to the increasing rift between what would become known as the global North and global South.

‘Good governance’

The most cited definition has come from the United Nations which explains good governance on the basis of eight characteristics: it should be participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and in accordance with the rule of law.

World Bank

The notion of ‘good governance’ was the brainchild of international donor agencies, particularly the World Bank. Between 2002-2007, the World Bank loaned US\$ 23 billion for projects related to good governance.

Further reading

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- Haroon A. Khan, *The Idea of Good Governance and the Politics of the Global South. An Analysis of its Effects*, Routledge, 2016
- Munyaradzi Mawere and Tendai R Mwanaka (eds.), *Democracy, Good Governance and Development in Africa*, Langaa RPCID, 2015
- Surendra Munshi and Biju Paul Abraham (eds.), *Good Governance, Democratic Societies and Globalisation*, SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2004
- World Bank, “Governance and Development” World Bank, 1992