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Democracy in Crisis: It's the next disruption

By Han Fook Kwang

SYNOPSIS

The established democracies like Britain, France and the US are facing unprecedented challenges, with their political leadership unable to manage the deep divisions among their peoples. These societies are undergoing fundamental changes caused by the digital revolution. Just as many traditional businesses have been upended as a result, so too will politics be disrupted. New norms and institutions will emerge in a difficult and divisive transition.

COMMENTARY

THE DEMOCRATIC world appears to be facing a crisis of some sort. Leading democracies are unable to manage the deep divisions in their societies that have been exacerbated by the very process that defined their democratic status: the act of deciding who to vote for as their leaders, and on important national issues.

British Prime Minister Theresa May suffered what has been called the greatest defeat in Parliament in modern history when her Brexit proposal was overwhelmingly voted down. Never had a sitting administration been so humiliated by its own backbenchers who snubbed their party, along with the main opposition Labour Party. Commentators say these developments signal a tectonic shift in British politics with power shifting from the PM to members of parliament.

Divided societies, angrier electorate

Power to the people's representatives?

Democrats may cheer but Britain is now a deeply divided country with no leader able to bridge the divide. According to a poll done by Edelman Trust Barometer, almost 70

per cent of Britons say their fellow citizens had become “angrier about politics and society” since the 2016 Brexit vote. Forty percent said they are now more likely to take part in violent protests and 61 per cent said their views were not being represented in the political system.

In America, the government was shut down for five weeks, the longest ever, over President Trump’s demand for a wall on its southern border. No one appears to want to give in – not President Donald Trump, nor the now Democratic-controlled Congress. The results of the recent mid-term elections in November show the divide to have deepened even more, with Republican candidates doing well in rural areas, in the South and among the working class voters without higher education.

Democrats did better in the cities, among minorities and the highly educated. The divide in the US appears to be not along race or class lines but identity. In France, President Emmanuel Macron faced his most severe political test when thousands of ordinary people wearing yellow vests took to the streets, burning cars and destroying property in Paris and other cities.

What is remarkable is that the so-called yellow vest movement, has no clear leader, no organisational structure or plan. It appeared to have erupted spontaneously among people who shared the same grievances, especially of political leaders who seemed out of touch with the ground and did not care about their problems.

Elsewhere, the stories are similar. Brazil’s recent presidential election was said to be the most divisive in the country’s history. Newly elected President Jair Bolsonaro faces a daunting challenge healing the sharp polarization that has emerged from an ugly and bruising campaign. Power to the people? If democracy is about the will of the people, is this its finest hour?

Have the conditions for democracy to succeed changed?

Yet, there is a growing sense of crisis in these countries over the gulf between the people and the leadership, and among citizens.

Why has this happened?

There are many reasons in each of these countries, each shaped by its own political history and circumstances. But no one can fail to note that the very democratic act of voting leaders has led to a worsening of these divides.

The electoral process, it would appear is part of the problem. It used to be said that newly formed societies especially those emerging from colonial rule and suddenly embracing democratic ideals of one man one vote were ill-suited to their new political circumstances. The argument was that it was easy to introduce the outward forms of democracy such as the ballot box but harder to develop the other conditions necessary for democracy to succeed.

These include the rule of law, the separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary, a free press, and, most important, the cultural values of a people who respect the rights of all as equal before the law. Without these, newly democratic countries are

likely to succumb to mob rule by the majority, or to corrupt leaders who abuse the democratic process for their own interests, as has happened in many countries.

It was argued that the mature democracies had taken decades to develop these cultural traits and institutions, and that was the reason they succeeded. There are pre-conditions necessary for democracy to take root. But what if the conditions change in these mature democracies? What if they are now undergoing a revolutionary transformation which alters the existing conditions? Has there been such a revolution?

The politics of disruption

The answer is blindingly obvious: the digital revolution which has changed the way people live, work and play. It has disrupted many businesses, in particular the information industry, removing traditional gatekeepers and changing the way news is created, disseminated and received.

Governments have struggled to cope with the relentlessness of the 24/7 news cycle, and the instantaneousness of social media. It has had a dramatic impact in the way modern election campaigns are run, especially in the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

The issues related to these platforms are now well known: the widespread use of fake news and fake accounts, hate speeches and smear campaigns to influence the way people vote. But the transformative changes brought about by the digital revolution go beyond the media and electoral campaigns.

Profound societal changes are taking place. Scholars such as Manuel Castells, a Spanish social scientist, have done much work on how these changes affect how societies are organized in a fundamental way. Traditional hierarchies are being replaced by networks with multiple connections.

People now behave more autonomously, shaped by a greater sense of the individual in a me-centred world. They feel empowered because of the greater freedom to obtain information, and more secure from being able to identify with like-minded people on the Internet, and believe they have greater power to influence others.

The research has shown that these are largely positive developments especially for lower income workers and women and that the Internet has increased their social space, not made them more isolated.

These are deep changes and it would have been astonishing if they did not have a significant impact on politics, especially in the established democracies where people have greater access to the new technology and are freer to act accordingly.

The explosion of individual and autonomous power combined with the network effect of the digital world makes it much more difficult to reach consensus on who to choose as leaders and how to agree on national issues.

At the same time, established institutions which were the necessary pre-conditions for

democracy to flourish such as a free press are themselves facing revolutionary change and uncertain about their future viability.

On the other hand, political systems are slow to respond to these changes because of the vested interest of those in it. Political leaders schooled in the old pre-digital days struggle to keep up with the pace of change. Hence it will likely be a long and disruptive transition, not unlike that happening in the business world. Over time, new norms and institutions might emerge to deal with the new world. In the meantime, expect more divisiveness and turmoil.

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