

India: The seeds of authoritarianism

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Any perceptive analyst of democracy will testify that there is no necessary relationship between democracy and a corruption-proof regime, or development, or political stability. If we were to evaluate democracy from the vantage point of the desired ends we expect it to realise, it would fare rather poorly when compared to authoritarian governments, say the one institutionalised in Singapore by its former prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Yew transformed Singapore from a malaria-infested swamp to an economic powerhouse, and a major centre of finance. The island-state has one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, possesses a world-class educational and health system, and boasts of an incorruptible public service.

But the regime ruthlessly controls the press, does not permit freedom of expression, and stamps out dissidence — and, often, dissidents. It might have controlled corruption, achieved material well-being, and become one of the financial power centres of the world; but Singapore does not respect the two prime fundamentals of democracy as India does: popular sovereignty and the equal moral status of citizens.

This is not to celebrate India's democracy, which is deeply flawed in many crucial respects. It is to point out that the proposed solutions for a corruption-free India that are currently on offer might not be democratic at all. I am by no means downplaying the achievements of the struggle against corruption. Anna Hazare is significant because his fast unto death catalysed the exasperation and the anger of Indian citizens against a system which has trapped all of us in its ugly and greedy clutches. The sight of hundreds of people holding candles in their hand was moving because it transmitted two powerful messages.

One, the political elite is but the representative of the people, and the people are entitled to demand accountability of these representatives for all acts of omission and commission. Two, all those hundreds of crores that pass from hand to hand; from ministers, to industrial houses, to lobbyists, to shady firms, and to individuals, are public money. People have a right to demand that the taxes that are extracted from them are spent for the public good and not for private gain.

So, when members of the political elite castigate the campaign against corruption as blackmail, it occasions a blink. Hello guys, this is what civil society is about. In 1790, the eminent Irish orator, wit, legal luminary, and member of the British parliament, John Curran (1750-1817) had suggested that "the condition on which god hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance." This is the historical mandate of civil society. In democratic states, civil society is expected to keep watch on violations of democratic norms by the state, through citizen activism, the making and circulation of informed public opinion, a free media, a multiplicity of social associations and sundry means of protest.

Yet a word of caution might be in order here. Confronted with the intractable problems that the messy but occasionally creative world of democracy brings with it, some civil society organisations prefer to substitute democracy with administration. Establish a Jan Lokpal, endow it with colossal power, bestow on it the status of a Leviathan, and all our problems will be solved. Sorry, this is not democratic.

If democracy on the one hand is about popular sovereignty, freedom and equality, it is also about

procedures and principles. One of these principles is the separation of powers. It is of the utmost importance that power should not be concentrated in one institution, and that democratic decisions should be subject to review not only by citizens, but also by other state institutions to ensure conformity with the Constitution. Democracy is the only form of government that is capable of self-correction; this should not be compromised for any reason whatsoever.

Certainly corruption is a major issue and needs to be fought, but according to procedures and norms, and in keeping with the mandate of the Constitution. The country is not Ralegan Siddhi, where alcoholics are flogged to make them give up their ways. India is democratic, and in a democracy even guilty people have rights. Anna Hazare may have earned the status of a big brother, but no democrat can allow him to turn this Lokpal into another big brother right out of the pages of George Orwell's projected nightmare.

More worrying are the political beliefs held by this gentleman. He wants corrupt people to be put to death! In a civilised society, surely, the very idea of capital punishment is anathema. What gives cause for even more anxiety is the extraordinarily low opinion that this Gandhian has of the very people who had rallied around him during his fast. "Ordinary voter [sic] does not have awareness", he is reported to have said in a meeting with the press. "They cast their vote under the influence of Rs 100 or a bottle of liquor or a sari offered by candidates. They do not understand the value of their vote."

This is an astonishing statement. Does not contempt for the ordinary Indian citizen defy the very rationale of democracy, and that of its major claim to legitimacy, that of equal moral status? Moreover, Anna Hazare should pay more attention to the history of elections. Does he really not remember how arbitrary and non-performing governments have been voted out of power in national and state elections?

More significantly this "voting out" has been carried out by the very ordinary Indian who he betrays such disdain for. Despite all its flaws, political democracy in the country has enabled large numbers of poor and marginal people to understand the power of the franchise, enter the public arena of politics, and to some degree influence the political discourse, and the fate of governments.

To wrap up the argument, it is time the holders of state power understand that mobilisation in civil society against or for policies, is an integral part of democratic politics, particularly when our representatives have betrayed us time and again. The state enacts, implements and adjudicates policies in our name, and governs in our name. We, therefore, have the right to ask why we should accept unjust and arbitrary policies, and above all, corruption.

But this does not mean that we uncritically accept civil society initiatives as wholly good and entirely democratic. Civil society is a plural space, and some organisations can carry within them the seeds of authoritarianism, and of an inexorable "will to power". These initiatives should also be subjected to public scrutiny and engaged with. Eternal vigilance is, after all, the price we willingly pay for democracy.

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P.S.

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