Making democracy work

Rather than gladiators in a fight to the death, ruling and opposition parties should see themselves as two sides belonging to one team

Terence Ho

For The Straits Times

A Pew Research Centre survey of nearly 19,000 people in 17 advanced economies this year found considerable public dissatisfaction with how democracy is working in many of these economies. Fewer than half of respondents in Greece, Italy, Spain, Japan, the United States, France and Belgium indicated satisfaction with their democracy. By contrast, over three-quarters of respondents in Singapore, Sweden and New Zealand were satisfied with the political system, according to the findings published last week.

While democracies across the world vary considerably in form and practice, some today see democracy itself in crisis, facing challenges from within and without.

Globally, populism and entrenched partisanship have had wide-ranging ramifications, from Brexit to distrust of vaccines. The proliferation of "fake news" is undermining the very foundations of a political system that depends on the informed choices of citizens. Democratic states have also been the target of election meddling and hostile information campaigns orchestrated from abroad.

The principal threat to democracy from within is the prioritisation of partisan interests above all.

Too often, political parties focus on tearing down competing ideas and proposals, rather than drawing on the rich reservoir of ideas for policy solutions. Challengers may seek the downfall of the incumbent even at the expense of the national good. For instance, the clash between Democrats and Republicans over the US debt ceiling has pushed the government to the brink of default. When political polarisation sets in, it can poison relationships in the community, workplace and even within families.

A question worth pondering is: Can a democratic system be envisaged that promotes constructive democratic discourse by rewarding both the ruling and opposition political parties for successful policy outcomes? Some may dismiss this out of hand. After all, politics in a democracy is a contest, with winners and losers.

More often than not, a zero-sum contest will turn ugly. This need not, however, deter the idealist from envisioning a political system where the competition of ideas builds up rather than tears down society.

If there is truth in Winston Churchill's observation that "democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried", then it behoves those of a democratic persuasion to try to make democracy work better.

Success is more likely when the main political parties are centrist, and not so far apart ideologically that they are unable to engage in constructive discourse. This opens up the possibility of cross-fertilising ideas to tackle policy challenges.

REFRAMING THE CONTEST OF IDEAS

For competing ideas to work to a country's advantage, those in power should be able to co-opt the best ideas, including those put forward by opposition parties, without being perceived to cave in to pressure or otherwise lose political points.

How can this be achieved?

First, governments should look ahead and take pre-emptive measures to tackle public grievances and emerging societal fault lines before these become political crises.

In Singapore, such issues include the socio-economic divide, and discrimination on the basis of race or nationality, which were addressed at the National Day Rally this year.

Timely intervention could save governments from being seen as buckling under public pressure when inaction finally becomes untenable, which would invite greater pressure on other issues in the future.

Any reform is best made from a position of strength rather than weakness. This requires those in power to keep their ear to the ground, and their finger on the pulse of the nation.

Second, government leaders should try to avoid taking a dogmatic stance on issues from which it would be hard to walk back later. These could include specific forms of social support or how the public purse ought to be used.

Ironclad pronouncements on such issues only constrain the policy space. It would be better to explain to the public why a particular policy is adopted or otherwise, but leave open the possibility for change should it become warranted.

Fringe voices – those whose views are far from the mainstream – are often dismissed as naive or misguided, but the arc of history suggests that today's heterodoxy may well become tomorrow's orthodoxy.

There needs to be a safe space for contrarian ideas to be debated – otherwise, only the most strident dissenters will be heard.

Third, those who have been early cheerleaders should resist the urge to claim sole credit for an idea that is eventually implemented, or to contend that they had forced the government's hand.

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In Singapore, universal healthcare insurance, enhanced healthcare benefits for the older generation, as well as wage floors for lower-wage workers were all ideas in circulation long before MediShield Life, the Pioneer Generation Package or the Progressive Wage Model (in its latest incarnation) were introduced.

In truth, a successful policy often has many "parents" – political parties, civic organisations, academics and citizens – whose advocacy and input over the years have made a difference.

Sometimes, it may take time for policies to move into the zone of broad acceptability as circumstances change and public attitudes evolve. It follows that those in government need not be shy about adopting ideas and policies advanced by political rivals or civil society groups.

On its part, the administration ought to be generous in acknowledging stakeholders' contribution to policy development.

In functioning democracies, policies typically go through a period of contestation and gestation, with stakeholders pitching in views that help to shape policy and refine it, even after implementation.

Recognising contributions and validating differences in view can go a long way towards encouraging constructive participation, rather than destructive division, in the policy formation process.

WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

For some, autocratic systems like China offer a compelling alternative to liberal democracy. Free from the strictures of democratic contestation, the Chinese government has been able to execute social and economic reforms in ways that would be unthinkable in the West: banning for-profit tuition, limiting the time children can spend on video games and curbing the monopolistic practices of its Internet giants.

It may be argued that these policies benefit society, and have been carried out at a speed that would be impossible in a system with greater restraints on the executive.

The comparative vulnerabilities of liberal democracies and autocracies are evident in their very different approaches towards information control, and the consequent challenges they face.

If democracies are plagued by a surfeit of questionable news and misinformation, authoritarian regimes suffer as much or more from a deficit of independent, trusted information.

Where the overriding priority is to stamp out any challenge to authority, alternative voices are muzzled, and accountability and transparency given short shrift. Inordinately constricting the flow of ideas and information also hampers intellectual dynamism and innovation over the long run.

In contrast, the dilemma facing democracies is how to prevent misinformation and hostile foreign interference from poisoning democratic discourse, while not giving the state carte blanche to quash dissenting views.

This is at the heart of the recent debates in Singapore over the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act and the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act.

US President Joe Biden has described democracies and autocracies as being locked in a struggle for ideological dominance. In his first address to Congress in April, he contended that "the autocrats of the world" were betting that America's democracy would fail. It was up to the United States, he said, to "prove democracy still works".

As he observed in an interview, the challenge facing democracies is whether they can arrive at consensus within a timeframe that would allow them to compete with autocracies.

REIMAGINING DEMOCRACY

Still, democracy possesses considerable advantages, not least the system of checks and balances against the unbridled exercise of state power.

There is also tremendous potential value in the contest of ideas, which can help democracies identify policy blind spots more easily than autocracies, benevolent or otherwise.

A democracy that derives strength from this would require responsible political parties and a discerning electorate that rewards constructive politics through the ballot box – and potentially in other ways limited only by the imagination.

Rather than adopting the posture of gladiators in a fight to the death, the ruling and opposition parties should see themselves as two sides belonging to the same team, their sparring on the training field helping to hone instincts and make the team itself more competitive.

This, of course, requires the parties to play ball, on a level playing field; it requires stakeholders to shed an "us versus them" mindset and seek unity in diversity.

Once political polarisation becomes entrenched, however, the window of opportunity to achieve this would have closed, perhaps irrevocably.

Political systems must be well adapted to each country's unique history, culture, demographics and society.

However, a constructive, competitive democracy is a worthwhile aspiration – whether in South-east Asia, Europe or any other part of the world.

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Governments should look ahead and take pre-emptive measures to tackle public grievances and emerging societal fault lines before these become political crises, says the writer. In Singapore, such issues include the socio-economic divide and discrimination on the basis of race or nationality, which were addressed at the National Day Rally. ST FILE PHOTO