

Is democracy in retreat?



ANDREW SHENG

IS democracy in decline, retreat or under siege? This is a soul-searching question by many who agonise over a lost golden age of democracy, freedom and rule-based world order.

Democracy, from the Greek words "demos"—people, and "kratos"—rule, is usually defined as a system of government in which the majority rules, with consideration for minority rights. As Abraham Lincoln defined it, "government of the people, for the people and by the people". But during his time, women and slaves were not entitled to vote or participate in their governance. The crux of the democratic ideal lies in the question—"who rules?"

Notice that democracy was rarely granted by the British empire, which never granted democracy to her colonies (other than white Canada or Australia) until forced to give independence after she became exhausted by two World Wars. Democracy was adopted as part of the American tool-box to be pushed so that more people would be like Americans, free and equal, at least in theory.

This is not to say that the idea of democracy does not appeal to peoples of different cultures and political background. The Chinese idea of democracy, first expressed by Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) embodied in San Minzhu-I or Three People's Principles, embraced citizens of common culture defined by nationalism, governance rights (constitutionality), and people-centred welfare.

In a survey of 50,000 people in 53 countries polled for the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, 71 percent of Chinese surveyed agree that China

has the right amount of democracy, whereas only 33 percent of Russian thought so. Indeed 81 percent of those surveyed agreed that it was important to have democracy in their country. What was remarkable was that 44 percent of those polled thought that the US threatens democracy in their country, as against Chinese influence (38 percent) or Russia (28 percent). The biggest threat to democracy is seen as inequality (64 percent) and big tech companies (48 percent).

Democracy in practice today is built around the process of procedural democracy, in which people vote openly, freely and regularly to choose their government. The best governance arrangement is presumed to be the Montesquieu Trinity of Executive, Legislature and Judiciary where mutual checks and balance deliver what the people want. In the last decade, economists like MIT Professor Daron Acemoglu argued that democracy fosters economic growth. But if growth has not been equally shared, democracy comes under threat from populist authoritarianism, which often is democratically elected into power.

Freedom House, which annually produces a report on global freedoms, claim that 2020 was the 15th consecutive year of long-term global democratic decline. Two important trends mark this decline—US domestic political problems and the reclassification of India, the world's most populous democracy, from Free to Partly Free status.

Is this democratic backsliding real or scientifically proven? Political scientists Waldner and Lust (2018) argue that the health of global democracy can no longer be adequately measured by simply counting democracies and autocracies. There are a group of countries they call WINDS or weakly institutionalised new democracies that easily backslide to military coups

or autocratic politics due to poor institutions that cannot deliver. The poorer the country, the more vulnerable to political change.

In short, democracy as an ideal depends on the quality of institutions and if these institutions corrode, become politically captured or are unable to deliver what politicians promise, then democracy or whatever ideology is in power will inevitably be

individual wills are much divided, very likely that the political decisions produced will not conform to "what people really want." That is exactly why people are disillusioned with politics, because the politicians are unable to deliver what they really want.

Schumpeter the innovative genius saw that just as the entrepreneur engages in "creative destruction", it is political competition that creates

such as autocracy. That failure to deliver is why democracy is retreating or at least regrouping. As globalisation, technology, demographics and climate change have made life much more complex, demanding instant decision-making, even the best of the democracies have seen concentration of power in presidential executive power, over-riding judicial or parliamentary checks. When institutional checks and balances fail due to corruption, corrosion or incompetence, then new forms of political leadership arise to challenge the old.

We should not fear change, but welcome it. As Hayek, the foremost market philosopher recognised, "a limited democracy might indeed be the best protector of individual liberty and be better than any other form of limited government, but an unlimited democracy is probably worse than any other form of unlimited government, because its government loses the power even to do what it thinks right if any group on which its majority depends thinks otherwise (Letter to *The Times*, 1978)."

Democracy is a work-in-progress, not carved in stone to be worshipped. Each country and community have to find its own form of democracy to arrive at what is best for the community as a whole. To survive, it has to meet the Darwinian test of evolutionary competition from many different modes of governance. Darwin never said the survival is of the best, only the fittest.

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A pro-democracy protester holding a placard does a three-fingered salute at a rally to demand the government to resign, to dissolve the parliament and to hold new elections under a revised constitution, near the Democracy Monument in Bangkok, Thailand, on August 16, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS

subject to change by peaceful or violent means.

In my view, the Austrian philosopher/economist Joseph Schumpeter remains spot on in his classic diagnosis of Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy (1942). The 18th century definition of democracy was an institutional arrangement to realise the common good through procedural arrangements that delivers "the will of the people". But how do we define the "common good" and what arrangements ensures that is delivered? Schumpeter foresaw that "whenever

the leadership that delivers what the people want. He saw that dynamic leadership and the contest of ideas and execution deliver this or fail in the process. Indeed, what the people want at different times and place may be different. Political leadership is all about understanding the mood of the moment, seizing the opportunities and organising the institutions to deliver. The trouble is that democracy alone does not ensure that the government will be any better in delivery of outcomes than any other arrangement,

Our silent, resilient saviours



AFIA JAHIN

AT a time when most people are struggling to choose between life and livelihood, there are members of our society who have been going out of their

way to help make life easier for those who have been afflicted by the virus. Volunteers, many of them very young and from all backgrounds, have been working across the country since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic last year. Despite all the challenges of working in risky circumstances they seem undefeatable and unstoppable.

These volunteers belong to both organisations that have been doing charitable work even before the pandemic broke out as well as those that were mobilised in response to the dire situation that the Covid-19 has placed us in. Either way, the common motivation has been the pure desire to help people in need.

In fact, the pandemic has given an impetus to volunteerism along with innovative ways to reach out to people. As early as March of last year, for instance, when the virus had first made its presence known in Bangladesh, the non-profit social welfare organisation Bidyanondo set up water taps, basins, and hand washes along a wall in Pallabi. They also began making and donating PPEs following their high demand in the health sector, spending days and nights working with very few volunteers (for safety reasons) and refusing to sell the PPEs (when they were quite scarce in the market) even when offered very high prices for them, as stated in one of the organisation's Facebook posts.

While volunteerism is nothing new, and many of the organisations

have been working for one cause or another for years, the job is especially meaningful at a time when such a fast-spreading deadly virus is ravaging our people. The individuals who are volunteering now, be it by distributing food or as assistants in vaccination centres, are putting their own lives and the lives of their loved ones at great risk. In return, they get only the appreciation and blessings of those they help—and



A volunteer of Tohura Aziz Foundation hands over a food packet early in the morning, before Sahri time, to a rickshaw puller on Abdul Hamid Road in Pabna town.

PHOTO: STAR

that seems to be enough. Take Samia Haque. A student of the Department of Biochemistry and Microbiology at North South University, Samia has been working as a Red Crescent Youth volunteer, among many others, at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital (BSMMU) since early February. She started off as a co-volunteer but is now a full-fledged permanent volunteer with the organisation.

"My sole reason for joining the Red Crescent Society was that I have always wanted to help and serve people. I

wanted to feel that I was of use to society, and [Red Crescent] has been one of the best platforms for that. My work here gives me purpose and makes me feel like I deserve the life that I am living right now."

The 20 or so volunteers help vaccine recipients throughout the process and make sure that the queue is being maintained. "While the work is easy to describe," Samia says, "in reality it is

quite complicated to do daily."

Most of these volunteers are young people between the ages of 18 and 30, and many are students who are doing volunteer work alongside online classes. One of the challenges they face, for instance, is the vaccine recipients being impatient, which makes maintaining the serial numbers difficult. Still, the volunteers keep their calm and work day in and day out, ensuring that the vaccination programme at BSMMU is running smoothly. This is the scene in all the vaccine centres where these volunteers

have been making the vaccination programme a smooth and relatively hassle free operation. A relatively small group that operates with 15 members, 10 of whom belong to the transgender community, is Brihonnola, an organisation that has come into the limelight most recently for their work outside the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Specifically, they help patients in any way they need, from supporting them to walk to arranging transportation for them.

"There are lots of organisations which are distributing aid amongst those affected by the virus," says Sadikul Islam, president of Brihonnola, "but given our lack of funds, we decided this would be a cost-effective and overall a great way to help the patients. We also have a low-speed vehicle which we use to help transport patients within the city—usually between hospitals. I believe our contribution is quite a small one, so we have been a bit taken aback with how much attention Brihonnola has garnered so far."

As the infection rates saw their worst surge ever in the country during the past couple of months, Brihonnola's members were eager to help the city dwellers in any way they could. Even a lack of funds could not discourage them, and they chose to use their physical labour to help patients instead. So, even in the unbearable May heat, coupled with the fasting month of Ramadan, the volunteers have been working till evenings all week while donning face shields, masks, and high visibility vests.

Of course, it goes without saying that they, too, face a few difficulties during their job. While Sadikul says that transphobia has been decreasing over the past years in our country, it is still one of the main issues Brihonnola's members have to encounter at work. Fortunately, it seems that people are more willing to forgo their unfounded biases during times of need, and after some initial hesitation are quite relieved

to receive help from the volunteers.

Outside the capital, Tohura Aziz Foundation has distributed food to people during this Ramadan on the streets of Pabna till midnight, so that no one has to fast without having "Sehri". Their young volunteers roam the streets and give packets of food to mostly low-income people or those who have lost their jobs during the pandemic, according to a report published in this daily. As of April 27, they were distributing 200 packets of food each night, made using funds from the members, their relatives, and friends. There are other organisations with volunteers helping to provide nutritious food especially iftar boxes to underprivileged children and adults.

Our biggest takeaway from Covid-19 volunteers should be their utter selflessness and dedication towards a good cause. Samia could have easily sat at home and continued on with her classes online. Instead, she, like hundreds of others, chose to commit to making the people of her society more protected against the virus, at the cost of having to endure exhaustion, risk herself being infected, and maintaining distance from her loved ones—simply because she wanted to. The volunteers at Brihonnola, too, could have cited their lack of funding as an excuse to cease their operations. Instead, they became even more resolved in their mission to help people and went the extra mile to use their physical labour, also risking their own wellbeing.

The volunteers from these and the many other such non-profit organisations can surely act as examples for the rest of us. The pandemic has not been an easy time for anyone, but doing work such as this can give one a sense of purpose and belonging at a time when the world—as we have always known it—seems more alien and cold than ever before.

Afia Jahin is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

QUOTABLE Quote

NAPOLEON HILL
(1883—1970)
American author

Every adversity has the seed of an equivalent or greater benefit.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Courageous
- 6 Sheriff's group
- 11 Kick back
- 12 To the time that
- 13 "Skyfall" singer
- 14 Map lines
- 15 Makes mistakes
- 17 "My word!"
- 18 Overworked to the point of exhaustion
- 22 Heaps
- 23 Casino worker
- 27 Slow mover
- 29 Car trip
- 30 Made money
- 32 Prayer finish
- 33 Hoops game
- 35 Scorching

DOWN

- 1 Lingerie item
- 2 Spectrum color
- 3 Pub pints
- 4 Screen idol
- Rudolph
- 5 Bring to bear
- 6 Chased
- 7 Lennon's love
- 8 Antlered animal
- 9 Flank

38 Car scar

39 Fill with wonder

41 Kind of wave or basin

45 Tonic, for one

46 Battery end

47 Pigs' places

48 Homes for koi

10 Otherwise

16 Scepter

18 Acid's opposite

19 Arm bone

20 Stadium sound

21 Director

Quentin

24 Promgoers' car

25 Smooth

26 Painter

Magritte

28 Banks, at times

31 Scottish river

34 Like bar beer

35 Bad actors

36 Leave out

37 City vehicle

40 Last letter

42 Singer Henley

43 Tack on

44 "— Misérables"

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

T	O	R	T	E	R	A	D	A	R
A	L	O	H	A	O	H	A	R	A
T	I	M	E	S	C	A	N	I	T
A	V	A	N	T	I	U	S	E	
M	E	N	E	N	R	O	B	E	D
I	R	S	R	E	O	P	E	N	
B	R	I	G	I	T	C	A	W	
W	R	A	N	G	L	E	O	R	R
R	U	N	E	N	D	U	R	E	
A	N	G	E	L	E	A	S	E	S
P	E	E	V	E	G	R	I	S	T
S	I	R	E	D	G	E	N	T	S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT