

POLITICS MATTERS, BUT WE HATE IT

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Western democracies are in a bad shape. This is not a crisis *in* democracy, which would be a normal feature, but a crisis *of* democracy. This form of crisis jeopardizes the credibility of democracy, and thus the soft power of these nations. This crisis is caused by depoliticization through a reliance on the market and non-public institutions to produce public goods.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 aroused enormous euphoria. In this post-Cold War excitement some thought that the West provides the only model to modernization. Other parts of the world should follow the social, political and economic models that have been proven to bring prosperity to the West. And these models focus on free market capitalism; science, technology and innovation; meritocracy through the market based on equal opportunities and access to education; pragmatism in politics; democracy and peaceful negotiations; and the rule of law. Pragmatism in politics supposedly leads to an absence of ideological conflicts and Francis Fukuyama concluded that history as ideological conflict came to an end. This overlooks the diversity all around our world and it is clear by now that not all countries are 'progressing' towards Western liberal-secular democracy nor are they willing to do so in the future.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 ended the joyous nineties. Some see a new bi-polar world emerging: Islam versus the rest, particularly

the West. The war-on-terror – which George W. Bush inaugurated by saying that who is not with him is against him, which he justified by stating that he doesn't do nuance but guts – is characterized by a politics of fear; security is considered more important than liberty. This leads to illiberal democracy, to use a term by Newsweek editor Fareed Zakaria.

When democracy becomes illiberal – thus when there is widespread disregard for the rule of law (by turning the rule of law in the rulers' law), for the spirit of constitutional checks and balances and for truthfulness – then we can no longer speak of democracy proper because then there is no longer an open society. A further onslaught on the open society comes from the mixing of politics with entertainment and big business; examples are the administrations of Berlusconi, who controls a large share of media landscape in Italy, and Sarkozy, who is married to a pop singer, and Angelina Jolie, who is an ambassador for the UN.

The cheerful nineties are even farther removed beyond the horizon of our collective memory when the bank Lehman Brothers went bankrupt on 15 September 2008. This bankruptcy ignited a global financial crisis. This financial crisis is also a political crisis, because global market capitalism could only be established through political decisions (the economic crisis in Asia of 1997, which forced Soeharto to step down, should have been a stern warning).

We are not progressing toward a situation where we will all be members of a single civilization, where all peoples of the world will embrace liberal-secular democracy and free market capitalism as the end of ideological conflict. Moreover, the Enlightenment dream of a universal civilization is Eurocentric.

The ideology of the neoliberals – the Washington consensus of the governments of Bush, IMF, WTO and the World Bank – is anti-democratic. They seem to forget that the liberalization of trade could only happen through state interventions, which led to the formation of monopolies. Moreover, no market can function properly without a framework that defines common goals (even Adam Smith – famous for his theory on the invisible hand – claimed so). Neoliberalism has led to a widening gap between the global rich and poor, and, as we know now, unstable financial markets. Wealth does not trickle down; taxation is needed for redistribution. Democratic politics cannot regulate markets if only the interests of multinational corporations are taken into account. Depoliticization is the amalgam of processes reducing meaningful democratic politics to mere policy-making executed by bureaucrats and managers.

There are several features of this democratic crisis. First, the political elite is insecure of its authority, which can lead to inaction and indecisiveness. Second, the political opposition voices a democratic deficit by referring to an ideal state, culture, identity and the voice of the people by using rhetoric means, i.e. populism (Dutch parliamentarian Wilders is an example for attacking Muslim immigrants). Third, this malaise is felt within society and can lead to disorder, i.e. there is an atmosphere of crisis.

When citizens are treated as consumers they will behave as consumers, however, this has led to alienation and distrust of the political elite and political parties. Politicians are considered as self-serving who form an old-boys network. Democratic politics is reduced by spin-doctors to mere drama. Citizens are disengaged from politics: party membership is shrinking, voter turnouts are dropping and election results are becoming more and more volatile (when a president is chosen by only a quarter of the electorate it raises questions concerning legitimacy). Depoliticization undermines politics in the narrow sense i.e. democratic governance, and politics in the wider sense, i.e. democratic society.

Citizens exit the political arena for several reasons. First, (perceived) corruption of the political elite in collusion with the business elite. Second, loss of state power and national sovereignty due to globalization. Third, inefficient (semi-) public sectors with non-transparent accountability. Fourth, a top-down market view on democracy, which considers voters as purely rational voters, politics is then a copy of the market dogma. Fifth, considering politics as a market place causes distrust in politics and excessive expectations of politics, resulting in disappointment and frustration, which result in a vicious circle of negativism.

The view that democratic politics is a necessary evil and the disengagement of citizens from the political arena should be a moral concern. For long, democratic politics was considered as the highest form of the good life. This tradition gave as the existential reason for politics that politics gives order to the social. Therefore, we need the articulation of new political ideas, ideals and ideologies for our globalized era that reclaim the primacy of the political. When the primacy of the political is reclaimed questions of justice can be voiced. The election of Obama gave rise to new optimism. However, his hopey-changey tune still needs to gain substance.

Politicians and citizens – and not only as voters, let alone as consumers – have mutual duties to formulate common goals and ways to reach these goals. The relationship between society and the state should be a relationship of mutual reinforcement: for a society to be civilized it needs a strong liberal

democratic state and for a state to be democratic it needs a civilized civil society.

Almost a decade ago Soeharto stepped down. On 21 May 1998 presidential power was transferred to then vice-president B.J. Habibie. Indonesia started on a long road of democratization, rule of law formation and decentralization. If older democracies are in a bad shape how can a young democracy like Indonesia be consolidated? To answer this question Indonesians no longer need to look solely to the West. And the new elected president can act with confidence at the international stage now Indonesia is proving to be able to consolidate democracy while older democracies are sick.

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