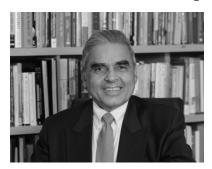
Democracy and the Virus: A Series of Reflections

The Athens Democracy Forum has asked some of our speakers for their thoughts on how the current crisis is impacting democracy, and the lessons to be learned. We will be posting their responses to a series of questions on a rolling basis in coming weeks.

Where the West Went Wrong



By Kishore Mahbubani

ADF: How are the various government responses to the coronavirus impacting democracy in the short and long-term?

KM: Warren Buffett once famously said that it is when the tide runs out that you discover who is swimming naked. The huge shock generated by coronavirus has clearly exposed which democracies are prepared for the future and which are not.

Sadly, most Western democracies are not. Instead of saving money for their grandchildren, the societies of grandparents today are spending the money from future generations. To finance a lifestyle of greater expenditure than income, Western societies are incurring budget deficits, financed through loans. Future generations, some unborn, will have to bear the burden of paying off their loans. Several economists have long warned of the dangers of this. For example, Pete Peterson, the investment banker and former U.S. secretary of commerce, presciently warned in 1982 that overspending was "a high-risk gamble on economic progress and population growth—a bet by today's workers that their children and grandchildren will be rich and numerous enough to foot the bill for another round of generous retirement benefits. Should this hope go even mildly awry, today's workers will retire into a Social Security system running deficits larger than the total benefits it pays out today."

If the dangers of overspending are so clear, why aren't politicians doing something about it? The best answer was given by a European politician, Jean-Claude Juncker, who served as president of the European Commission from 2014 to 2019. He famously said, "We all know what to do, but we don't know how to get re-elected once we have done it." Witness what happened to President Emmanuel Macron of France when he tried a few reforms to cut long-term spending.

The solution to the core problem in modern democracies can be summarized in one word: "sacrifice." To create a balance between income and expenditures, the current generations will have to make some "sacrifices" to help future generations. Similarly, the rich will have to make "sacrifices" to help the poor.

So far, no modern Western democracy has produced a great leader who speaks of "sacrifice." Only when such a leader emerges, will we see a real turnaround in the long-term prospects for Western democracies. Coronavirus provides Western politicians an opportunity to speak more honestly to their people. This opportunity should not be wasted.

Is there a place for deliberative democracy in times of crisis, or is it simply too much of a luxury?

Deliberative democracy is not a luxury. It is essential. It is particularly essential during a crisis like the current one. However, when a boat is in the middle of a big storm, especially a storm that could lead to the boat capsizing, it is vital for all passengers and crew on the boat to be brutally honest about the structural weaknesses and strengths of the boat.

Many Western democracies clearly face some structural weaknesses. The coronavirus crisis has exposed, for example, how ill-prepared the bottom 50 percent of their societies are for any storm. Take the U.S. as an example. It is the only modern developed society where the average income of the bottom 50 percent has gone down over a 30-year period. Two Princeton economists, Anne Case and Angus Deaton, have documented how this has created a "sea of despair" among the working classes.

How did this happen? In my book "Has China Won?," I explain that this is a result of the betrayal of some key principles of America's founding fathers. They believed, as did many great Western philosophers, that a democracy should rest on two pillars: freedom and equality. American democracy has come to rest on only one pillar: freedom. This creates a structural weakness. By not paying attention to equality, America has left its bottom 50 percent weak and vulnerable.

The greatest American political philosopher of recent times was John Rawls. He formulated a key principle of social justice, that "the higher expectations of those better situated are just if and only if they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectation of the least advantaged members of society." This principle has been completely ignored. The results are tragic.

As I state in my book, "Under the surface guise of a functioning democracy, with all the rituals of voting, America has become a society run by a moneyed aristocracy that uses its money to make major political and social decisions." In short, America has become a functioning plutocracy.

A plutocracy is not a viable boat to sail in during a storm. To fix this problem, this is the time to have a brutally honest discussion on how this has come about.

Kishore Mahbubani is a former president of the U.N. Security Council, and currently a distinguished fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.