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Is Liberal Autocracy the optimum form of governance for Lesser Developed Countries? Andre Lim, Joshua Tjahjadi August 2011 1743 Words Hypothesis: Liberal autocracy is the optimal system of governance for lesser-developed countries (LDCs) Democracy at home, and abroad: In this essay, the authors aim to compare the systems of governance in Indonesia and Singapore, as well as how their differences have led to varied repercussions in both countries; those (repercussions) that will be closely examined here are the growth/development of stable governmental institutions, as well as the just rule of law.

These are relatively newly-decolonized states existing side by side, in recent years taking different paths of governance. This resulted in wildly different outcomes. What was it about their different political paths that caused the difference? Is the fault with the democratic process, or with their implementation? Is there a certain developmental threshold within which democracy is just doomed to failure? Many of these questions traverse along peripheries of political doctrine and liberal ethics. Certainly, democracy is an unpredictable, and often messy process.

Only by answering hard questions like these can it be better understood, and refined. This is what the authors hope to achieve. To start off, however several key terms first have to be defined. Liberal autocracy refers to a non-democratically elected government founded on the principles of liberalism, that is a fundamental belief in the importance of liberty and basic fundamental rights. Notably successful examples include Singapore, and in the past Hong Kong, Taiwan as well as Japan. Lesser developed countries are nations exhibiting low levels of socio-economic development.

Criterion include- low economic development (GNP of less than 905 USD, per capita) as well as human resource weakness (indicators include Adult literacy, nutrition and education). Liberty vs. Democracy- Rise of illiberal democracies? As Fareed Zakaria once brilliantly put it, ' there today exists two strands of liberal democracy, both inextricably interwoven into Western political fabric- liberty and democracy. ' The former is floundering even though the latter is flourishing. What is the significance of this co-relation?

Democracy at its purest essentially means the rule of the people, whatever it may entail. Liberty recognizes that every man is born with certain unalienable rights- rights to religion, to life, to own property and be free from unfair prosecution. These are rights that cannot be infringed upon. Thus the crux behind constitutional liberty is the construction of institutions such as an independent Judiciary and Treasury to safeguard these rights. Only with a firmly-established Constitutional Liberty can democracy become a force for good.

People frequently understand these concepts in reverse. Without the restrictive tenets of a strong Constitutional Liberty, the democratic process will end up manipulated and reinforcing corrupted/tyrannical/incompetent governance, elevating mediocrity and triggering stagnation. This is made apparent with Indonesia's example. Without the checks and balances provided by libertarian governance, elections more often than not grant victory to illiberal forces. Contrast with Singapore's single-party rule that gave rise to political stability and little corruption.

A lack of liberty turn erodes the egalitarian and majoritarian principles casted by founders of modern constitutional-democracy doctrine- Madison, <https://assignbuster.com/is-liberal-autocracy-the-optimum-form-of-governance-for-lesser-developed-countries/>

Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu. After all, the democratic system obviously has many admirable qualities. It allows a peaceful transfer of power, and renders tyrannical rule impossible. In both Singapore and Indonesia, this conundrum has been made apparent, time and again. 1960s to 2000: Emerging from the upheavals of 1960s, both the LKY and Suharto regime placed utmost emphasis on stability and order.

Thus a common tactic was to stifle political opposition; co-opting whoever they could, and prosecuting the rest. For instance, in the 1980s a group of Indonesian intelligentsia composed of former military men, public intellectuals and officials signed the Petition of 50 (Petisi 50), criticizing the regime's authoritarian tactics and following a 1984 accusation that Suharto was building a one-party state, the group was cracked down upon and many of its leaders were jailed. In Singapore, many prominent opposition leaders such as Chee Soon Juan and Joshua Jeyaretnam were prosecuted and jailed for their political activities.

In both nations, the government also played a major role in different sectors of society; be it religion, social or economic. The results were astounding. Between 1960 and 1990, GDP/capita increased four-fold. After the debacle made by the Sukarno regime of economic affairs, Indonesia slowly regained trust of investors, and foreign markets. Hyper inflation was brought under control, and as slew of measures were implemented to make Indonesia competitive again. By early 1980s Indonesia had achieved self-sufficiency of rice production, as well as basic education for all and successful family planning measures.

The Golden Age of Autocrats? In the 1960s-1980s, in midst of the Cold War, amidst the geopolitical turmoil engulfing South Asia then, strong leaders were required maintain unity, as well as stability. In a sense, the turbulence of those years gave legitimacy for autocratic rule. In developing countries where the populace was mostly uneducated and politically illiterate/susceptible to radicalism, the strong hand of an Autocrat was required to provide the stability vital to building the economy, creating strong institutions, pushing forth important reforms. These would in the future be key to building a working Democracy.

If there was one thing men like Mahatir, Marcos, Chiang, Lee and Suharto agreed on, it was that in an LDC, the strong, unwavering hand of autocratic rule was necessary to temper populism and keep check radicalism. 2000 onwards: Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, Indonesia evolved into a full-fledged democracy. However, democracy has brought about a whole slew of problems. For instance, the judiciary's impartiality and reliability have often been questioned. In June 2011, a judge was caught receiving bribes from a lawyer that amounted to Rp250 million in various currencies.

In addition to this, the country also faces problems such as crumbling infrastructure, falling tax revenues, environmental degradation, corruption as well as religious tensions. Singapore on the other hand has been powering forward, be it in terms of education levels, or the economy. Its political elite, un-encumbered by electoral demands is able to make long-term decisions that otherwise would have been rendered impossible in a full-fledged democracy. For example, Singapore fiscally is exceptionally disciplined.

Its population exists on little subsidies, and through measures like the CPF, whereby people pay for their own compulsory healthcare insurance, it has large surpluses and little deficit. This allows the MAS and GIC to invest in new technologies and facilities vital to Singapore's long-term growth, such as the Petrochemical facilities on Jurong- Island, or Biopolis biomedical facilities. Contrast this to Indonesia, whereby the electorate is unwilling to give up on fuel and food subsidies they once enjoyed during the boom years, but are nowadays unsustainable and detrimental to Indonesia's economic growth.

What constitutes good Libertarian Governance? Having looked at the preceding case studies, several correlations can be made between democracy, governance and progress. Firstly, it is that democracy can only become a force for progress and stability were it to come hand in hand with strong governance. When left to itself, democracy by no means lead to consensus and effective decision making. Instead, it will end up getting manipulated and corrupted by infighting, vested interests and corruption. Take the Indonesian Parliament. It is an archetypal example of the democratic process getting hijacked by corruption and ideology.

Given that Indonesia lacks strong governmental institutions and mature civil society, the democratic process frequently ends up as a medium for parties in power to battle out their vested interests and for racial, ethnic groups to push forward their own agendas. Some may ask, what is the value of strong institutions? The crux behind Constitutional Democracy lies in checks and balances. No single party should have all the power, instead; power and the decision making process should be diffused among the different branches of government.

This way, it would render cronyism, patronage politics and in general bad governance less likely. Were this accomplished, decision making rests not so much on who is in power; but rather the institutions that formulate and implement them. Thus the underlying problem with immature democracies like Indonesia. Without a civil society and strong institutions to balance out the powers of the executive, there is nothing preventing irresponsible governance on the part of those who seek to use democratic institutions to push forward their undemocratic agendas.

For instance, with the presence of a strong judiciary and treasury to formulate and implement a just tax code, it would be impossible for Indonesian conglomerates and their cronies in Parliament to push for tax breaks and other concessions. This is inherently undemocratic. What Democracy thenceforth would end up doing is aggravating conflicts and instability, as can be seen in places like Lebanon and Iraq, whereby the advent of democratic elections have given rise to an ethnically, politically polarized electorate. Secondly, a certain amount of economic growth has to be achieved before a stable democracy can be established.

There exist several reasons for this. On one hand, a government capable of producing sustained economic growth is more likely to be stable and effective, possessing the strong institutions required for this. Their presence increases the chances of a Liberal Democratic regime surviving. Economic prosperity also means that a society is more stable, with an educated, empowered population likely to hold government account to their actions. Paradoxically, as inherently undemocratic the PAP regime may seem today,

Singapore 45 years after independence is closer to becoming a successful Liberal democracy than ever before.

Having a motivated, uncorrupt elite in more or less total control of public policy means that Singapore had been able to enjoy decades of sustained economic, political and social growth. This has created stability, as well as strong institutions and a flourishing civil society. With its vast ruling majority, the PAP regime has also been able to build legislative and judicial institutions that counterweigh the power of the ruling body, since it has no need to cope with frequently detrimental populist sentiments or political infighting.

The legislative body can then focus solely on advancing national interests. Therein lies the crux behind effective governance. Conclusion: In conclusion, it can be surmised that establishing the pre-requisites required for a strong Democracy is a complicated process. Developing countries lack these pre-requisites, and trying to develop Liberal institutions in these countries under democratic circumstances is arduously tough. When this process fails, as it often does, the Democratic process loses its value as a force for stability.

Herein lies the value of a Liberal Autocracy; to build the foundations for a working democracy. Certainly, liberal autocratic rule has its disadvantages. With such a high concentration of power within the ruling government, things only work out if the government is able, uncorrupt and works to build the institutions required for future transition to democratic rule. This was the case in Singapore. In Indonesia, the establishment of growth, stability and Liberty came hand in hand with cronyism and patronage politics. This is undemocratic; a possible offshoot of autocratic rule.

Like America's founding fathers, Lee and Suharto were both elitists with a democratic cause; to improve the lot of as many people as possible. They had one consensus- Democracy has to be meticulously built, rigorously defended. Developing countries require autocracy first, were a strong democracy to be conceived. However, with the advent of internet and a new generation of young people eager for rights and freedoms, this formulae may not work in other developing countries today. After all, any system needs to be revised from time to time. No system last forever.

This thus, is the dilemma developing countries face today. They face the problem of consolidation, of making a democratic regime successful, because self-government is never easy. After all, democracy can be entrusted to any society, but not everyone can make it work. (1743 words)

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