Politics and Power

Things that may interest you

- The number of democracies has grown since 1990 but voter turnout has declined, particularly in Europe – indicating shrinking perception of the extent to which democracy changes things.
- In 2015 4.1bn lived in democracies, 800m in managed democracies, 440m in oligarchies, 1.71bn in autocracies and 303m in transitional countries.
- Globally, 39% of people live in free countries (as defined by Freedom House), 24% in partially free and 37% in countries that are not free. Since a peak of freedoms in 2006, by 2017 113 countries declined in political rights and civil liberties and only 62 improved.
- USA, where some perceive gun-possession as a freedom, permits 20,000 small arms *per day* to be exported by an industry six times larger than is needed for home consumption.
- In 1900 there were 3.5 Europeans per African. In 2050 there will be 4 Africans per European.

In some respects, political power is the most backward area covered in this report, the subject most in need of upgrade and change, variously in *all* countries and political systems. In one sense, life goes on however much politicians, apparatchiks, dictators and monarchs try to control it and, in another, people at the political centre are crucial to the world's future.

This concerns people and their power. During the 2011 Arab revolutions it was said that *democracy isn't only about elections*, and another key notion concerned *losing our fear*. These notions pinpointed a big question: how to balance effective governance with popular participation. Every kind of system needs to embrace everyone unless we want a world where some thrive and others suffer, because the world is crowded, interdependent and networked, everything is affected by everything else and we live in a time of amplifying consequences.

This is an age of throngs. Occasionally people mass in the streets or online, swaying unpredictably between the wisdom of the majority and the madness of crowds. A kind of democratisation and dispersal of power is re-shaping political process, causing authoritarian regimes to become more responsive to their publics and democracies to become more confused by them. This unplanned devolution bypasses conventional party, class, local and sectoral loyalties, articulating emergent public instincts, hopes, issues or grievances more than coherent ideologies.

Distrust of authority and institutions has been growing for decades. Power is easier to acquire, harder to wield and faster to lose. But public clamours can risk hijack by populists, being tainted by bad information, grumbling prejudice or resurgent historic antipathies, yet they also have an element of what Mahatma Gandhi called *satyagraha*, truth-force. For example, while anti-immigrant sentiments reflect legitimate migrant assimilation issues, they also express people's sense of loss of control of their lives and their nations while the problem arises arguably from other causes, such as the surreptitious capture of government by business interests.

Power once reserved for governments has been accrued by corporations, NGOs and billionaires. With privatisation of public services, data control and even of war, boundaries between government and business are ever more blurred, with obfuscated accountability and transparency, making systems change a very

tangled process. Power is also eroded by hackers, protesters, leaks, 'the court of public opinion', systemic glitches, together with leaders' own errors, dishonesties and hidden agendas. Such political disarray is problematic inasmuch as social solidarity, shared social goals and good governance are much needed today.

Flaws in all kinds of political systems have accumulated over many years. To gain power, leaders have to be hardened and sociopathic to withstand the trials of getting there. Even so, electoral democracy, arguably 'the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried' (Churchill), does answer three key needs: for the public to express an opinion when it has one, and for it to lend or withdraw support for leaders and replace them when necessary. Yet many democracies are tainted and trust in politicians and parties has declined, particularly in the oldest, original democracies. Governments are also easily arm-twisted by background elements with a capacity to influence the agenda, especially in foreign, military and economic policy.

Nowadays we can distinguish five main kinds of political system: *electoral democracies* (the largest is India); *managed democracies* (such as Turkey, Singapore and Russia) with a semblance of democracy, a token opposition, strong media control and some influence from public opinion; *oligarchic democracies*, also with a semblance of democracy and oligarchic dominance (such as Kenya, Brazil, Bangladesh or Venezuela); *dictatorship*, either with one ruling party possessing absolute power (as in North Korea, Belarus or Saudi Arabia) or with paternalistic power, attentive to public opinion and with one-party democracy at local level (as in China or Cuba); and *transitional systems*, moving from one state to another (such as Liberia, Hungary or Thailand).

Democracy has substantial problems: the gulf between governments and people's real lives has widened; public debate is as much poisoned and manipulated as it is informed by the media, internet and their moguls' agendas; lobbyists are too close to

government, influence can subtly be bought or inveigled, and constitutional quirks can lead to skewed outcomes – a range of issues have eroded democratic legitimacy. The public can also be under-informed, irrational, narrow, tribal, reactive and short-termist, which doesn't help. Democracy, a polity of winners and losers, thrives on disagreement, failing to establish inclusive, pluralistic consensus.

Dictators and authoritarians have their value during times of uncertainty when democracies are hamstrung by deadlock. But their success depends on getting things right – if they don't, or if they outstay their relevance, or they favour their supporters to the detriment of the majority, or they treat people cruelly, they cannot easily be removed, and when, eventually, despots lose the plot, grow old or die, there are serious succession problems. In addition the boundary between democracy and authoritarianism has become blurred, with illiberal regimes rising to power democratically, stacking the constitution and then extending their terms of office to institute deceptive forms of dictatorship.

This whole question concerns *legitimacy*, not easy to define since it involves subjective, fluctuating public perceptions. Some dictatorships gain legitimacy if they deliver effective governance while some democratic governments lose it when they lapse, finding themselves 'in office but not in power'. But while critical public attention often focuses on people at the top, poor leadership ultimately arises from deficient vigilance, pressure and guidance from the public. Projection on leaders, whatever their faults, evades the public's acknowledgement of its own responsibility.

Illegitimate rulers can gain ground when the public looks the other way, deludes itself, closes its eyes or is confused – and thus, by omission, the public permits leaders to gain undue power to pursue their own agendas. While there is truth in the saying that people get the leaders they deserve, it is also true that tyrants often exceed what people deserve as a political learning experience.

Nevertheless, tyrants exist because deficient public process provides gaps for them to walk into. Social power concerns the interaction between society and leaderships.

No system is perfect, and much depends on the motivation and integrity of politicians. Georges Pompidou, a French prime minister, said back in 1973, *"A statesman is a politician who places himself at the service of the nation. A politician is a statesman who places the nation at his service".* Unfortunately, no system has foolproof integrity filters. In the end, political systems depend for their health on the intelligence, judgement and clear-headedness of ordinary people, and this is a critical issue in times to come. Inducements such jobs, growth and consumerism wear thinner as affluence grows, and public demands become less material, more sophisticated. Such 'self-expression values' prioritise environmental issues, stranger tolerance, pluralism, gender equality and democratic participation, in distinction to 'survival values' that emphasise security against threats, ethnocentrism, stranger danger and distrust.

Political change is needed, not so much in the type of system as in the way it operates. When in the 1980s Mikhail Gorbachev advocated *perestroika*, restructuring, and *glasnost*, transparency, perhaps prophetically he announced it for the whole world, not just for the USSR. There are no neat recipes to achieve such reform, especially since recent technological advances have created immense potential for social control and regime perpetuation, provoking a perennial question: *does the system serve the people or do the people serve the system?*

This matter will probably hit a crunch point over the introduction of artificial general intelligence (AGI), involving a potential ceding of power from people to machine intelligence – a new kind of *coup d'état* without human agency. It could mean the *de facto* end of democracy since AGI will, at least theoretically, make better choices than humans or it will persuade us to believe this is the

case. How will AGI be programmed, and according to whose priorities and values? How much will the rights and needs of ordinary people be subordinated to the priorities of billionaires, corporations or the deep state who will run AGI? The time-window for these questions lies between now and 2050. We are crucially unready to face them.

Oligarchies

Oligarchies hold a key influence within nations but they have a vital weakness: they extract wealth and power from society, focusing power at the top through capital accumulation, laws, media, restrictions and penalties. But a time-stamp applies: siphoning off wealth and power weakens the productive sectors of society, draining their resources and systemic health, and society gets weaker, structurally, socially and psychologically. Deterioration, degeneration and restiveness set in until a tipping point eventually comes where oligarchs themselves start to lose out.

But they are trapped. The system is rigged in their favour, so anything more than an appearance of reform undermines their position. Society slides into a downward spiral. New leaders might emerge to challenge the oligarchy, some honest, some radical and some exploitative, but outcomes depend on the political wisdom of the people who, by this time, might themselves be damaged, transfixed by populists, making rash decisions, getting confused or turning violent. People do in some cases experience political clarity, as in some of the recent 'colour' and Arab revolutions, though they then might lack mechanisms to translate their ideas and preferences into forming a new system.

Meanwhile, democratised, free societies forget why they implemented the reforms that made them so, drifting into taking their liberties for granted. New generations might lack the experience of hardship or repression, failing to appreciate the vigilance needed to maintain freedom. This has happened by slow

accretion in mature democracies, where subtle oligarchic power has grown pervasive and, after 2008, a popular reaction started growing.

The majority of people, decent as they might be, can nonetheless subscribe to constructs that permit oligarchies to do things that they wouldn't themselves prefer. They wish to believe that the system they live in, whatever its faults, is good, right and inevitable, that things are normal and people at the top are trustworthy. Oligarchies thus stay in power through a matrix of incentives and sanctions that keep everyone in line. While they might not necessarily have outright malintent, they act with a self-interest that ultimately is destructive. Ordinary people – collaborators or victims – turn a blind eye to seeing their own role in maintaining this tango of power. Regrettable things develop from there. The 18th Century thinker Edmund Burke once said, "*For the triumph of evil it is necessary only that good people do nothing*".

A substantial political correction is needed, and this will be painful since it concerns examining the motivations of both leaderships and the people. The price of avoidance will likely lead to eventual crisis. Oligarchic power, with its control of media, government, law and the economy, and playing a key role in maintaining the conditions leading us toward crisis, needs transformation through mass unsubscription from its key tenets.

The public needs to connect the dots, shifting attention from single issues, gripes and grievances to an all-round, global-scale, ethical, courageous change of perspective and priority – *losing our fear*. A thriving system needs social mobility, a sense of public service, divested interest, philanthropy, justice and equity, care for the weak and vulnerable and a full, longterm approach to optimising civilisation and conserving the world's resources. The landscape is shifting to one where the resilience of the whole system is at stake, and it is in everyone's interest to look at our socio-economic systems in the round.

Pulling strings

If you want to influence things, do it through money. The biggest players have a critical influence in the way the economy works and, according to Oxfam, 82% of added wealth generated globally in 2017 went to the richest 1% of the world's population. The same year saw the largest ever increase in dollar billionaires, rising to over 2,000 in number, whose wealth grew by $762bn that year (that's one-third of UK's total annual GDP).

But it is corporations that hold most of the world's wealth. They are controlled by small numbers of people, many of whom serve in strings of companies. *New Scientist* has reported that researchers in Zürich identified a network of 1,318 companies globally, each connected to at least 20 other companies, which together generated 20% of all global corporate revenues in 2007. They control a further 60% through indirect shareholdings. Tracking back through these shareholdings, these 1,318 companies were found to be controlled by just 147 companies, many of them financial institutions (Barclays Bank, JP Morgan Chase, Goldman Sachs, etc). Key people in these companies amount to one thousand or less people, in total.

The world economy is thus controlled by a small number of companies, themselves controlled by a small caucus of interlinked people – many of them associates, friends and relatives. This isn't exactly a conspiracy to control the world, as some would claim, but it does look and operate like it – it is more an ecosystem of big players with shared interests, and it is certainly not a free, meritocratic playing field. It is a loose, concealed cartel with a variety of subgroups within it, tugging in different directions though sharing key aims: to maximise profits and influence and to do whatever is needed to maintain that position. This can include manipulating markets and governments and even engaging contractors to fight wars for them. Some are dynasties and others rise and fall over time but their main interests are congruent and

they can coordinate and collaborate easily and quickly. A few phone calls and a meeting can fix things.

Indeed there are conspiracies and organisations pursuing certain goals, and sometimes they take hold of events to yank things their way, but they usually have specific aims, such as to promote American interests, influence governments or key nodes in the system, or promote offshore, intel or military interests. They can jog things with varying degrees of success, but this constitutes influencing, not controlling, the world, and it is not infallible and all-knowing. This is like an interactive ecosystem since the rich and powerful sit in different schools of thought. Some are American, some Chinese, some Arabic, some transnational. Some are old money and some are upstart tech billionaires. Some are shady, some upstanding. They have a variety of beliefs and attitudes. Sometimes there are rivalries and frictions, even standoffs or wars. But as a group they tend to behave largely in concert, avoiding rocking the boat, whether or not they discuss matters.

This is, to an extent, human life. But this is a very powerful grouping. Their capacity to capture wealth and resources, pull strings and promote ideas is significant. Their capacity to stay out of the limelight is extensive, especially since they control most of the media. Working through the offshore sector, they can influence nations, use private military and intelligence contractors and hosts of agencies, companies and trusts, run by squadrons of people who don't think hard about who and what they're working for – they just do their job and collect their payoffs.

The significance of this for the future is that the core of the world system is unaccountable and opaque, and this is not necessarily the best for humanity. They have built a system that is taking the world to a crisis point. They can block change and, equally, bring about change, yet their influence is not as total, effective, advanced or all-encompassing as many conspiracy theorists might believe.

They make mistakes and miscalculations. Sometimes events, or the public, or mavericks, catch them by surprise. Their systems can be clunky and their disagreements harmful. Sometimes they don't get their way, or their kids or wives don't play the game or, like the rest of us, they get ill or die. But without them, the war in Syria would have been shorter, the arms and oil industries would be smaller, the financialised, offshore economy would not exist, the profit-pumping neoliberal agenda of recent decades would not have prevailed and we would live in quite different times. Many things would have happened differently.

Three key issues stand out for the future. First, the technology and AI rush implies social control potentials that humanity badly needs to understand. Second, economic transformation to build sustainability into our societies cannot happen unless the high-growth, high-profit, corporate system either changes or is somehow levelled downwards. Third, this interest group has moulded world society around the economic system when the priority for the future is to mould the economic system around society and the environment. And a key question is: *who decides?*

Next, we must look at two major, historic shifts that indirectly affect politics and power in society.

Gender politics

An historic gender rebalancing is taking place. Longterm, it has big implications for social power, values and standards. Starting in the West around 1900 and escalating in the 1960s-70s (Feminism 1.0), it has since then been spreading, partly by diffusion and partly because women worldwide independently form conclusions of their own. This second wave, Feminism 2.0, emerging in the developing world, concerns family and community change, socially-inclusive, justice-oriented values and, not least, the basics of human life such as poverty, access to healthcare and education or women's right to act autonomously. Feminism 2.0 has repercussions for peace in the

Middle East, appropriate development in Asia and Africa, social change in India, social healing in Latin America and, globally, for religion, ecosystems, community care, conflict and the way society works.

This shift is occurring not solely amongst women. As generations change, men cleave roughly two ways, between those whose values are changing and those who seek to reinforce gender stereotypes and fear loss of status. Men, oppressed too, have not seen their dominance succeed in the way it was supposed to – the evidence being visible in the ills of our world, in pollution, resource exhaustion, military destruction, social insensitivity, labour exploitation and other problematic discontents. This cleavage between men. transitional, is likely to resolve itself as older generations die off – after all, boys are the sons of mothers and, if they wish to be the partners of women and fathers to daughters who respect them, or if they wish to be happier inside themselves, then male change is inevitable.

This cultural shift goes deeper. It concerns a questioning of gender concepts. A new megatrend leaning toward gender flexibility is embodied in the LGBTQ movement. This is not simply a psychological form of gender-role loosening: advances in plastic surgery now permit gender-reassignment operations for those experiencing dysphoria, and it is happening not just in the West but also in countries such as Iran, Thailand, India, Colombia and Brazil. Even so, apart from surgical transitioning, new LGBTQ gender roles are emerging worldwide. Anathema to traditionalists, notably in the Arab, African and Indian worlds, and looked on even as evil and punishable, one counterbalancing factor is that, on average, gay and lesbian people tend to have higher behavioural integrity standards than average heterosexuals, generally practicing less crime, violence and corruption – and this cannot be ignored.

There is yet far to go. Sexual equality as a social dynamic is incrementally changing societies in an historic and trans-

generational manner. This will continue, though globally the balance has not yet tipped: it has advanced most in developed and post-communist countries, in cosmopolitan cities and amongst progressives. It involves change at all levels – social roles and relationships, traditions, psycho-emotional issues, economics, power, families, violence and in the nature of human cultures.

Meanwhile, historic male dynamics of violence, exploitation and insensitivity periodically lash back through terrorism, sexual abuse, domestic and intercommunal violence. But a new maleness is emerging that is far more consensual, empathic, sensitive and seeking to 'spend more time with the family'. While a competitive, patriarchal system still prevails, the global trend is moving toward greater gender equality. This fast-but-slow change goes hand in hand with other issues discussed in this report, such as justice, inequality, economic and ecological change, and penetrating all departments of life, and it cannot be separated from them.

Gender role transformation involves more than pay equality, glass ceilings, female executives, domestic and childcare duties, LGBTQ rights or social behaviours. It involves the very nature of civilisation, the way it sits on this planet, uses resources, augments natural capital, balances individualism with community, designs its architecture and cities, farms the land and integrates itself with nature and human nature. It concerns inclusion, care, nurturing, empathy, sensitivity, support and those very qualities that our faceless, competitive, exploitative, conflicted world system lacks – a world where politicians are supposed to be tough and executives must extract the maximum from the market. Deep cultural, social and psychological issues, both conscious and unconscious, exist for women and men, and it will take time. But the tide is turning, and issues around male violence, women's rights, family life, cramping gender-role traditions, female power in society, equal recognition and pay, are all stepping stones in this historic shift.

While at birth 50.4% of the population are males, by age 30 the balance tips and, of centenarians, around 75% are female. Thus the maturing of the world's population brings with it an incremental gain in feminine influence. Historic-scale gender rebalancing is a values, not just a numbers game, and while it isn't easy and it brings up deep historic pain, something unprecedented is going on. By the late 21st Century gender balances will be very different. Beneath the complex psycho-social megatrends of today there are signs of a nascent social reintegration, connected with the rebirth of feminine influence and the reconstitution of new kinds of families and tribes. At core lies one key issue: *social empathy*. Humanity needs to become more human, familial and friendly.

Technological change

Robotics and artificial intelligence could provoke a variety of social responses, some of them serious. "*It is possible for a majority to be left behind*" (Erik Brynjolfsson of MIT) – it is *that* serious. We could see two worlds bifurcating, separating the smaller number who benefit from and the larger number who are at the receiving end of technological change. In the developing world there is need for gainful employment, not wholesale automation, but automation will probably mean low wages in order to under-price automated systems – this cheap-labour issue profoundly affects women and people in less-developed countries. In richer countries a crisis looms as jobs are lost at *all* employment levels and the real economy declines in relation to the automated and financialised economies. Automation is not universally beneficial: it benefits investors and richer consumers, not those earning their living through wages and those living at the bottom of the world's social pile.

Even if universal allowances and new social possibilities develop to compensate for automation, at least in those countries that can afford it, implementation will take time, provoking potential social

resistance to change and proving trickier to carry out than today's upbeat billionaire tech-tycoons want it to be. It will require enormous financial transfers from automated wealth-generating sectors and regions to recipient social sectors and regions – a tax on automation to deal with its consequences. Business will still need consumers and stability, and people will still need decent living conditions and a feeling of progress. Without these, trouble is likely – disaffection and restiveness, growing mental health issues, loss of social cohesion and exaggeration of imbalances in wealth and power, bringing danger to the winners as much as to the losers. Anticipating this, some tech-billionaires are busily buying property on isolated islands and in New Zealand, even fantasising about colonising Mars – all very good, but unsustainable and a dereliction of duty.

Universal allowances pose a problem. Governments, agencies or companies will, in effect, hold monopoly control of millions of people's incomes and lives. Today, we can (theoretically) find another job, but with universal allowances everyone will have one income source with few other options. Therefore the adequacy and fairness of these allowances and the terms, conditions and control issues attached to them matter a lot. If a person refuses insertion of an implant, chooses to protest or fails to conform to requirements, allowances could be reduced or withdrawn as a penalty. The social control possibilities are thus enormous. Would these allowances be administered with respect for freedom and sociodiversity, or used as a way of controlling people?

Automation of dangerous, drudgerous and dirty jobs is largely welcome. But if robotics mean complete replacement of most people's work, consigning people to a life of hardship or rejection, forced leisure or virtual reality gaming, it will accrue enormous unintended consequences. People will need to create new kinds of work involving lifelong learning, creativity, social contribution and activities that business does not cover. This could bring substantial

benefits if done well and applied at a socially-acceptable pace, with a whole-systems approach. It could also be a disaster. The wider implications of automation are enormous, potentially pitting the system against humanity. Without getting this right, instability, unrest or social deterioration could occur. Automation and AI development might be slowed, simply because of the immense social complications involved.

Would the introduction of super-intelligent robotics be imposed or inveigled upon society? Would it be introduced with or without informed public support and consent? Automation has to be beneficial to society as a whole, not just to special interests. Without majority consent, social cohesion and disquiet could go critical.

Will the net direction of travel lead toward a disintegration or a reconstitution of society? If it moves toward reintegration, will the impetus arise from the bottom up or cascade down from above, through micromanaged systems using data-driven social engineering? The character of society is at stake, and, again, *who decides?* This question might not be answered by 2050, but it will be fermenting vigorously. At stake is a redefinition of the balance between social control and freedom.

On the edge

The world is on the threshold of enormous political changes, and where this will go is at present unknowable. There are many stored-up, overdue issues pending, with a reluctance to open them up for fear of being overwhelmed – but this makes potential overwhelm more likely. The danger is that multiple issues could erupt simultaneously, with too much happening at once.

Elsewhere in this report the inadequacy of nations was raised: many of them fail to reflect emergent social, political, economic and ecological needs. As societies modernise and grow economically,

their societies and politics change while national institutions tend to remain stationary. Legitimacy, governance, public service delivery, social justice and sustainability become key issues. We are entering a period of overdue political fermentation which will not be easy to stave off, pressed by encroaching pressures such as climate change, mass migration, gender politics, ecological and population crises. Even oligarchs and the deep state are in disagreement over what to do – some seeking new ways to maintain control and others seeking new ways to progress things, with both fearing coming under the spotlight.

An acute area of risk lies around AI and the way it is implemented, its reliability, its capacity to subvert human agency, and even the threat it brings to power structures and oligarchies. A further area of concern is the world public and its difficulty in encompassing the scale of what is going on. There is an escalating need to stretch beyond self-interest and to defragment world society.

Another area of concern lies in the vision and integrity of political leaders and representatives – partially a function of the political milieu in which they work. The media have held a key role in promoting an adversarial, agenda-driven, sensationalising pressure on politicians that skews public dialogue, putting politicians on the defensive, failing to properly fulfil the media's role in objectively scrutinising politics, and also concealing the hidden agendas of their business owners. Pressure on politicians distances them from ordinary people and ground-level reality, isolating them in their offices and institutions, and dissuading people with integrity, sensitivity and a sense of public service from standing for office or succeeding if they gain office.

We could be heading toward turbulent times, perhaps in the late 2020s and the 2030s, when ordinary people might lose their fear, attempting to gain increased influence over events, not least out of frustration over their lack of political traction. The success or failure of this up-welling of popular feeling will depend greatly on

the maturity of crowds, their capacity to think beyond themselves, act together, form clear judgements and apply effective ways of bringing about reform. Alternatively we could be heading toward potentially dystopian times where humanity cedes its sovereignty to artificial intelligence and those that control it. But even then, one open question is whether those who control it are unleashing a monster too big even for them.

Interesting links

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