Building the Pillars of Democracy

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Article at a glance

• History shows that democracy, in its full-fledged, inclusive, and participatory form, is relatively new and fragile.

• Democracy must be cultivated from the bottom up, with a clear core set of values as a foundation on which to build an adaptive, responsible government.

• Despite the great strides made in the recent decades, democratic gains around the world are not irreversible and the commitment of entire societies to the democratic principles is necessary for democracy to be strong and lasting.
Introduction

A philosopher, thinker, and a Nobel Laureate in economics, Professor Amartya Sen has inspired us with his seminal contributions that have given new meaning to the ethical dimensions of the pressing economic and social challenges of our times. One of Professor Sen’s most influential contributions is the concept of capability, which places human freedom in the center of the discourse on development. Capability is what lies between raw capacity and action, and it is only with an appropriate capacity that individuals can exercise all kinds of freedoms – including democratic freedom.

On democracy, Professor Sen has observed that, “No substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press.” Today, when the profit motive often prevails over considerations of justice, equity and rights, Professor Sen’s message on development, linking it with human freedom, democracy, and a free press, is refreshing indeed.

With the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama suggested that the end of history was upon us. Yet more than 15 later, the triumph of democracy has been less than absolute. Some countries have turned away from a liberal brand of democracy and embraced a more authoritarian rule. A number of governments continue to keep their political systems democracy-free while delivering economic goods to their citizens. At the same time, some countries that have democratic systems seem to be struggling with issues of accountability and governance.

Democracy, with its obvious virtues, should have had no difficulty in taking root around the world; yet for many countries, “government of the people, by the people and for the people,” remains a tantalizing, elusive ideal.

The Challenge of Making Democracy Sustainable

The primary difficulty in sustaining democracies is the struggle between those who govern and those who are governed. Aristotle proclaimed that, “If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.” But translating this simple prescription into practice is a formidable challenge to which many struggling democracies around the world can attest. As countries strive to follow Aristotle’s vision of democracy in our own times, they continue to face compelling questions:

- Why does democracy seem so fragile?
- What elements are required for a country to reach the threshold necessary to sustain democracy?

The following are some insights from my experience as a prime minister committed to building democracy in Thailand – including drafting a constitution. Let me first share a thought from Mahatma Gandhi, who articulated the organic nature of democracy: “The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It has to come from within.” People have to want democracy.

In most of Europe, the evolution of democracy was slow and non-linear. European history is a chronicle of civil wars, revolutions, and dictatorships. Yet democracy took root, and today, no rival political system challenges it in Europe. That historical experience shows that stable democracy as we understand it today is a relatively new phenomenon. If we take universal suffrage as the key event in western democracy, we find that the broad, inclusive participation of all citizens is little more than a hundred years old. But Europe’s experience also demonstrates that the fragility of democracy can be overcome through the development of institutions that enable broad and inclusive participation in governance.

Democracy and Development

In the course of history, humanity has been constantly adapting to new technologies and striving to manage challenges ranging from climate change to natural disasters. Over time, a democratic system has clearly proven itself as best able to adapt in the
evolutionary process if its basic pillars are strong enough. A contemporary metaphor for democracy is that of a software algorithm that produces the best possible political outcomes for any society. The intellectual code for this political software stretches back centuries, with Britain’s Magna Carta of 1215 as a starting point of a centuries-long process that helped shape the principles of democracy and rule of law we so much value today.

There is an implicit premise here that democracy is inherently better, more stable, rational, beneficial, and legitimate than other forms of government. Precisely because democracy derives its authority from the consent of the governed, it can claim this primacy. Winston Churchill aptly stated that, “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those others that have been tried from time to time.”

One of the key reasons that democracies around the world remain fragile is unequal emphasis on their political processes and economic development. The political process must be viewed along with the level of development. As development occurs unevenly, so too does the state of democracy. Democracy and development are two sides of the same coin.

**Education and Knowledge Sharing**

Democracy starts with the wisdom of the voting public; however, that wisdom is acquired. A voting public must understand the issues it will encounter and the options it has to deal with them, and be able to access the means to exercise choice in the democratic process. The heart of democracy beats only with the participation of all citizens in exercising their rights – first, to raise issues of concern for inclusion in the political agenda; and second, to choose those whom they feel would best address their concerns in the political process.

In addition to responsible citizenship through participation in voting, democracy requires that citizens be well-informed of issues that their communities and societies face in an increasingly globalizing and interconnected world. A struggle in many developing countries is to channel resources and make education more relevant to daily life, changing its emphasis from rote memorization to creativity and independent thinking, and extending the reach of education programs, especially to girls and women in poverty. One pleasing silver lining to note is the progress of gender equality in the promotion of universal education. Such progress augurs well for creating the critical mass of informed voters needed to fuel democratic processes.

Asia has the distinction of being a region that has produced a significant number of democratically-elected women heads of government and state. One encouraging development in recent years are South Asia’s efforts to ensure gender parity in the democratic process by requiring that a significant proportion of all elected functionaries must be women. Accelerated region-wide, the advancement of girls and women is now necessary for wider grassroots participation. Therefore, education and the sharing of knowledge as a public good are important means of supporting the democratic process and deterring those who want to govern through abusing power.

**Democracy in the Asian Context**

In Asia, as in the West, democracy is won not just through the ballot box. The real struggle is fought out on the streets by students, farmers, workers, and other ordinary citizens who come out en masse to express their opinions. It was in Asia that Mahatma Gandhi crafted non-violence as a movement for political change; subsequently, there have been street protests over the course of five decades in the Republic of Korea, and the people’s power has swept across Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, as well as other countries. The flame of democracy also continues to burn brightly in South Asia, which has the largest and most active voter populations.

For democracy to live, citizens must resist the temptation of being complacent. Each community, workplace, and school needs programs for promoting grassroots democracy. An apathetic electorate is easy prey for any organized group to seize power by force or fraud, giving rise to totalitarianism.
In much of Asia, where harmony is a core value and conflict avoidance a first response, our challenge is to embrace criticism – weighing pros and cons in a disagreement – as part of the maturation of the democratic process in the Asian context.

**Pillars of Democracy**

There are a minimal number of pillars needed to support the infrastructure of democracy. If you wish to build a bridge, there are principles of engineering that must be followed. Similarly, there are seven main pillars of the architecture of democracy: elections, political tolerance, the rule of law, freedom of expression, accountability and transparency, decentralization, and civil society. But democracy, unlike bridge building, isn’t just science; it is also the art of the possible.

**Elections**

Free and fair elections lend legitimacy to democracy by preventing one person or a small group in a society from imposing certain vested interests on the general population. No one person or group should exercise a monopoly of power over the election process.

Political parties constitute a major instrument of constitutional democracy in which fundamental norms govern the political community and determine relations between the legislature and the people, as well as the interactions among centers of power. In a democracy, political parties can be formed and can campaign without intimidation. Some countries require political parties to have a minimum level of popular support before they can participate in elections. All political parties must also have access to free media and other means to broadcast their election platforms. The electoral process should be supervised, monitored, and carried out by a neutral body, often an election commission.

Unfortunately, elections may be rigged and votes bought. Politicians who only appear among their constituencies to enhance their patronage power, to be photographed and filmed distributing largesse, are sadly a familiar phenomenon in many countries.

A political establishment that ceases to reflect the aspirations of a given country’s citizens loses its political legitimacy. Once that happens, the political establishment could call for new elections. However, it may instead resort to the use of force, fear and intimidation to cling to power, and elections may be suspended or subverted. Although elections are necessary and may be the most visible aspect of a democracy, there are many examples of manipulating election processes to aid and abet autocracy and tyranny. In themselves, elections do not suffice to ensure democracy.

**Political Tolerance**

The second pillar is political tolerance. Free and fair elections do not give a mandate to oppress or sideline those who have voted against the government. It also does not mean that the majority have the right to rob the minority of its civil liberties, rights, property, or life. Tolerance is required for sustainable democracy. If minority groups do not benefit equitably from the election process, there can be no peace. That absence of peace would make a mockery of efforts to be democratic.

In many countries, there are examples of rewards given only to supporters of the ruling party, with neglect or punishment for those who voted for the opposition. The distribution of food, water supplies, and development resources has been used as a weapon of control to win elections. Post-election politics can also be punitive on the losers. The elected government may view the minority’s participation in government as an obstacle, rather than finding a way to include them in reasoned debate and, where appropriate, incorporate opposition ideas into government policy.

Tolerance has to do with acceptance of diversity in society. It begins with the way children and young people are brought up. If we teach the young to believe in the principle of “winner takes all,” we impede the development of democracy. Instead, young people must learn that what the winner earns in an election is an on-going duty to strike a balanced consensus in society. Striking that balance is an art.
Rule of Law

The third pillar of democracy is rule of law. There has been much debate on the meaning of this idea. What is clear, though, is the close connection between the rule of law and democracy. When the political process is subject to laws and takes place within a sound regulatory framework, it enables citizens to judge the lawfulness of the government. Citizens can answer some key questions:

- Does the government govern according to the law or does it take the position that it is exempt from some inconvenient rules?
- Are procedures of the government stable and within the law or does government act in an arbitrary fashion, arresting people who challenge its policies and depriving them of their liberty without due process?

Returning to the importance of the Magna Carta, Habeas Corpus is one of the most cherished concepts it contains. Habeas Corpus prevents arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, and execution by requiring such government actions to be justified under law and ensuring the detainee’s right to due process. A political class, which accepts that official actions must comply with the law, is more likely to embrace democracy. Proper application of the rule of law puts a brake on any attempt to destroy liberty, seize property, or violate human rights. It also means that such rules apply across the board to all citizens.

When application of the rule of law is weak, corruption flourishes. Bribery, kickbacks, bid rigging, and policy favors for family and cronies are well known in many countries. In these situations, those who seek enforcement of the law may face intimidation or reprisal. Democracy becomes dysfunctional when the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the legislature, the private sector, the police, and the military all use their power to enrich themselves and advance their own interests at the expense of society at large. Laws notwithstanding, corruption undermines the rule of law. Judicial neutrality is a key premise of the rule of law. If judges apply one set of rules for those with wealth and influence and another set of rules for those without, the entire political and judicial system falls into disrepute, eroding public trust in government institutions to deliver justice.

The rule of law is rooted in a system of moral values. In South Africa, for decades, the rule of law existed within an apartheid system. The law was based on the color of one’s skin. In a properly balanced political and legal system that protects the rights of citizens, those with a particular skin color cannot use it to obstruct justice. Justice and equality are directly linked with the sustainability of democracy. Generally, once the rule of law is compromised, a regime, despite what it may otherwise profess, slips on its democratic credentials and loses legitimacy.

In a constitutional democracy like Thailand, the constitution defines the institutional arrangements that govern in a democracy. Democracy works best when its institutions and officials operate in a system with checks and balances. The rule of law defines the limits to political interference in decision-making processes. With the rule of law, the system is held in common by all citizens, who are subject to the same laws; those governing do not “own” the system. To ensure the functioning of the rule of law, it is vital that the integrity and independence of the judiciary and the entire justice system are not subject to undue influence and illegal intervention.

Freedom of Expression

The fourth pillar sustaining democracy is freedom of expression. What people in civil society are allowed to say, print, distribute, and discuss is indicative of the democratic nature of a political system. A free press is one measure of freedom of expression in a society. Internet untrammeled by state control is another.

Few governments, democratic or otherwise, have a genuinely easy relationship with free press; yet, despite all its shortcomings, a free press, supported by open Internet access, is indispensable to keeping the public well informed as part of a functioning democracy. Even in an established democracy, government may seek to manipulate free press into serving its own
Government often conduct spin campaigns to advance their agenda and dilute the power of independent media.

New technology is unleashing powerful new forces through quantum expansion of information dissemination and space for public discourse. The Internet has revolutionized participation in political debate and action, and fostered the formation of e-communities. Mobile phones serve as crucial means of facilitating rapid communication. In countries with authoritarian practices, freedom of information is high on the government’s danger list. Such freedom, as represented by the new media, is a few clicks away on websites such as YouTube and on numerous subject-specific blogs. These new forces have made it much harder for governments to control the flow of information.

The fact remains that even democratically elected governments will go to great lengths to manipulate public opinion, whether on TV, in the print media, or on the Internet. State influence and control over the flow of information should give us pause. The trappings of democracy may appear healthy, but if freedom of information and press freedom are hollowed out, democracy is compromised. Constant public vigilance remains instrumental in performing a watchdog role. This is not always easy, as the law in many developing democracies is neither supportive of freedom of information nor does it favor the press in case of conflict with the government.

Freedom of expression was thought important enough to place in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 of the declaration provides, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.” Although no democracy has absolute freedom of speech, unless citizens have the right to express themselves in the political process, no government can be made accountable for its actions.

The key is to balance national and societal interests to create and maintain the level of discussion required for participation in democracy to be meaningful, while drawing lines that take into account a country’s history and cultural milieu. Each country places its own limitations on freedom of expression. What matters is that those limitations are not misused by political forces to limit public scrutiny of policies and actions that have an impact on the integrity of governance. For example, if criminal libel laws effectively thwart whistle-blowing on irregularities or corruption, democracy is diminished.

Democracy is about multiple voices. These may be contradictory; some may be more informed than others, while others may be personal opinion, gossip or speculation. That is a marketplace of ideas. As in all marketplaces, not everything is of equal value. So as long as our institutions enable people to understand how to assess ideas in this marketplace, selecting the rigorous and rejecting the shoddy, democracy is not only sustained – it thrives. With the Internet, globalization, and mass communications, the marketplace of ideas draws from far beyond the borders of any single democracy. Such a marketplace can no longer be easily crafted and controlled by government and no single government can feel quite comfortable in invoking the means to silence dissent or whistle-blowers.

Accountability and Transparency

The fifth pillar of democracy is accountability and transparency. Institutions of government and individuals in those institutions must be held accountable for their actions. A government must be accountable to the people who elected it into power. It must be accountable to an independent judiciary or other impartial institutions established to check government action. Be it agricultural policy, fuel pricing, or health care services, decisions must not advance the agendas of vested interest groups over the public interest.

Accountability and transparency essentially have the same purpose: protecting citizens against misguided policies or decisions that enrich a few at the expense of the many. When these two “guardian angels” are compromised, it is an alarm that good governance is at risk, and that the democratic process has stalled.
Decentralization

The sixth pillar rests on local or provincial political empowerment. The closer the government is to the people governed, the more responsive the government is likely to be. At the same time, for decentralized democracy to work, funding must also be decentralized, material and human resources, and institutional capability. Decentralization of the political process is another way to curb the concentration of power and influence exercised by political forces. Citizens become more aware, interested, and willing to participate in democracy when they see their officials as neighbors and what is at stake as something close to home.

It is at the local level that we see the best example of how democracy is connected with the daily lives of citizens. The physical proximity of the neighborhood has the same benefits as the online community in a knowledge economy: people with common interests and shared values express and exchange views and insights, influencing one another. Citizens’ right of assembly and participation at the local level nurture the longevity of democracy in a society. The creation of political parties at the local level also facilitates building of a representative democracy. Local participation by voters and candidates drawn from the same district or province gives credibility and legitimacy to the democratic process. The local administration becomes a training ground for future national leaders.

Civil Society

Civil society is the vital seventh pillar. An active civil society begins its engagement at the grassroots. Community forums, clubs, issue-focused activist groups, charities, cooperatives, unions, think tanks, and associations fit under the broad umbrella of civil society. These groups are the participatory vehicles for sustaining grassroots democracy. There is a strong degree of volunteerism, shared interest and common values around which information is gathered and analyzed, views are formed, and advocacy pursued.

The health of a democracy may be measured by the vitality of its civil society and the extent of citizen participation in public policymaking. Civil society provides an important source of information for intelligent debate on matters of public interest. Civil society provides a mechanism whereby the collective views of citizens can shape and influence government policy. By bringing arguments and information to the public as a context for examining policy, civil society forces democratic government to present counterarguments or to modify its position. Such exchange is healthy for democracy.

Finally, it is clear that when the deliberative process within a political system accepts the role played by civil society, it also implicitly agrees that citizens have a role to play in checking government decision-making. A vibrant civil society thus makes for more thorough decision-making in a democracy. In many countries, however, there is a history of political patronage. Many heads of a political entities have built up a personal following whose loyalty is to the individual rather than to a political party or creed. When that happens, civil society suffers and democracy cannot be easily sustained.

The Need for Responsible Leadership

The pillars of democracy outlined above are necessary but insufficient without leaders to build and maintain them. The qualities of leadership for sustainable democracy are found in those who act in an honest, transparent, and accountable manner. They are consensus-builders, open-minded and fair. They are committed to justice, to advancing the public interest, and they are tolerant of opposing positions. Of course, it is often said that democracy is a messy way of governing and that the human condition is flawed. There is truth in both statements; but admitting limitations, avoiding the mistakes of the past and looking forward to a new generation of leaders builds on the lessons from the struggles of ordinary citizens for democracy.

To foster a sustainable democracy, a nation must focus its efforts on building a system that empowers people not only through the right to vote, but also through norms, institutions, and values that support that right and make it meaningful.
What will sustain democracy is the shared realization that, although democracy is far from perfect, the alternatives are even further from perfection. Some societies come to this realization sooner than others. Some are experimenting to see if only parts of democracy, such as good governance and accountability, can be enjoyed without the implications of full-fledged democracy. As long as they demonstrate a commitment to the larger welfare and well-being of the people and deliver public services, the majority of their people may well be content with the status quo and not protest.

Conclusion

One reason for such views that doubt whether democracy is the best way to advance social welfare may be a sense of disappointment with representative democracy in many fledgling democracies. Elected officials, instead of serving and protecting the public interest, serve their own interests and those of their cronies. They arrogate the right to dictate in the name of the majority, while riding roughshod over the minority. They become “the public” and are no longer “representatives.”

For the past three decades or so, a trend towards more direct, participatory democracy has continued worldwide. In established democracies, this may be an incremental change; however, going from autocracy to mass participatory democracy is a big leap that entails a challenging transition. What is important is that the seeds of democracy must be homegrown for it to be accepted and to function. Each society must work out its own contradictions, its own competing priorities.

Historical and contemporary experiences everywhere highlight the fragility of democracy. Even when seemingly well established, democracy can be subject to tampering, especially in times of crisis. There is no democracy so strong that it is invulnerable to the greed and ambitions of people. To nurture and sustain democracy, its beneficiaries must also serve as its guardians; the common people must be ever vigilant and wise. For most of humanity, history has not ended. The struggle for and against democracy will continue far into the night.

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