

The Unnoticed Demise of Democracy

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ROME, Jul 24 2017 (IPS) – Politicians are so busy fighting for their jobs, they hardly seem to notice that they risk going out of business. Democracy is on the wane, yet the problem is nowhere in Parliaments. Common to all is a progressive loss of vision, of long term planning and solutions, with politics used just for power.

In English, there are two terms: politics, which is term for the machinery, and politics, that is the vision. In Latin languages, there is only one, politics, and that is now becoming the adequate term also for English-speaking countries, from May's UK to Trump's US.

In a few years, we have seen an astonishing flourishing of authoritarian governments. Turkey's Erdogan may be the best example. He was elected in 2002, and hailed as proof that you could be a Muslim and also a champion of democracy. At the end of the decade, he started to take a more fundamentalist and authoritarian approach, until in 2013 there was the famous crackdown on thousands of protesters, protecting a Park in Istanbul intended to be razed for a supermarket.

Since then, the tendency to use power has accelerated. In 2014, Erdogan was accused, along with his son, of corruption (three sons of cabinet ministers were also arrested). He blamed it on the Gulenist Movement, a spiritual movement led by an earlier ally, Fethullah Gulen, who now lives in the US. And when in 2016 some military factions attempted a coup against him, he used the coup as a reason to get rid of Gulenist and other dissidents. It has put 60,000 people in jail, and he has dismissed from public employment a staggering 100,000 people.

What is reminiscent of Stalin and Hitler's practices is how those 100,000 have been treated. They have been banned from private employment, and their passports as well the ones of their families have been revoked. When asked how they will survive, the government's reaction was to scoff that even eating roots would be "too good" for them.



President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

We're talking of hundreds of judges, tens of thousands of teachers, university professors, who have been dismissed without any hearing and without any formal imputation. Europe's reaction? Empty declarations, and since then Erdogan has become more authoritarian.

He has built a Presidential Palace of 1,150 rooms, larger than the White House and the Kremlin, where there is a three-room office dedicated to taste his food to avoid poisoning. The palace cost between 500 million euro (the government's declaration), and 1 billion dollars (opposition' estimates).

It could be said in Europe's defence that Turkey is not a member of the European Union, and his actions have made it extremely unlikely that membership in the EU is possible. But Poland and Hungary not only are members of the EU, but also the main beneficiaries of his economic support. Poland joined the EU in 2004, has received more than 100 billion dollars in various subsidies: double the Marshall Plan in current dollars, the largest transfer of money ever done in modern history.

Yet the government has embarked in a firm path to dismantle democratic institutions (the last, the judicial system), and even the sleepy EU has been obliged to warn that it could take away the right of Poland to vote, to the total indifference of the government. Yet nobody has formally proposed to cut the subsidies, which are now in the budget from 2014 to 2020 another 60 billion dollars - half of what the world spends for development aid for nearly 150 countries.

Hungary is run since 2010 by Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who campaigns for "an illiberal democracy", and, like Poland's PM Szydlo, has refused to accept any immigrants, in spite of EU subsidies. Hungary, despite its small population (less than 10 million, versus Poland's 38 million) is the third largest recipient of EU's subsidies, or 450 dollars per person.

One third of the world population lives on less than that. In addition, the European Investment Bank gives a net subsidy of 1 billion euro, and Hungary received 2.4 billion euro from the balance of Payment Assistance Program. The two countries have formed with Slovakia and Czechia, the Visegrad group, which is in a permanent campaign against the EU and its decisions. Needless to say, subsidies to Slovakia and Czechia largely surpass their contributions.

Are Erdogan, Orban, Szydlo and dictators? On the contrary, they are democratically elected, like Duterte in the Philippines, Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Maduro in Venezuela and other 30 authoritarian presidents in the world. But in Europe this is new. And it is also new to see an American President, Donald Trump, present an agenda of isolationism and international confrontation, who was also regularly elected.

A poll at the end of his first semester revealed that his voters would re-elect him again, with the Republican support going down only from 98% to 96%. Nationwide, his popularity has declined to 36%. If elections were held today, he would likely get a second term.

Which brings us to wonder why we still consider elections equivalent to democracy? Because this is how the people can express themselves. But people certainly do not like corruption, which in polls anywhere is considered the most prominent problem of modern governments.

However, unless it reaches a totally systematic level, like in Brazil, a studies don't show a

strong correlation between corruption and electoral punishment. Corruption, in politics, has been used by populists, who has promised to get rid of it to the electorate: exactly what Trump did in his campaign, while now his conflict of interest and lack of transparency with his private interests have no precedent in the White House.

That bring us to the next question. If ideologies are gone, and politics have become mainly a question of administrative efficiency and personalities, what is the link between a candidate and his voters, and whose support persists despite everything, like those who voted for Erdogan, Trump, Orban and Szydlo?

Perhaps it is time that we start to look to politics with a new approach. What did we learn from the last few years' elections?

That people are aligning themselves under a new paradigm, which is not political in the sense we have used until now: it is called IDENTITY. Voters now elect those with whom they identify, and support them because in fact they defend their identity, no matter what. They do not listen to contradictory information, which they dismiss as "fake news." Let us see on what this identity issue is based: the new four divides.

There is first a new divide: cities against rural areas, small towns, villages, hamlets. In Brexit, people in urban areas voted to stay in Europe. The same goes for those who voted against Erdogan, who is unpopular in Istanbul, but very popular in the rural areas. In the US, those who vote d for Trump were largely from the poor states. The same has happened with Orban and Szydlo. None would be in power if the vote was restricted to the capital and the major towns.

There is a second new divide: young and older voters. Brexit would not have happened if all young people cared to vote. Same with Erdogan, Trump, Orban and Szydlo. The problem is that young people have in serious percentages stopped to be active in politics because they feel left out, and look to parties as self-maintaining machines, ridden with corruption and inefficiency.

Of course, this plays in favour of those who are already in the system, which perpetuates itself, without the generational lift for change. Italy found 20 billion dollars to save four small banks while the total subsidies for young people are 2 billion euro. No wonder they feel left out.

There is the third divide, which is also new, ideologies of the past were basically more inclusive, even if of course the class system played a significant role. The third divide is between those who have finished at least high school, and those who did not. This is going to increase dramatically in the next two decades, when the robotization of industry and services will reach at least 40% of the production.



Tens of millions of people will be left out, and they will be those with less education, unable to fit in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Elites look with disdain at the choices of electors who are considered ignorant and provincial, while the latter in turn consider the elite winners who reap whatever they can, and marginalize them.

Finally, there is a fourth divide, which is very important for the values of peace and cooperation as a basis for a world governance. It is the divide between those who see the return to nationalism as the solution to their problems (and therefore hate immigrants), and those who believe that their country, in an increasing competing world, can be better if it integrates in international or regional organizations.

Two extremely simplified examples: Europe and the US. There was a survey done by the EU among the nine million Erasmus, or the students who with a scholarship from that exchange program went to make lives in other countries. They have had more than 100,000 children by marrying somebody met abroad: the real Europeans.

In the poll, they were at 92% asking for more Europe, not less Europe. And in the US, the classic Trump voters, as white (a demographic group in decline: at every election 2% less of white vote), who did not get beyond secondary education, who do not read newspapers or books, coming from the poorer states. People who lost their jobs, often after closure of factories or mines, strongly believe that they are victims of globalization, which created social and economic injustice.

This is a consequence of the fact that during two decades, only macroeconomic indexes have been used, like the GNP. Social indicators were largely shunned. How the growth that GNP indicated was divided was not a concern for the IMF, World Bank, the EU and most politicians, who blindly believed that market was the only engine for growth and would solve social problems: only now have they tried to brakes on, too late. The world has seen an unprecedented explosion of inequality, which is helping nationalism and xenophobia to become a central part of the political debate.

Nationalism is not confined to Trump, Erdogan, Orban and Szydlo, and to Brexit. China, India, Japan, the Philippines, Israel, Egypt, Russia, and other countries are now run by nationalist and authoritarian governments. This bring us to a very simple conclusion. Either the transition to an unknown new political system, that will certainly replace the present unsustainable system, will be based on the values of social justice, cooperation and peace (probably updating the present international organizations), or it is difficult to see how we will avoid conflicts, wars and bloodshed.

Why the man is the only animal who does not learn from previous experience?

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