

Democracy and its Difficulties: Learning from Others

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Democracy represents the way forward but making it work is problematic given universal human tendencies to abuse freedom, and to prefer wealth and power over wisdom and virtue. Two particular difficulties, or shall we say *challenges*, for democracy are: first, to accommodate the unique and inalienable rights of each individual person; and second, to allow evolution of the rule of law so that undesirable widely-followed customs are progressively replaced by an enlightened ethics.

Thailand is currently exploring alternatives to its current system of democracy. In doing so, it should not regard itself as inferior or backward in comparison with other countries. And I include those that have been apparently experimenting with the idea for centuries and that all-too-often proclaim themselves as bastions of democracy.

The 20th century generated two main answers to the issue of the relation between government and the people, a relation which should assist and protect personal essentials like prosperity, well-being and education.

The first answer was communist one-party systems, and the second was welfare democracies. Both of these grand designs sought to relieve people of worry and responsibility. However, this is attempting the impossible. Both systems contain inherent contradictions and inconsistencies, which ultimately must lead to their downfall.

I will say little about the downfall of communism, an approach which is now rejected for all practical purposes. The notion that an economy, which is more like a rainforest than a tennis-court, could be centrally planned and rationally constructed, was fatuous. Inefficiency, demoralization and failure were the inevitable results. And the notion that personal enterprise and effort should not earn fair rewards runs counter to the deepest instincts of us all. Life could never be about having our needs met by others as of right. It is about working hard to fulfil our needs and wants (as judged by ourselves) insofar as is possible in our circumstances.

The welfare democracies have had a slightly longer run than communist dictatorships due to their embrace of liberal capitalism and the vast funds obtained through taxation of enterprise. However, their problems are escalating. When first instituted, it was easy to guarantee provision of social security after the retirement age of 65—because life expectancy was about 67 years. Now that life expectancies are in the mid-80's and populations are aging, it is impractical. Furthermore the essence of welfare is the re-distribution of wealth. Taken too far, and of course it has been, the effect is to drain resources from the productive individuals, to encourage dependency rather widely, and to allow people to deny the risks inherent in life.

As the 20th Century progressed, the numbers of people directly and indirectly receiving government benefits increased, as did the numbers directly and indirectly employed by government. Living off government support became a majority practice and the easy or only option. The hard work of genuine production and innovation fell on fewer and fewer people. And more and more of their energy became inevitably driven towards accommodating government, finding ways to benefit from subsidies, avoiding taxation, persuading officials for regulatory support, and so on. It is easy to see where this must lead: to a slow impoverishment, collapse and disintegration.

Democracy in the West has had the worthwhile advantage of allowing a disliked government to be removed without resort to violence or coups. However, it should be remembered that Hitler was elected democratically. Such a thing can occur because the majority rather easily functions as a herd. This herd mentality also drives politicians to act unnecessarily. It led recently to passage of the Patriot Act in the US—one of the greatest assaults on the American Constitution and personal liberty ever passed into law. Because the Act enhances the centralization of power and control, politicians are unlikely to repeal the law until there is some major social upheaval.

Western politicians are fully aware that they get into power through a majority vote. One direct consequence is that their democratic systems invite a tyranny of the majority. As a result, there are repeated instances of either views of the majority or claims of ‘public interest’ being used as excuses for politicians to trample upon the rights of individuals.

In the countries with which I am familiar, I have noticed that those who aspire to be elected have over the years shamelessly used two tools: bribery and deceit. Apparently the public accepts this due to ignorance, feelings of helplessness, and probably unrealistic wishes for selfish benefit. For a long time, the general public refused to think the worst of politicians and the media hid indiscretions—much as occurred within the churches—in order to maintain a confidence-inspiring façade. However, public surveys in recent decades have shown that politicians are increasingly held in contempt. It is difficult to see how such a state of affairs can be good for a society.

The most dominant and ultimately catastrophic feature of political life within welfare democracies is the use of bribery. While politicians do not pay individuals to vote for them, they do promise money to the people as a whole or to sectional groups (eg the low-paid, the miners, the middle classes) in order to get their votes. The money that they promise is, of course, not theirs to give. It actually belongs to productive people from whom it must be coercively removed via taxes. Another form of bribery is the siphoning or directing of money into projects in the constituency of the politician—known in the USA as ‘pork-barrelling’. These projects are often of minimal productive value. Money-politics is certainly alive and well in the USA where politicians regularly respond with legislative, policy and regulatory favours to campaign contributions from large businesses. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac gave many tens of millions of dollars to US legislators: so, despite being responsible for accounting fraud and insolvency, their CEOs recently received multi-million dollar payoffs.

Because societies are ultra-complex systems, the simple notion of direct causation—X causes Y—does not operate. It is rather difficult to know in advance either causes or effects. Incentives used by government routinely operate perversely e.g policies for housing increase homelessness, efforts to reduce waiting times for treatments increase waiting times, attempts to reduce carbon emissions generate more carbon than is saved, methods to avoid recessions damage the economy, and so on.

In addition, the bureaucratic systems within government are intrinsically inefficient and rather ineffective: in services, in procurement, and even in tax-collection. During the Iraq war, a whole new truck would be purchased to avoid the effort to replace a tiny cheap part. So the net result of government activities is waste on a truly colossal and barely imaginable scale. Most recently, in the UK, the government spent 5 years removing competition from the National Health Service on principle, and then 5 years introducing competition to get better results. The degree of disruption and demoralization is hard for an outsider to comprehend. Despite extra tens of billions of pounds spent on the NHS, it is not surprising that the public views the service as worse than when the process began.

My view on bribery and waste is not new or particularly insightful. It has been said that: "A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover they can vote themselves largesse from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates promising them the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that a democracy always collapses over a loss of fiscal responsibility, always followed by a dictatorship."

In regard to the final comment about dictatorship, it is worth noting that in addition to the Patriot Act mentioned above in the USA, laws have also been passed in the UK and Australia to permit ministerial government by decree with no recourse to the courts or accountability. In a variety of situations, anyone suffering at the hands of a government agency or minister has no rights to access to lawyers, to the press, or even to family and has no right of redress in case of error. This flouting of historical rights —Tony Blair (former UK Prime Minister) indicated to the press that the Magna Carta was out of date—means that the safety net of normal decencies and fair-play have now been removed. A legal setting for dictatorship is now in place. Sadly, no party is campaigning in either country for repeal of the liberty-endangering laws.

The second feature of politics in the welfare democracies is deceit. There is a well-known joke as follows. *Question:* how do you tell when a politician is lying? *Answer:* his lips are moving. To win mass support, as democracy demands, politicians continuously and deliberately lie to the public. They make promises that they either have no ability to keep or have no intention of keeping. They hide mistakes; they deny the need to make hard but necessary choices; and they look for someone or something to blame rather than accepting responsibility.

Politicians do not like being caught out. They desire a docile populace that does not check what they have said in the past and will not question or investigate their actions. They therefore act to accumulate more and more power to themselves including the power to be free of scrutiny and accountability. Another common technique is to use lies to induce or exacerbate fears in the populace, most perniciously fear of foreign states or fears of economic distress, with the purpose of assuring people that only the government can protect or rescue the situation. Once legal restrictions and government interventions are in place, they are rarely completely removed. So quasi-dictatorial bureaucracies have come to dominate Western democracies.

The political technique of pandering to the lesser instincts—envy, impatience, laziness—and stimulate baser motivations of the populace—fear, greed, hate—runs directly counter to the need in a good society for people to elevate their thoughts and activate their better selves. Any political initiative or system that weakens personal responsibility and encourages dependency—as Western democratic governments have been doing for decades—is headed for eventual crises and failure.

Probably the most pernicious form of deception relates to theft from the people in terms of inflation (debasement) of the money supply. Given that borrowing is commonly used to obtain government funds, inflation reduces the value of the repayment. At the same time it penalizes the thrifty and hard-working. At the same time, because monetary wealth apparently increases, people mistakenly feel good.

In the US, inflation is calculated in very strange ways—ways that seem deceptive and to benefit the government to the detriment of the people. Politicians now seem to find it essential to deceive people about the extent of inflation both to reduce pension and welfare payments (usually inflation-linked), and also to lessen demands for higher wages with the possibility of uncontrollable wage-price spirals.

Western democratic systems generally encourage short-termism (quick-fixes) that look good and can be immediately popular rather than genuine solutions, often with some temporary pain, leading to long-term benefits. Unfortunately, an idea or plan does not become true or sensible, just because many people believe it or like it. Economic solutions are frequently developed that will harm future generations — our grandchildren and great-grandchildren who have no vote in the present and cannot object now.

Because the immediate majority view is given such pre-eminence in democracies, human rights are easily and regularly over-ridden. Human rights are about the uniqueness and preciousness of each individual. Democracy in the West has, however, led to assertions that majority-based extortion and coercion is needed to protect human rights. This idea is paradoxical. Human rights should be primarily about how and when each individual should, or rather **must**, be protected from that majority or from the will of other power-filled entities including government. The unpleasant reality to be faced is that there is no inalienable human right to receive health care or be paid a pension or get any form of welfare from others. Compassion, charity, acceptance and other

essentials of a good society depend rather on an enlightened and disciplined way of life—something which each individual must cultivate and which is intrinsic to Thailand's Buddhist values.

It has been said that: "The average age of the world's great civilizations before they decline has been 200 years. These nations have progressed in this sequence: From bondage to spiritual faith; from spiritual faith to great courage; from courage to liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to selfishness; from selfishness to complacency; from complacency to apathy; from apathy to dependency; from dependency back again to bondage."

I am inclined to think that the West has moved from apathy to dependency. On a positive note, there are just two steps to spiritual faith. Is it possible that Thailand is moving from spiritual faith, through courage to liberty?

The early American founding fathers were an extraordinary bunch of visionaries. They knew a thing or two about power and its abuse and the needs of a viable community. Rather bleak views were articulated by several of them including John Adams, a founding father and 2nd President, who wrote: "Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."

Having very briefly looked at the serious problems that have developed within the welfare democracies—and which are directly due to poor implementation of the otherwise positive notions of 'welfare' and 'democracy', we can now return to briefly consider what is possible and necessary.

Societies do require governments for social order and to protect life, liberty and property. Regulations for fair dealing are required and governments must prevent the spoiling or waste of common resources (the 'tragedy of the commons'). Safety nets, legal justice system and defence of the realm do need organisation. But, however willingly accepted, Government is a form of institutionalised coercion. So it is not possible to think of democracy without carefully considering the system of government that is being democratically enabled. The best democratic arrangement cannot overcome an ill-designed dysfunctional system of government.

Voluntary arrangements between individuals are always preferable to coercive arrangements, both psychologically and in terms of social outcomes. To maximize freedom, well-being, productivity and prosperity, it is imperative that coercion be kept to an absolute minimum. This will occur if governments do as little as possible—but enough to encourage and enable individuals and groups to do things in a constructive and ethical way.

Dishonesty at the personal level, however undesirable is human, usually limited and transient, and can be managed. By contrast, dishonesty at the societal level is debilitating, causes widespread and sometimes irremediable damage and must be actively minimized. The dishonesty behind the war in Iraq is one example; and dishonesty leading to environmental destruction is another. So governments should collect and spend as little money as possible. Power and wealth work best when they are in the hands of individuals looking after their

own interests. They work worst when individuals accumulate power and wealth from others through claiming and promising to look after the interests of others.

The principal danger in democratic arrangements is the accumulation of centralized power and the associated accumulation of enormous wealth. So systems of checks and balances are required at the national level, and appropriate devolution of power to regional or provincial levels, and to municipal or community-district levels. Even neighbourhoods or villages within local communities should be as self-governing as possible. The closer people are to their representatives the better. The closer representatives are to the effects of their decisions the better. The smaller the size of the decision, the less the likelihood of big terrible mistakes. The temptation to centralization and maximization of error by politicians is great: it is certainly evident in both USA and Australia.

Actually, the basic political unit is the household. If a household is responsibly governed, then society is off to a good start. The implications here are an emphasis on personal responsibility, essential duties, self-reliance, care for others, upholding group needs and the common good, and fostering harmonious relations with other households. A well-functioning family household needs all its members to discharge their responsibilities and express mutual respect. Efforts devoted to educating about parenting, sensitivity to the needs of children, support for families as a whole, and equalizing legal rights of men and women could directly (and amazingly quickly) contribute to effective democratic sentiments in wider society.

A range of electoral innovations deserve consideration. I will mention just a couple. In choosing politicians, the ballot box is not the only fair way to get representatives. For example, it might be possible to have systems where most or all politicians are chosen by lot. Juries, whose members are no experts in the law, work perfectly well like that. Such an arrangement would bring an end to campaigning and lobbying prior to (s)election and it would emphasize that everyone in the country is potentially responsible for its governance.

Another idea: it is common to limit the number of terms of a President, but it might be sensible to limit the number of terms of elected politicians to prevent the development of careers parasitic on public spending. If a person knows that they have no chance of further political power they may be less likely to respond to lobbyists and will also develop other useful abilities and skills. If a person is truly capable of grasping complex social issues, then they would be far more useful if employed by society rather than having to suffer the vagaries of election.

Although democracy is essential, the design and development of democratic arrangements and governing systems are not fixed but rather grow in a continuous process. Design has to be adapted to the particular country, its culture and developmental stage, and the state of global consciousness. Thailand is unique, and long may it remain so.

In thinking about design, we can perhaps usefully compare governing to schooling because both cases reveal an inequality between those in charge and those who must have the freedom to develop themselves responsibly. The more powerful in each case exist primarily to serve the less powerful. Systems of schooling that enable creativity and maximize freedom and responsibility within and amongst children—often rather disturbed and deprived children—have been successfully developed. Yet these excellent principles all too often struggle to penetrate the mainstream due to the forces of custom and convention. The task in designing democratic government is similar to designing schooling. An ethical orientation is needed. We must identify the essential principles at stake, accept the irremovable features of human nature—and then work with these. This can be done.

One final thought: There is evidence to suggest that humanity is currently in an important transitional phase in the development of conscious awareness. As this process evolves, democracy and government will also mature and improve. Experiment and reflection will be necessary to foster and guide this evolution. Thoughtful people in Thailand are certainly capable of rising to this challenge.

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