

Reflections on Good Governance

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Note to Readers: I write these reflections as I am concerned about the way a number of democracies develop and their inability to tackle serious problems effectively. I spent 20 years in politics and an additional 30 in policy analysis and teaching at different universities. Writing these reflections is a way to order my thoughts and experience and make it available to younger people. I welcome criticism that could lead to improvement. I apologize for not being able to respond to all comments, but will read them to improve the text.

Note to Dutch readers: Ik schrijf in het Engels omdat ik hoop dat de inhoud ook enige betekenis kan hebben voor niet-Nederlandse lezers.

Good governance improves human rights. Full implementation of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights is the highest goal. The UN treaties on human rights specify all. The best system of government is free representative democracy. Illiberal democracy, populist direct democracy, referendum democracy, theocracy and autocracy do not lead to good government.

The word democracy is imprecise and often used for propaganda. North Korea calls itself a democratic republic while it is the most suppressive and unfree state. Many other unfree states call themselves democracies. Many democratic governments are dominated by kleptocratic circles which exploit the state and its population.

Democracy means rule by the people or rule of the people. But there is no country in the world or in history which was literally ruled by its people. Those who rule, or govern, are always a small number of citizens. What makes a country a true democracy is that those who govern are held responsible by the population and can be removed if the majority of the population disagrees strongly with the way it is governed, and if the government violates the constitution and other laws.

Democracy requires much more than popular elections. The first requirement is rule of law. This means that the rulers are themselves subject to the laws which are determined democratically. Elections do not create democracy by themselves, as they can be limited to one man one vote one time, after which the elected abolish freedom. There are war criminals who were elected president of their country and rapidly became autocrats.

A complete democracy is a poly-archy, meaning there are many institutions which have power in society but keep each other in check, in particular the legal and police system, parliament, the electoral board, free media, security services, and institutions for economic and social governance, as well as strong local and provincial governments.

No country is ideal and free representative democracy is not paradise but it is the least bad form of government. The best examples are countries like the Federal Republic of Germany, Finland, New Zealand and Sweden. The Netherlands also has a good system, but it is not carefully maintained and runs the risk of decay to a populist referendum democracy.

The political influence of social media has both good and bad effects on democracy. The good side is greater availability of information to the electorate and increased transparency of government. The bad effect is increased risks of misinformation, mass manipulation and populist rule. The next note will deal with the dangers of populism and referenda .

Public Opinion

Media commentators and some politicians tell us that politics should follow public opinion. That would be democratic. But what is “public opinion”? The public, that is everybody in a society, has many different views and changes them often. There are also many who have no particular view, are not interested in certain matters, are too busy to follow everything, and find political questions not interesting or too complicated to give a definite view in a discussion in the local cafe or meeting room.

Finding out what the opinions of the public are is an academic profession. One has to ask many people many questions and establish how intense these views are held and their relation to other views. The statistical measures and the formulation of the questions require great care. “*The public opinion*” does not exist. If one asks the population if the government should spend more on education, safety, health, social security and employment, most will say yes. If the next question is if the government might increase taxes to do all this, most will say no. Good governance requires that many interrelated questions, which may contain incompatible wishes, are considered in their entirety, in order to make well-considered decisions in the general interest of the state and the society which the state should serve. Good governance is the most vexing and difficult profession that exists. It is a noble profession that is constantly under fire, like soldiers fighting for the future of their country.

Good governance has to be responsive and also fully responsible and transparent in its service to the general interest of the population. I will discuss responsibility, general interest and transparency later. The word politics is derived from the Greek word for city-state: polis. It means the governance of the community, be it a village, city, metropolis, state or organization of states. The word has fallen into disrepute, which is due to perceptions of bad choices which some politicians make and the manner in which political decisions and the personal lives of politicians are reported, in a critical if not demeaning and sensational way. That is why I rather talk about governance. For matters of international politics, one might use the term the elevated term statecraft, as it differs from governance and good administration inside a state.

The common misunderstandings about what both democracies and the nature of public opinions are, is exploited by persons who seek the highest public offices, seeking the publicity, prestige and power that comes with high elected offices. As power rests in democracies on winning elections, and not on having a record of good governance, or a clear, potential ability to such service, the electoral system can easily be abused by making statements and promises that gain support of many voters, without any base in good policy choices that would effectively solve

the political questions which are of great concern to the voters. By voicing as a opinion leader only the political emotions of a part of the electorate very cleverly, a majority can be gained in elections.

Populist politics exploits the emotions among the electorate, both positive and negative, and summarizes the many opinions among the voters into catchy statements, claiming that they are the popular views, or popular opinion. Often, the more experienced or shrewd seeker of high office is aware that these statements are no effective policy, but they work to get good electoral results. The communicative cunning and personal attractiveness required to win elections have no relation to the competencies required to govern well, which is composed of good administration for the rule of law and the economy, as well as statecraft to preserve international order and a peaceful equilibrium among states.

To the extent that populist politics is based on stirring fears and hate among the population, and making promises which cannot be implemented once in office, populism undermines the functioning of a free, representative democracy. If such politics is carried on, it may lead to suppression of various minorities and to enmity and aggression among groups of citizens and among states.

Politicians who exploit negative emotions of the population, who then claim to represent a supposed popular majority opinion and try to legitimize their policy proposals by rigging elections and bypassing different views, can turn into dangerous autocrats. Mankind saw many such examples in the 20th century, in Communist Russia, in Communist China, in Fascist Italy, in National-Socialist Germany and various other states. Stirring up hatred among groups or supposed socio-economic classes leads in the end to suppression, incarceration, torture, mass atrocities and war. Those who sow hatred reap destruction. This is why populist politics based on fear and hatred should be exposed and corrected already when it starts, even in seemingly innocuous beginnings, in order to protect a free, representative democracy.

Many democratic states have populist politicians. It is not limited to the so-called right wing. Democratic systems can fall ill, so to speak, due to different diseases.

The pathology of politics comprises nationalism, egalitarianism, religious rule, ideological rule, “direct” democracy, referendum democracy, kleptocracy by the political-economic elite, consumerism, anthropocentric destruction of nature, and other ills. These diseases may hit at the same time. I will discuss them one by one.

The Disease of Nationalist Populism

Populist politicians advocate policies of which they often know that they are not effective solutions, but advocate them anyway to the people to gain votes, appealing to their emotions and to sensationalist media. A common tactic of populists is to attack in very abusing terms those who were in political leadership in a responsible fashion, and other policy opponents, as media respond immediately to insults against leadership and are inclined to magnify this. Media are not to be seen as the department of objective information of a society, but more as a branch of commerce, in which incomes and careers are made, like in other businesses. Much daily news is what is supposed to catch attention, sell, and attract advertisers. Media are in a hurry; there is fast internet news and there is little time to verify facts or research a variety of dissonant facts and views. Many reporters do not want their scoop killed by information that would cast serious doubt on the story. Editors and owners have few funds for research and background journalism. Very professional journalists suffer under this hurry and often choose an easier and more rewarding life as a communication advisor or press secretary. The best and most independent journalists hold on to their profession out of a sense of public service. Their work and integrity is crucial to a democracy: the fourth estate in the division of power (the other three are a free parliament, an executive which abides by the constitution, and an independent judiciary and police system).

Populist politicians use these weaknesses in the media system to advance their goals. Shouting insults and making statements that do not stand scrutiny, they ride a tiger towards electoral victory. But the tiger may eat them at last, as the more independently thinking part of the electorate will sooner or later discover that the voters have been duped. To stay in power and defend themselves against criticism, populist leaders may be inclined to exaggerate the threats from within

the state or foreign enemies. The leader then becomes really aggressive towards minority groups, scholars, independent media and other segments of society, followers of peaceful ideologies, and foreign states.

The first law of populist politics is to do whatever seems necessary to get elected. The second is to hold on to office and power by any means. The third is to seek confrontation against a supposed threat in order to solidify one's support. Once independent institutions and critical voices have been sidetracked or silenced as traitors who are undermining the state, time is ripe to call new but manipulated elections, or a referendum about leadership. By that time, life gets really dangerous for minorities, whose safety is the very crux of a democratic rule of law state. Historical examples abound. By now, the security services of the state are mobilized against the population to keep it under control and guard against purported dangerous threats. Then it is high time for freedom loving people who want to keep their families safe to emigrate.

This pattern is repeated time and again in many different countries, periods and under various religions and ideologies. It is surprising that many people do not recognize the pattern before it is too late to stop it. The pattern can be corrected, particularly in free democracies, by strong democratic institutions and active citizens. The longer they wait and the more they compromise, the more dangerous it becomes to uphold the law and democracy. Gradually, many citizens see no other alternative than to obey the system and to serve it...to their ultimate moral capitulation. Those with the least scruples, who are also the most aggressive, will become the most fanatic servants. So what matters is: how to stop the authoritarian train in its tracks very early.

The advocated policies of Trump and of Wilders are signs of the early stages of this political disease. Further advanced are Erdogan, while Putin's Russia is approaching non-fatal metastasis: no end in sight. But I should not diagnose too many patients at one time. Let me focus on Wilders and his "Party for Freedom". The funny thing is that it knows no internal freedom, nor any form of democracy. Internally is a straightforward and effective autocracy. The leadership principle (I am careful not to use the the German term) prevails. The leader determines the

party program, the electoral list, and the strategy. There are no members with voting rights. All that the supporters can do is give donations and vote for him. The organization does not meet the minimum requirements of Dutch law for an association, which are a board elected by the members and an annual report which gives full transparency about income and expenses. I gather that much income is kept secret. Reportedly part of it comes from foreign sources. The policies of this PVV are both nationalist and left wing social populism. The appeal is to the disgruntled and those who fear (if not hate) foreigners from non-western states, as well as refugees in general and Islamic Dutchmen in particular. Many voters belong to the insecure group of white males who lost their work or are self-employed or on short term contracts or the less-educated sections of the retired and the rural population. They rightly feel not comfortable in a rapidly changing, globalising world economy, which seems to be dominated by successful young urbanites who are everyday on the web and have a clear and dynamic future.

But Wilders has no effective solutions to the real problems and fears of his voters. I will try to analyse his political program in the near future.