

Democratic Leadership

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CHAPTER 10

Democratic Leadership

Haig Patapan

Countries in transition to democracy face numerous obstacles and challenges. Securing democratic institutions and the new principles of representation, accountability and the rule of law are perhaps the most obvious. More subtle and complex concern the attempts at accommodating and reconciling powerful traditions, rich cultural heritage and religious beliefs with democratic practices. Indonesia, in transition to democracy, has certainly confronted many of these difficulties, and due to prudent leadership, is successfully negotiating a stable transition. What may be less evident to countries in transition to democracy, however, is that the leadership that facilitates such transitions may have to redefine itself in a democracy. Put differently, that democracies mandate a unique democratic form of leadership. But what is this form of democratic leadership? In posing this question, we are struck by the fact that although there is an extensive scholarship on democracy and on leadership, *democratic leadership* has received little scholarly attention (see, Kane et al 2008; Burns 1978; 2003; Mughan and Patterson 1992; Kellerman 1986; Edinger 1976; Elcock 2001; Ruscio 2004; and Miroff 2000). One reason for this is that those scholars who took leadership seriously, the so called 'elite' theorists, indicated the fundamentally undemocratic consequences of

leadership in democracy (see generally, Pareto 1935; Mosca 1939; Michels 1962). That leadership was necessary but necessarily undermined democracy explained, in part, the reluctance of other democrats to confront directly the theme of leadership. The response by democratic scholars to these elite theorists has been to ignore leadership altogether, suggesting that different forms of democracy – deliberative, participative, associational, and so on – do away with the need for leadership in democracies.¹ Thus between a scholarship that emphasises the impossibility of democratic leadership, and another that implicitly claims that leadership is not necessary provided ‘true’ democracy is instituted, the very serious and important topic of democratic leadership has not been addressed.

If leadership is important in democracies, what sort of leadership is made possible by democracy? What types of leaders does it favour? How does it shape and limit its leaders? These are the questions that we explore in this chapter. We do so not simply because these are pressing questions for countries that are in transition to democracy, but also because of the larger theoretical significance of these questions, both to the study of good

¹ For an analysis of this scholarship see Kane (2003), and more generally, the literature on direct democracy (Pateman 1970, Barber 1984, Held 1996); associative democracy (Hain 1983; Hirst 1994, Cohen and Rogers 1995; Giddens 1998); deliberative democracy (Elster 1998; Cohen 1989; Dryzek 1990, 2000; Habermas 1987, 1996; Guttman and Thompson 1996, 2004).

leadership, and of democracy.² Our examination of the nature of democratic leadership is warranted by the ubiquity and moral authority of democracy – this very authority and legitimacy of democracy tends to obscure the problem of leadership in democracies.³ That democracy is the only standard for judging regimes, and that all regimes claim democratic credentials, makes it difficult for us to realise that historically democracy is a late-comer. If anything, history favours monarchy and empire as the seemingly natural forms of political association. Moreover, the modern dominance of democracy tends to discourage reflection on those other regimes that vied with democracy for authority – regimes based on excellence (aristocracy), honour (timocracy), wealth (oligarchy). Thus in asking the question of democratic leadership we are also retrieving a philosophical tradition that understood politics in terms of regimes rather than contractual settlements.⁴

² On the importance of elites in democratic transitions see O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead 1986; Karl & Schmitter 1991. For attempts to combine both structural and agency perspectives see Diamond 1993; Linder and Bächtiger 2005.

³ In what has been called the 'third wave' of democracy of the late 20th century (Huntington 1991), the spread of democratic government has been quite remarkable. For example, in 1974, 39 countries (26.9 per cent of all) were electoral democracies; by 1997 the number was 117 (61.3 per cent) (Diamond 1999, 25).

⁴ For democracy as a 'regime' rather than the form of the executive (per Hobbes and modern social contract theorists) see the classical formulations of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and its modern variants in the works of Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Bryce. For a recent example of scholarship that employs the concept of regime see McCarthy (2006).

What are those fundamental aspects of democratic regimes that have significant implications for leadership? Here it is necessary to distinguish between classical democracy and modern democracy. In classical political thought the core feature of democracy, its primary animating principle or idea, is freedom. This idea of freedom, however, is fundamentally political, based on the notion of who belongs to the city or the idea of citizenship. Thus, in classical political thought the ‘free-born’ of the city (as opposed to those vanquished in wars and therefore the enslaved), claimed freedom to be the pre-eminent good, defining democracy as the best regime for those who were by nature free.⁵ Because democracy is founded on freedom, it is open to the various political claims made by the other regimes (based, for example, on the idea of wealth, or honour). Thus democracy does not instruct its citizens the way other regimes impose their principles – freedom in democracy allows room for those principles that define other regimes. Consequently, democrats will claim the right to enjoy their own pleasures and desires, opinions and judgments, habits and conventions. The democrat, according to Socrates in Plato’s *Republic* (561c-d),

lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastic, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and, jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him; and if he ever admires any soldiers, he turns in that direction; and if it’s money-makers, in that one. And there is neither order

⁵ See generally, Plato *Republic* Book VIII (Plato 1968); Aristotle *Politics* Books 1, 4 (Aristotle 1984).

nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed he follows it throughout.

This freedom appears noble because it is a type of independence and self-sufficiency. Importantly, it is this freedom, permitting and sustaining a variety of views, lives and regimes, that makes democracy particoloured and beautiful.

Modern democracies, in addition to the principle of political freedom, are founded on the idea of natural rights.⁶ Consequently the classical understanding of freedom coexists in modern democracies with the idea of liberty and liberalism, of freedom not founded simply on political considerations (such as citizenship) but on transpolitical foundations such as autonomy and dignity. An important implication of this for our discussion is that though freedom is the animating principle of both classical democracy and modern liberal democracy, the way democracy understands and defines leadership will differ, based on the differing sources of the notion of ‘freedom’.

‘We the people’

The beauty and nobility of democracy – the diversity and variety it fosters – has significant consequences for rule and leadership. At best the freedom encouraged by democracy results in an ambivalence regarding the merits of political life – politics is no different from the other choices, of idleness and

⁶ As Tocqueville (2000) notes in *Democracy in America*, this notion has its source in the theological debates that introduced dogmatism into politics.

pleasure, money-making or honour-seeking. In addition to a certain ambivalence, democratic freedom may also lead to a rejection of politics because it is an imposition upon one's independence and therefore a limitation on freedom. Thus democrats will be suspicious of those who seek political office, judging them as opportunists who will exploit public funds or as potentially dangerous oppressors⁷ In this light one can argue that the animating principle of modern democracy is at profound tension with political life, and in particular, rule and authority – that at the core of democratic politics is an ambivalence, or indeed a distrust, of political rule and leadership.⁸ Put in other words, the principle problem of leadership in democracies is its very legitimacy.

How can the principle of freedom and leadership be reconciled? The democratic answer to this problem of articulating freedom as a political principle is to turn to a different principle, equality. This is a natural move because the logic of equality lies at the core of the principle of freedom. In

⁷ This accounts for two aspects of modern democracies – the low regard people generally have for politicians (see eg Inglehart 1997; Putnam 2000; Gidengil et al 2004) and the extraordinary public concern with misuse of even small amounts of public funds (see for example recent enactment of 'codes of conduct': Fleming and Holland 2001).

⁸ One can argue that democracy is the exception, that the other regimes implicitly adopt a principle of rule and therefore are more open to leadership. For example, oligarchy favours rule that endorses the principle of wealth – the best money-maker or the wealthy are entitled to rule according to the principles of that regime.

classical democratic thought one can almost say that equality is contemporaneous with the claims for freedom – ‘equality’ is the first claim of the democrat. In liberal democracies the argument is well known: if I respect freedom then I must respect it in others who may exercise their freedom differently from me. Thus my endorsement and defence of freedom demands that I, at the very least, mute my criticism of the choices made by others. More generously, it requires that I concede the equal worth of those choices. Thus democratic freedom leads to democratic equality, as a matter of principle (all freedom must be defended), and as a matter of liberal prudence (such compromise will also assure my freedom).

Freedom and now equality, become the animating, though not simply harmonious, principles of democracy. More specifically, freedom and equality are of necessity the theoretical foundation for all democratic leadership. But the need to introduce equality to implement freedom compromises it, thereby challenging and undermining the legitimacy of all leadership in democracy. Leadership thus has a curious place in democracies. It is always questionable yet always necessary. This tension can be seen in two democratic attempts to solve the problem of rule and leadership – direct rule and ruling in turn.

The one obvious way to preserve freedom is to have all rule – direct democracy seems to be the most democratic solution to the problem of freedom. It solves the problem of leadership by making all leaders, assuming all are equally capable of rule. It soon becomes clear, however,

that all cannot rule. There are practical reasons for this: all cannot dedicate all their time to rule; some, not all, need to bring matters on for consideration, shaping the agenda; all will not always speak with a united voice. The democratic compromises of a parliament (that re-convenes rather than being in continuous authority); appointment of executives who will convene and dissolve parliament as well as initiating motions (for review by all); and majority rule (however 'majority' is defined) undermines the legitimacy of direct rule and of those 'leaders' who facilitate the will of all.

⁹ Importantly, rule by all as a solution to the problem of democratic leadership mandates small democracies, leading to instability and insecurity.¹⁰

The other pre-eminently democratic solution to the problem of leadership is the principle of ruling in turn. Ruling in turn solves a number of problems we discern in direct democracy by acknowledging them as strengths. Ruling in turn defends the freedom and equality of all by allowing all to rule, not at the same time but serially, appropriating and overcoming what appeared to be a problem in direct democracy, the executive. Ruling in turn concedes the democrats' general ambivalence about the merits of

⁹ For the most sophisticated analysis of this problem see Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1978) where he attempts to preserve the will of all without compromising individual freedom.

¹⁰ See the discussion in *The Federalist Papers* (Hamilton et al 1982) regarding representative democracy as a major modern innovation in republican thought that overcomes the dangers and instability of ancient small republics.

politics by sharing the burden of office and letting others rule. Finally, ruling in turn makes possible representative government and therefore large democracies. Though resolving a number of problems, this solution to democratic leadership raises a range of new concerns. Ruling in turn is clearly only an approximation or compromise of people ruling for themselves, ironically something democrats don't want to do. That another will lead me, albeit for now, and until I take over, points to representative democracy.¹¹ Representative democracy introduces the considerable theoretical problems of representation, such as consent, agency and mandate, and reveals the uneasy status of leaders in such democracies. Is my leader my agent or trustee? Do I authorise or mandate all or only some of my agent's decisions? If trustee, do I accept that some are superior in leadership and thereby question the principle of ruling in turn? Accordingly representative democracy, in conceding the need for leadership by a few of the many, makes possible the idea of superior leadership, implicitly challenging the democratic principles of freedom and equality. Ruling in turn justifies democratic leadership but it is an uneasy, tenuous justification precisely because it seems to challenge those principles that animate democratic politics.

These reflections point to important aspects of democratic leadership. Leadership, at tension with the democratic principle of freedom, tends to be addressed in democracies as a matter of process rather than substance –

¹¹ On the extensive literature on these themes see eg Pitkin (1967); Manin (1997).

rotation, representation, are procedural means for resolving the problem of who should rule. As a consequence most debates on leadership in democracies are less about the merits of the leader or the action proposed and more on whether the process is suitable eg is it 'transparent'? Is it inclusive? and so on. Process tends to replace substance because the substance – rule – is an intractable democratic problem.

Moreover, the coexistence of the principles of freedom and of equality, and the willingness of democrats to 'see' equality more clearly than freedom, poses a problem that is a continuing theme of political thought: democratic egalitarianism is as open to direct democracy as it is to the equal rule by one. The potential of democracy to fragment into tyranny, in the classical sense, or in the modern Tocquevillian sense of bureaucratic soft-despotism, is due primarily to the compromise of freedom with equality.

Finally, the many attempts to implement freedom as a political principle, and their varied though ultimately unsuccessful outcomes, point to an unavoidable fact about leadership in democracy: it is fundamentally prone to accusations of illegitimacy. That there is no democratic solution to the problem of leadership – all such attempts compromise democratic freedom – accounts for the perennial democratic political debates concerning participation, consultation, populism, strong leadership and elitism.

Democratic leadership

The discussion above is intended to show the important ways democracy defines and shapes its leaders. In addition to the foundational question of the legitimacy of any leadership, democratic politics has significant implications for leadership in a number of important areas. It is not possible to do justice to the complexity of these themes in this context. It is useful, however, to sketch the more important ways democracy defines leadership. These include the problem of law and bureaucracy, commerce, ethics, and international relations.

Bounded Leaders and Administrators

The questionable status of leadership and authority in democracy gives rise to two divergent tendencies regarding democratic leadership. One acknowledges the need for leadership, and even argues that leaders have special skills and talents that may require significant discretion in the exercise of authority. In conceding these principles democracy demands that such authority be held responsible or accountable. The ‘bounded leader’ is the natural consequence of this concern. Leadership is bounded principally by law, specifically by the rule of law, constitutionalism, separation of powers, and ideas of fundamental rights and freedoms.¹² The ‘legalisation of politics’, that includes judicial politics as well as an evolving international legal regime, points to the unique democratic demands placed on modern

¹² We cannot explore in this context the extent to which these measures may be said to be different for classical and liberal democracies.

leadership (see Montesquieu 1989; Hamilton et al. 1982; Russell and O'Brien 2001; Zifcak 2005). At the same time, the democratic ambivalence regarding leadership tends to relegate the leader to no more than a bureaucrat, reducing politics to nothing more than technical administration. Leadership as administration means that technical, incremental and bureaucratic solutions leave little room for individual leadership, discretion and prudence, reducing the leader to a sort of social scientist who uses the modern sciences of statistics, demographics and related disciplines to order the regime.¹³ The dynamic tension between these two tendencies contributes, in part, to the contested nature of leadership in democracies.

Chief Economist

Freedom provides the link between democracy and commerce. The freedom that is the foundational principle of the regime inevitably justifies economic as well as political freedom. Combined with the observation that the desires of the many in democracy are those that can largely be satisfied by money, it soon becomes clear that democracy tends towards commercial freedom. The significance of this for leadership can be seen more clearly when we note that the equality and individualism that is a major part of modern democracies makes desire for well-being intense and permanent. The painful realisation of unequal wealth and the importance of 'this-worldly' prosperity justifies a competition for comforts that appears to have no

¹³ For an examination of the problem of prudence in modern managerial reforms see Kane and Patapan (2006).

obvious end point. This frantic competition defines the nature of success – financial rather than political – and elevates commerce, making it the measure of politics. This has important implications for leadership. The depreciation of the political in democracies has the serious consequence of making the people even more unpolitical. Thus the democratic leader, who is now judged in economic terms and has to speak to the people as an economist, finds it difficult to engage the people politically.¹⁴ At the same time, the people who eschew politics as unprofitable judge it as a sort of business, but demand that the leader not profit from office. Democratic leadership becomes a competition based on promises of prosperity and accusations of financial mismanagement. Budgeting becomes the new political accountability.

Moral Leader

There is of course another form of accountability in democracies: the democratic leader has to be an ethical and moral leader (see generally Kane 2001). But what are the precise contours of this form of accountability? The foundational principle of freedom defines morality in democracies – we are free to make moral choices. This understanding tends to dismiss arguments based on necessity as excuses by the weak, lazy or corrupt. It accounts for the indignation – the moral fevers and demonisations – that sometimes

¹⁴ See in this respect Putnam's attempt, applying Tocqueville, to revive 'social capital' in democracies (Putnam 2000).

afflict democracies. Thus democracies tend to high moralism in political matters, expecting their leaders to represent, and be, the ‘best’.

The best for democrats is understood in terms of individual morality; it is personal morality that is the measure of politics in democracies.¹⁵ In not distinguishing between the personal and the political, democrats gauge and evaluate political action in terms they understand – truth-telling, fidelity, consistency, sacrifice, compassion, generosity, even piety.¹⁶ Importantly, freedom, and the dignity of free moral choice demands that persuasion, not fear, is the basis of democratic politics. Democratic leaders need to argue, debate, even cajole but never threaten citizens. Taken together these demands impose a very high personal standard on the democratic leader that is generally at odds with political life, where lies, compromises and changing of alliances is political currency. The distance between these two worlds necessitates a sort of politics of hypocrisy (Grant 1997), where the democratic politician continues to be political while attempting (or seeming) to rise above the fray.

¹⁵ This may be at tension, of course, with the liberal notion that demarcates politics between the ‘private’ and ‘public’. Therefore certain standards of morality may not apply to public figures if they can show that the relevant matter was in some sense ‘private’. In this context consider, for example, the failed attempt to impeach President Clinton.

¹⁶ The piety is not simply ‘religious’ – it can refer to ‘sacred limits’ concerning, for example, the honouring of parents, treatment of the dead.

These considerations become acute when a democratic leader has to negotiate international relations. The unsavoury, albeit necessary, aspects of international relations, ranging from spying to the possibility of pre-emptive war, challenge the tendency of democracy to favour peace, stability and virtuous rule.¹⁷ In his *Discourses on Livy* (Book I, chapter 59), Machiavelli (1992) commends the ‘slow motion’ and honesty of the many when he recounts the proposal put to the Athenians by Themistocles. Themistocles told Aristides, the peoples’ representative, that the entire Greek fleet, which they held in good faith, could easily be gained and destroyed, making the Athenians all powerful. Aristides reported to the people that Themistocles’ policy was ‘very useful but very dishonest’. On this basis the people refused it. That democratic politics is fundamentally ‘moral’, imposing considerable demands and requirements on its leaders, suggests that in international relations a different rhetoric is demanded of the democratic leader, one that will have to negotiate the moral and the useful.

Leadership in democracies

The discussion above is no more than an indication of the important ways the democratic leader is different from leaders in other regimes. We have not examined, for example, the greater powers enjoyed by democratic leaders, and significantly, the unique problems faced by leaders in regimes in transition to democracy. Transitional democracies confront many

¹⁷ Note, however, that the democratic tendency to favour democratic regimes impels it towards an international political agenda that demands it abandon simple pacifism.

obstacles – institutional, traditional, religious – in their attempts to adopt democratic practices. What we have suggested in this chapter is that in confronting these formidable and sometimes intractable difficulties, it may be easy to overlook fundamental tensions within democracy itself. To the extent that leadership is important in the transition to democracies, then the problem of democratic leadership is one of these foundational problems that need to be confronted and understood. The power, legitimacy and authority of democracy is now conceded by all. An understanding of the unique demands and requirements it imposes on its leaders is only now being recognized as essential for both promoting and sustaining democracy. The need to explore the realities of leadership is even more pressing in the case of Indonesia, which has relied so significantly on its leaders in transition to democracy. Importantly, the nature of democratic leadership in Indonesia is complicated by the powerful demands of religion; the democratic leader in Indonesia will have to reconcile and accommodate the legitimate claims of religion, without sacrificing the core demands of democratic governance. Whatever the basis of such reconciliation, it is evident that a clearer appreciation of the character of leadership in democracies is an important starting point for securing both stable democratic rule and prudent statesmanship.

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