

From Middle – East To Hongkong The Challenges Of Democrarcy In The Era Of Globalization

Sumeet Thakur

Assit Prof. Political Science,
Himachal Pradesh University,
India

Abstract: Democracy is going through a churning times in the present era of globalization. Middle East (Syria, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Saudi Arabia) and peaceful uprising in Hongkong against the ham-handed approach of Chinese communist party to crush civil liberties in Hongkong are presenting the glaring examples of conflicts regarding conception of just democratic governance. Liberal democracy has been limited to the concept of conducting free and fair elections, but questions of minorities, federation, ethnicity and participation has been left behind. Time has come for the reconceptualization of democracy and democratic institutions of governance.

Hongkong has been the battle ground between the indirect fight for democracy between communist party of China and pro-democracy protestors. Who are demanding right to elect any person they trust rather than vote on the name of candidates who will be acceptable to Chinese Communist Party. Pro-democracy protestors are fighting for the right to have free and fair competition for people's consent. From their prospective democracy at least for them ends and starts with this. But the fundamental question is that from where these ideas about nature of governance percolated in Hongkong, do it has any connectivity with the globalization process? Does the increasing globalization process have just helped it to become more potent and well-covered event?

The bloom of Arab Spring in Egypt, Libya and Syria in particular and on the whole in the entire Middle East clearly brought to the forth argument that demand for an open – participatory governance is becoming one of the most desired form of governance for the oppressed people. Is there any co-relationship between the spread of democratization and the pace of globalization process in today's world? The globalization process is transforming the way governance is being conducted in the different countries of the world. The most predominant strand of this globalisation process is the information revolution which is unique in terms of the speed with which dissemination of the information and data is

happening. It is this rapid and ever expanding spread of information which has been made possible by the digitization of the communication which is now playing a very crucial role in the expansion of the liberal-democratic ideals.

But historically the expansion of the democratic form of government was not a linear and swift process. The expansion of democratic ideals and methods were fiercely resisted by established elites and ruling groups. "Democracy in the West became fully developed only in the twentieth century. Before the First World War, woman had the vote in only four countries respectively Finland, Norway, Australia and New-Zealand. Woman did not get to vote in Switzerland until as late as 1974. Moreover, some countries that became fully democratic later experienced relapses. Germany, Italy, Austria, Spain and Portugal all had periods of authoritarian rule or military dictatorship during the period from the 1930s to the 1970s. Outside Europe, North America and Australia, there have been only a small number of long-standing democracies, such as Costa Rica in Latin America."

Since 1970 the pace of transformation towards liberal-democracy has really increased. Number of democratic countries has doubled and while the existing democratic states have stabilized their democratic system more firmly. It started from Mediterranean Europe where the powerful military regimes were over thrown and Greece, Spain and

Portugal witnessed the arrival of democratic governance. In early 1980s there was a change in South and Central America. Countries like Brazil and Argentina came back to the democratic form of government. The fall of the Communist bloc and transition to democracy post-1989 in Eastern Europe and parts of Soviet Union was another important instance which further widened the expansion of the liberal-democratic form of governments in the world.

What can be the reason behind this surge in the liberal-democratic form of government in different parts of the world even in those regions which were hitherto untouched by this form of government? In the words of Anthony Giddens "For increasing number across the world, life is no longer lived as fate – as relatively fixed and determined. Authoritarian government becomes out of line with other life experiences, including the flexibility and dynamism necessary to compete in the global electronic economy. Political power based upon authoritarian command can no longer draw upon resources of traditional deference, or respect. In a world based upon active communication, hard power, power that comes only from the top down-loses its edge. The economic conditions that the top-down Soviet economy, or other authoritarian regimes, couldn't handle the need for decentralization and flexibility –were mirrored in the politics. Information monopoly, upon which the political system was based, has no future in an intrinsically open framework of global communications."

The post-second world war period is marked with the ever increasing economic and technological interdependence in different parts of the world. It has its roots in the system build after the Second World War. Twin Bretton-Woods's institutions along with GATTs have laid the foundations of a liberal economic, trade and monetary regime at global level. Emergence of European Union and its demonstration effect has led to the creation of ASEAN and many other regional economic groups which are seeking to emulate this liberal-economic path of development. This process of homogenizations and imitation has been exerting strains on the non-liberal democratic countries to conform to the ideal-type of liberal democratically governed political system.

The forces of globalization have created webs of norms; conditionality's and regimes which generates new-new challenges for international and domestic governance in this interconnected world. Different authoritarian and totalitarian regimes have to face ever increasing accountability within the liberal international trading and investment system which globalization has created, and what it does is that it reduces the amount of monopoly which the states used to have over the transmission of the information and communication. This opening up of information and communication has played a very crucial role in undermining the grip of authoritarian governments and helped in the strengthening of pluralist societies which in term help in the creation of democratic political system. Because in the democratic polities the relative autonomy of the political sphere is based on the ability of the different members of a society to communicate with each other and through which every society is able to mould its political system on the democratic pattern of governance. One of the essential requirements for a democratic political system is the relative autonomy of its political sphere and protection of the freedom of expression. Ability to

communicate without any significant amount of hindrance is the essential feature of a democratic discourse. Therefore what is happening is that in their effort to emulate developed-liberal democratic countries in the economic and technological sphere authoritarian political systems are losing their control on the information and communication.

Countries like Soviet Union which were totally isolated from the global economic system had lost their capacity to compete in a dynamic and competitive nature of world economy. Because of their monopolistic economic and political setup their isolated economies lost efficiency over the period of time which made their economic conditions very precarious. Once these hitherto isolated authoritarian economies started to reform their economic set up, they had to simultaneously reform their political system to make it more transparent. This became an essential requirement in order to compete in a liberal trading and investment system at the global level which requires some sort of transparency from the participating countries. Some of these closed political-economies could not make this transition very smoothly because of the dearth of institutional and regulatory framework which is needed for the smooth working of a free market economy. This can be seen in the proclamation of the Mikhail Gorbachev in which he laid stress on Glasnost and Perestroika³. But there are many totalitarian and despotic regimes which still adopt partial approach towards the globalization process by prioritizing only the economic and trade related aspects of the globalization process. These countries are still hedging and protecting themselves from the political aspects of the globalization process this very often leads to fuelling the conflict in their political systems.

In the words of Tony Sach, "To compete effectively the state will be forced to cede sovereignty on certain issues upward by empowering trans-national institutions, relinquish many business decisions to trans-national business corporations, and be held more accountable to a nascent trans-national civil society. At the same time, the state will be forced to cede sovereignty not only downward (to new administrations) but also outward (to new social actors that are crucial to national success in a global world.) Such a scenario must be extremely troubling to authoritarian regimes."

But all these changes cannot be simply added to illustrate that as authoritarian states become the members of international economic system then there will be a consequent decline in the state's capacity of arbitrary actions among the authoritarian regimes. But it cannot be denied that in the long run the active participation of authoritarian regimes in the world economy will create sufficient challenges which will force authoritarian regimes to reform their political sphere and make it more open and transparent. As has been happening in China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar and many African states are example of this transformation process.

Anthony Giddens traces the root of this transformation in the communication process which lies at the core of globalization process. This global communication has various facets or norms which are political, economic, social and technological. Although different societies and political systems adopts different approaches towards this but it is becoming very difficult to selectively adopt this process of transformation. "The communication revolution has produced

more active, reflexive citizenries than existed before. It is these very developments that are at the same time producing disaffection in the long-established democracies. In a de-traditionalizing world, politicians cannot rely upon the old forms of pomp and circumstances to justify what they do. Orthodox parliamentary politics because remote from the flood of change sweeping through people's lives."

In Middle East which was under the grip of dictatorial regimes from Libya to Syria has witnessed strings of revolution. These spates of revolutions were the cumulated impact of the process of globalization of economy and communication which is now also sweeping through these regions also. The arrival of new social media tools like Face book, My-space and Twitters has freed the means of communications from the monopoly of ruling class .Global media has also helped in the creation of a constant pressure of international civil society on these repressive regimes to adopt the political reform process. These regimes in the Middle East which are going through a painful transition have until now only adopted the economic aspect of globalization. In these countries the impact of economic globalization process has only benefited a particular section of their societies. These particular sections have the hold on the current dictatorial regimes in these countries and rise in the income disparities has also contributed for the generation of current resentment in these countries. The question was till when these countries are able to selectively adopt only those aspects of the globalization process which suited the ruling elites while neglecting the political and democratizing aspects of globalization. But after these spates of revolutions it is becoming clear that the impact of globalization cannot be selectively limited by the dictatorial regimes to the economic sector only and it will also influence the political aspects of these societies.

For the first time in the history of human civilization, governments have lost the monopoly on information and now the citizens are also living in a same information environment as the ruling class. Therefore the increase in the speed of communication and creation of information societies demand more and more responsive and transparent form of governance. The democratic political system and political process is one of the best practical systems in such an environment which the process of globalization is creating.

Crisis in Iraq and Syria which are fuelled by the clash of ethnicities and rise of ISSI (Islamic State Syria Iraq) to emerge as a voice to the Sunnis which were feeling disempowered after the fall of Saddam Husain is clear illustration of ethnicities fighting it out to capture repressive apparatus of state. This clearly depicts the failure of liberal democratic electoral institutions in solving the problems of ethnically divided societies; electoral democracies are simply transmogrified into another method of majority versus

minority power settlement. Liberal democratic institutions have not been successful alternative to authoritarian structures which hitherto held peace at the cost of participation by use of brute force. The transformation of post-soviet republics into liberal democracies has not been smooth and has been coeval with the rise of mass based communal consciousness. Similarly the recent wave of Arab Spring has not been without its own share of failures. Although it dislodge many a Dictators like Mubarak, Gaddafi and Ben Ali but after sometimes the former elites and powerful-sections has captured their lost powers, for how long bureaucracies, military and markets will be treated as apolitical in traditional liberal democratic theory? American promise of transformation of Afghanistan and Iraq has proven sham. Afghans are still divided under ethnic lines and electoral democracy fuels it rather than building bridges. Syrian civil war (Sunni Vs Shia) and nature of conflict in Iraq Sunni vs. Shia and Kurds spread in northern Iraq is clearly sectarian. Fate of Kurdish nation itself which is scattered across in northern Iraq, Syria and Turkish highlands highlights complexity of the region which makes the application of any simplistic electoral democracy as a solution very shallow. The most serious question it raises is, do large scale hitherto (legacy of colonialism) commonly governed political entities especially one in which various ethnicities or nationalities exists should necessarily be force to fit into the identity of a nation-state in order to proclaim it liberal democratic system? Should nation-state or large governance unity be treated as sacrosanct even if it comes at the cost of suppression of minorities? Last not the least in the developed world and country like India where liberal electoral democracy has gained its root the question on its legitimacy are being asked. Does electoral democracy is the last and most practicable form of governance? Do liberal – democratic system is not inherently biased towards the propertied class? Can market be treated as complementary of political system? Does justice of market should be treated as justice of political system?

REFERENCES

- [1] Anthony Giddens, Runaway World, Profile Books Ltd, 2002, London, Page 69, 70.
- [2] Ibid, pp73-74
- [3] Mikhail Gorbachev, Wikipedia.
- [4] Tony Saich, Globalization, Governance, and the Authoritarian State; China p 208, in edited book Governance in a Globalizing World, Joseph S. Nye and John D. Donahue editors, 2000, Brookings Institution's Press.
- [5] Anthony Giddens, Runaway World, Profile Books Ltd, 2002, London, p73.