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

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For The Straits Times

A Pew Research Centre survey of nearly 19,000 people in 27 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 June.

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

Globally, populism and entrenched patriotism have had widespread ramifications, from Brexit to the rise of the far right. The proliferation of fake news is undermining the foundations of a political system that depends on the informed choices of citizens. Democratic states have also become the target of election meddling and hostile information campaigns on social media.

The principal threat to democracy today is the prioritisation of partisan interests above all. Too often, political parties focus on winning elections, capturing ideas and proposals, rather than rating the public interest in their policy solutions. Challengers may seek the downfall of the government. Incumbent even at the expense of the national good. For instance, the clash between Democrats and Republicans in Congress led to a partial government shutdown last year. When the power is in the hands of a political party, it can dictate the political agenda and make 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 as wishful thinking. After all, politics is a democracy’s cost, with winners and losers.

More often than not, a zero-sum contest will ensue. This need not, however, deter the idealist from envisioning a political system where the competition of ideas holds open rather than shuts down society.

There is much in Winston Churchill’s observation that “democracy is the worst form of government, except all other forms that have been tried” that 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 constructively in the discourse. This opens up the possibility of cross-bridging lines to tackle policy challenges.

REFRAMING THE CONTEXT OF IDEAS

For competing ideas to work for a country’s advantage, these in power should be able to co-opt the best ideas, including those put forth by opposition parties, without being perceived to cave in to pressure or otherwise lose political points, or be seen as backtracked. First, governments should look at the obstacles and find pragmatic solutions to tackle public issues and addressing societal fault lines before these become a crisis.

In Singapore, such issues include the socio-economic and racial discrimination on the bases of race and nationality, which are addressed in the National Development and Education policies.

Time-limited interventions could save governments from being seen as buckling under public pressure when reaction failure becomes untenable, which would limit greater pressure on other issues in the future. Any reform must be seen from a position of strength rather than weakness. This requires the power and influence of the government leadership to be debated in a manner that does not allow political politicians to set its own agenda. If the political leaders fail, it can be a recipe for a society without a 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 making democracy work?

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.

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

In truth, a successful policy often has many “parents” — political parties, civic organisations, academic and citizens — whose advocacy and input over the years have made a difference.

Sometimes, it may take time for policies to move into the realm of broad acceptability as circumstances change and public attitudes evolve. It follows that in a government that needs to be about adopting ideas and policies advanced by political rivals or civil society groups. In this respect, the adoption ought to be generous to acknowledging stakeholders’ contribution to policy development.

In functioning democracies, policies typically go through a period of contestation and evaluation, with multiple voices pitching in that has helped shape policy and refine, even after implementation. In an emerging cooperation and validating differences in view can sometimes lead to 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 unachievable to the West, banning free market norms, limiting the size and role of the state, and censoring the media. It is proof of how disciplined states can grow.

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 disparities and discrimination on the basis of race or nationality, which were addressed at the National Day Rally. ST FILE PHOTO

Falselyhoods and Manipulation Act and the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act. US President Joe Biden has defended democracy, arguing that autocracies were being locked in a death, the ruling and opposition parties should see themselves as two sides belonging to one team.

A democracy that derives strength from this would require responsible political parties and a discerning electorate that rewards constructive politicians through the ballot box — and potentially in the workplace — not just by the imagination.

For instance, reforms that pose grievances of a fight to the death, the ruling and opposition parties should see themselves as two sides belonging to one team, their sparring on the issues of the day, not just by the imagination.

This, of course, requires the parties to have “guts” and, as political playing field, it requires that there be a level of trust and respect between them, and some recognition that the other side has a mind and a spirit.

Once political polarisation becomes too acute, 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.

For Singapore, one competitive democracy in a world of authoritarian power, whether in South-east Asia, Europe or any other part of the world.