

Report

The Power of Politics and the Future of the Ballot Box

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Abstract

The locus of power is moving from the majority representative governments to a fairly new power still to be defined. Traditionally, the majority of votes through the ballot box, based on one man one vote electoral system, had the power to install governments of their choices. There have been far too many interruptions in tenures of governments installed through a one man one vote electoral system in recent times. These interruptions in many instances are properly orchestrated and are middle class in all appearances. Furthermore, these interruptions have often conflicted with the majority that voted into power the incumbency. They are also viewed by some as counter revolutionary intended to serve the interests of the capitalists and middle class. Others have argued that these interruptions are essential to prevent further corruption and abuse of power.

The other line of argument calls for the total reform of the electoral system which they claim could avoid these interruptions. They emphasise that reformation of the electoral system is essential and could lead to sociopolitical and economic stability. They suggest the re/implantation of a qualified vote or what is historically referred to, as the graded or weighted vote electoral system.

This report seeks to examine the relevance of both these electoral systems in contemporary societies.

Introduction

Traditionally, the populace used by the ballot box is based on a one man one vote electoral system to install governments of their choice to office. The elected government

was then expected to execute the mandate of the majority before its tenure expires. The locus of power is moving from the majority of representative governments, to a fairly new power that draws its mandate from outside the ballot box. It consists by and large of a middle class, political opposition groups and selected civil society organisations. Many in the developing world also see foreign donor agencies as part of the new power.

Donor agencies serve as parallel governments in many developing countries; they provide essential services to the society. These agencies have been accused of fuelling national political tensions. The media unfortunately is seemingly growing as part of this new power. It holds the power to amplify the voices of the "majority ". The partnership that exists between this power and the media tends to ignore the voices of the real majority. It utilizes urban streets to mobilise support in national liberation squares, seen as rally points on the city.

Although taunted by the media as representative of the majority, it represents a minority who could not win the elections. It conflicts with the real majority when it comes to issues of legitimacy. The new power also views people with disdain because of their choices manifested in elections. The new power disagrees with the capability of the real majority from making sound political decisions and criticises the over reliance on state resources. The widening gap between the rich and the poor has increased the popularity of socialist leaning governments around the world. Consequently, there have been widespread middle class backlash against elected governments and those responsible for electing them. What does it mean to the legitimacy of the one man one vote electoral system, the respect of electoral mandate and tenure thereof?

Understanding the One Man/One Vote and the History of the One Man/One Vote in the Developing Countries

The one man vote electoral system was first discussed in the US in the 1960's. Before then, States and local governments divided up political power without taking into consideration the number of people and their sizes in each territory. The system seeks to rectify the political voting stratification and to achieve equality. Voting embodies and represents democracy in many developing countries. One man one vote is a significant democratic marker of that understanding of democracy. Whereas traditionally, the middle class have regarded themselves as more important than the proletariat, the system achieved some kind of equality when it came to matters affecting citizenship.

Although not overtly articulated, the middle class have always been averse to any system which intended to alter the status quo. One man one vote gives equality to all citizens, and it gives opportunity to dictate sociopolitical and economic national

trajectory. The priorities of the poor majority dominate that trajectory. The middle class have used various popular means to perpetuate the status quo and in certain cases, restore their lost privileges. They fund political opposition, work with civil society and use courts to oppose the real majority from exercising power.

Capitalism draws its successes from liberal democracy and is therefore averse to socialist projects that are typical in the majoritarian governments. The middle class are therefore caught between the rock and the hard place when it comes to democracy. Partly because democracy encourages economic liberalization, a key to middle class privilege. It simultaneously espouses the principle of a one man, one vote as its cornerstone. The middle class have thrived through liberalized economics in a democracy. The possibility of withdrawing those privileges by governments that prioritizes government social spending remains a major concern. Historically, elections were followed by an exodus of skill and capital, which is often referred to as 'Brain Drain' in the developing world. These countries were left with a large number of uneducated and unemployed populace. The remaining middle class was subsequently expected to pay more taxes to facilitate for social spending. Failure to extract more funds from whatever sources remaining in the country led to governments resorting to sources of a last resort i.e. International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for assistance. The IMF funding is accompanied by conditions in the form of a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), which most developing countries blame for poverty and under development. (The SAP is a subject on its own which needs a paper of equal length to discuss). It is sufficient to say, that it insists on certain government spending, whilst ignoring government spending priorities.

Many people are, therefore, beginning to question the relevancy of a one man one vote. Does this electoral system really serve the interest of the nation given its perceived bias against the middle class? The recent protests are the manifestation of a middle class who have lost patience with governments installed through a one man one vote. The middle class is using the weapon that has been historically "reserved" for the working class to vent their grievances against the system. Violence is directed at state institutions like government buildings and installations but hardly at private properties. Furthermore, the positioning of these protests, as it was the case in Ukraine, Thailand and Egypt, is meant to affect the running of the state, and not the running of big private businesses.

Some have suggested that in order to maintain the situation from deteriorating any further, perhaps there is a need to review the current electoral system. The suggestion is clearly meant to appease the middle class who feel marginalised and relegated to political periphery. Unless some miracle occurs, where the middle class outnumber the working class and the chances of a middle occupying government office are most

unlikely. What alternatives are there for the middle class other than resorting to violence and occupying liberation squares in city centers?

The Rise of the Middle Class - the New Power

Representation of the working class in parliaments around the world and post elections uncertainties have always been a concern to the middle class. They dread the possibility of change in political and economic trajectory that could threaten their status quo. The unpredictable future reaction of the empowered working class against the middle class is another concern. Furthermore, the world economic realities are changing and assimilation into highly skilled and industrialised economy is proving to be difficult to penetrate. These realities have brought a new thinking within the middle class that involves old tactics used by the working to gain power i.e. protest and violence.

Recently we have seen a number of countries revolting against legitimately and democratically elected governments. In most instances these governments through popular mobilisation of the middle class have been crippled and unable to execute their mandates. These events seem to follow the same concern in all the countries concerned. There is often a well-orchestrated plan involving key stakeholders within the society. There also seems to be a constant flow of private money which helps to pay for public amenities, technical logistics, printed materials, food, medical facilities, anti-riot gear and much more. The recent events in Kiev, Ukraine, and the ongoing protests in Istanbul, seem to be shaping themselves along those lines as well. These gatherings present themselves as a representation of the "majority". However, close scrutiny of these protests reveals a lack of the real majority, and the people who voted for the incumbent governments.

The middle class by its virtue and behavior challenges the presumption that all people are equal irrespective of their social and economic standing. Therefore, it is not surprising that suggestions point to some sort of a qualified vote or what is historically referred to as the graded or weighted vote electoral system.

The graded or weighted electoral systems takes into consideration that people's social standing and economic status are different. It suggests that those social traits should be used as a determinant in measuring votes. The vote of a student should not be considered the same as that of an adult middle manager of a big financial institution, a middle class colleague once argued. Voting which is a passage to national legislation should not be left to all and therefore, voting should take into consideration the educational and economic positioning of the general populous as the argument continues. The challenge in reverting to old defeated systems like the graded or weighted vote electoral system is that they carry the conservative tags, they are a

system that were defeated by the people in the past. The international suffrage movement gains are very entrenched to reverse.

Conclusion

Democracy as we know it is going through a kind of metamorphosis that must be acknowledged. Popular protests in urban areas cannot be ignored especially with the advent of 24 hour international news channels that are unwilling to capture the other side of the story. The parliament, which is the custodian of rights and the execution of the mandate of the electorate, is rapidly losing authority. Parliaments have instead become rubber stamps of what has been decided at the town square. Street protests at town squares have replaced places of authority. Looking at the challenges faced by the real majority and the gains made by the "majority" in recent times, it can be concluded that electoral power is shifting from the ballot box to a "majority" in the town squares.

Consequently, it can be predicted that a one man/one vote electoral system will become obsolete in the near future. The mandate of the people, the tenure of governments elected democratically, and the exercise of power of the people by the people are fading realities.

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Endnotes:

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