

Two-party system - and a 'third force'?

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Contents

- [Universal suffrage - a revolut](#)
- [The source of the democratic](#)
- [Can the two-party system \(...\)](#)
- [The verdict of history - \(...\)](#)
- [Benefits of two-party system](#)
- [Limitations/pitfalls of \(...\)](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

The two-party system is a step towards the further maturity of the democratic status of a country. But it will not automatically solve the problems facing the nation, says Jeyakumar Devaraj.

Malaysia has only known one ruling coalition in the past 52 years since Independence. But the result of the March 2008 elections has led to rising hope among many Malaysians that an enormous change might be around the corner - a two-party system under which the people are free to choose between two coalitions which are both capable of governing the country.

The purpose of this paper is to locate the institution of a two-coalition system against a wider historical perspective.

Universal suffrage - a revolutionary concept

The concept that every person has an equal right to select the government irrespective of his or her social status, wealth, education, religious affiliation or beliefs is a revolutionary idea. And it is relatively new.

Ever since the time historical records have been kept right about 7,000 years ago and right up till the 19th Century, human society has been organised on the principle that certain groups of people were born with superior characteristics and therefore had the ("God given") right to rule.. The majority of the people, the commoners, were considered to be inferior and less "refined" and therefore not fit to rule. This was the basis of the feudal system that was in existence since 5000 BC in Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, the Yang Tze civilisation and Egypt. It remained true during Roman times and in kingdoms all over the world - India right up till the time she got colonised, China, the kingdoms of Malacca and Majapahit, the Maya and Inca empires in Latin America, the kingdoms of Africa, the Islamic empires from the time of the Prophet right up to the end of the 19th Century.

This concept began facing a challenge in the 16th Century. A faction of the elites in England rose up against King Charles I because they were unhappy that they were not being consulted about the rate of taxation. This led to the English Civil War in 1641-1651 and ended with the beheading of the king. Charles's son did manage to re-establish the monarchy in 1660 (and execute several of those who were instrumental in the removal of his father). But a system whereby the propertied elites would be

consulted by the British monarch was formalised; this later evolved into the House of Lords.

This concept - that people have the right to have a say in their governance - slowly developed into 'universal suffrage' or the right of all citizens to vote. In Britain, the most advanced country of that era, the Reform Act of 1832 extended voting rights to adult males who rented property of a certain value, so granting one in seven males in the UK voting rights. The Representation of the People Act of 1918 lifted property restrictions for voting for men, who could vote at 21; however, women's votes were given with these property restrictions and were limited to those over 30. Women in Britain only won equal voting rights through the Representation of the People Act of 1928.

In the United States, the 15th Amendment of the US Constitution in 1870 gave the right to vote to all citizens irrespective of colour or history of previous servitude. But black men faced considerable obstacles in exercising this right as many states enacted laws requiring proof of a certain level of literacy and the payment of taxes to qualify as a voter. There was also the real threat of physical violence against black men who were audacious enough to come forward and vote. It took the National Voting Rights Act of 1965 to assure the voting rights of blacks in several southern states. Women in the US only won the right to vote in 1920 through the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

So, the institution of universal suffrage, is a very recent phenomenon, historically speaking - it has only been practised in the past 150 years of the past 7,000 years of humankind's written history! In Malaya, ordinary people were first given the right to vote in the municipal elections of 1952.

Despite being a relatively recent phenomenon, the democratic revolution cannot be undone. People all over the world have come to accept the egalitarian concept that all humans are "equal before god" and have the right to choose their government and have a say in the way they are governed. Thomas Jefferson's famous lines "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" has come to be accepted by a large majority of the world's population!

The source of the democratic "revolution"

Karl Marx argued that the campaigns for universal suffrage were an integral part of the struggle of a new elite for political hegemony. Marx noted that the political movements for the right to vote (and for a curtailment of the arbitrary power of Kings and the Aristocracy) started in the most economically advanced countries of the time - England, France and America.

Marx's view is that a new elite group - the mercantile (traders) and later the industrial capitalists - was emerging from feudal society. This new elite had increasing economic power but were constrained by the existing feudal structures. To succeed in their struggle against the arbitrariness of feudal aristocrats and the monarch and for a greater say in society, this new elite enlisted the support of the "commoners" and campaigned against vested feudal interests. They did this by arguing for a more equal society and championing concepts such as no taxation without representation, the equality of all men, rule of law, judgment by a jury made up of their peers and emancipation of slaves.

The monarch cannot rule by decree. All men and women are created equal before God and have an equal right to determine how they are governed. This was the essence of the bourgeois democratic revolution, and it has changed human society in a very fundamental way!

Can the two-party system meet the real needs of ordinary people?

"Workers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose apart from your chains!" exhorted Marx in the Communist Manifesto in 1948. Many progressive worker leaders agreed with him that the rule of the rich elite had to be overcome through a revolution of the working peoples.

But with the advent of universal suffrage, many leaders of the working class began to question the need for revolution to advance their cause. After all, they argued, since ordinary people make up the huge majority of the population, the real needs of the ordinary people would be addressed by electing in a government that is sensitive to the problems of the ordinary people. There is now no need at all to organise for a revolution as Karl Marx had advocated (Communist Manifesto) for the poor constitute the majority of voters. Change can come in stages through the ballot box – socialism by evolution.

But there were others in the socialist movement who disagreed with this view. Lenin for one argued strongly and eloquently as follows:

- State = Bureaucracy + Armed body of men
- The State is not neutral. It is there to protect a certain class interest. It is an instrument for the promotion of a particular class and the suppression of other classes.
- The existing States in the world all legitimise and protect the property interests of the elite – the Capitalists and the Landlords.
- It is not enough for a workers' party to merely take over the reins of power. One needs to revamp the State apparatus itself.
 - o The laws defining property relationships need to be rewritten;
 - o The privileges of the elected representatives had to be curtailed for they tend to get co-opted by the elite (only workman wages!);
 - o Make elected representatives more accountable – "immediate recall";
 - o Transparency of the administration. Taking over of administrative functions by local councils of workers and the ordinary people.

Lenin argued that the bourgeois state apparatus must be "smashed" and a new State apparatus needs to be set up to implement changes in the interest of the workers – the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat"

[I am putting his ideas very crudely – look at State and Revolution for a proper exposition of these views!]

The verdict of history - which group was right?

The Socialist Movement (Second International) split into two camps. The Bolsheviks succeeded in overthrowing the Czar and in expropriating the capitalists and the landlords in their country. This led initially to severe economic privations – industrial production as well as food production dropped disastrously, and there was famine. But after the initial period, the centrally planned Soviet economy grew at a much faster rate than that of the Western economies, propelling the Soviet Union's emergence as one of the two super-powers in the world in the 1960s.

But democracy suffered. The “Proletarian Dictatorship” of the Soviet Union deteriorated to the dictatorship of a bureaucratic elite that assumed totalitarian control of that society and completely stifled political participation of the ordinary people. This is the main reason why capitalist restoration was accomplished so easily in these societies following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The other major group - the Social Democrats - took the Parliamentary route. The world witnessed tremendous improvement in the working and living conditions of workers especially in Europe as the Social Democratic parties managed to implement significant reforms and institute a “Welfare State”.

But since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, there has been a significant move in the opposite direction (the neoliberal attack on benefits accorded to the ordinary people). Benefits given to workers are being pulled back all over the world including in Europe. Distribution of national income is again becoming skewed towards the richest of the elites.

So which group was correct? I think it is not clear cut. The Bolsheivik experiment in the USSR demonstrated clearly that one can grow the economy and industrialise a nation without the capitalist class - i.e. capitalists are dispensable, and all the drivel about the need for entrepreneurial skills to spur economic and technological growth is simply not true. But it cannot be denied that the KGB was vicious, and the Gulag did happen. The USSR was a totalitarian police state where ordinary people were completely disenfranchised. Trotskyites would argue that the Bolsheivik experiment was derailed in the 1920s itself by a bureaucratic faction organised around Stalin - that it would have been possible to widen and deepen the democratic revolution while building a modern economy.

The Social Democrats who took the Parliamentary route began facing problems in the 1960s. They did not expropriate the capitalists but just regulated them. This resulted in an out-migration of capital to nations that had fewer restrictions on capital - especially when the West began winning the Cold War! A process of de-industrialisation took place in Britain and other advanced industrial countries. Industrial jobs dropped as factories relocated, and government income dropped as companies relocated to tax havens. This forced the government of the welfare states to take measures to reduce the pressure on corporations; the tax regime was altered in their favour. A Value Added Tax (VAT or GST) was instituted to shift the tax burden to the ordinary people, and parts of the welfare state were dismantled through privatisation and co-payment requirements. This process of dismantling the welfare state is ongoing today.

So the jury is still out on this question. Lenin and Marx could have been right when they insisted that the means of producing wealth should be taken from the hands of individuals and corporations and put under the control of ordinary people. That was for them (Marx and Lenin) an essential pre-requisite for the building of an equitable and humane society. Production must be for human need and not for corporate profits!

Benefits of two-party system

The two-party system is an improvement on universal suffrage. Universal suffrage entitles everyone to the vote. But that doesn't automatically mean that the people can change the government. We do not need to go far to look for examples - take our case: Umno believes that it has a (God-given) right to rule in perpetuity, and several key institutions within the Government share this view: the Police, the Attorney General, the Judiciary, the SPR, and the MACC among others. The manner in which the state institutions acted to bring down the Pakatan Rakyat government in Perak is a clear indicator of how deeply entrenched the belief that Umno is the only legitimate party to rule Malaysia.

Another example is just south of the causeway - Singapore. Universal suffrage but no electoral choices of significance. Change of power between two parties or two coalitions at federal level signifies a certain political maturity and a non-aligned stance on the part of the government bureaucracy.

The move to a two-coalition system will bring several benefits to our society especially in curbing government excesses and corruption. Because:

- your enemy may come into power the next time and expose all your misdeeds.
- also “absolute power corrupts absolutely”. Limiting the time a party stays in office helps curb excesses.

Limitations/pitfalls of the two-coalition system

But there are limitations to the two-party system. It does not solve all the problems. The limitations are as follows:

- Is there a real choice? Labour and Conservative in the UK; Republicans and Democrats in the US. The main parties gravitate to the political centre and there isn't much to choose from.
- Participation in national elections requires huge funds. Only parties and presidential candidates that have the backing of the corporate sector can hope to compete successfully.

So the people only have a choice between ‘Coca-Cola’ and ‘Pepsi’.

Incidentally, this is true for us in Malaysia as well. While the Pakatan Rakyat represents an improvement over the Barisan Nasional in its stance regarding ethnic politicking, corruption, cronyism and the need to abolish draconian laws such as the ISA, there isn't much difference between the BN and the PR on crucial macro-economic policy issues such as the FTA with the US, Intellectual Property Rights, the need to attract FDI to Malaysia, liberalisation of the economy, health tourism, privatisation, and the need for a GST. This is the main reason the PSM has held back from formally joining the PR coalition.

The PSM supports the PR because we believe that moving to a two-coalition system is a step forward for Malaysian society. But getting into the PR as a junior member would signal an endorsement of the macro-economic policies listed above which we are dead against.

This raises the necessity of creating ‘third force’ candidatures to bring real alternatives into the political agenda of the nation.

Sometimes parties appeal to ethnic, jingoist or religious sentiments in order to win votes and in the process exacerbate these sentiments and lead to conflict among the people

- a. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party of Bandaranaike came to power by exploiting Sinhala chauvinism
- b. The BJP in India has Hindu chauvinist tendencies.
- c. The ultra-right, anti-immigrant parties in Europe similarly feed on the fear of economic competition caused by immigrant communities.

The two-party system can lead to gutter politics and exacerbate ethnic tensions as rival groups within the elite play on divisive sentiments in their efforts to win power in Parliament. There are examples of this in several of the nations emerging from the dissolution of the USSR and Yugoslavia.

This underlines the importance of building a people's coalition that enhances the solidarity of all the

ordinary people – the Marhaen – and this necessitates a class-based approach to the issue of nation building.

In the rare event of a significant change in power, there is always the danger of an extra-parliamentary coup by the propertied classes, as occurred in Chile in 1973. (The legally elected government of Salvador Allende of the Chilean Socialist Party was overthrown by a US-sponsored coup in which tens of thousands of left-wing activists, unionists and writers were murdered.) The example of Venezuela holds many lessons that we need to analyse and learn from such as

- Use of referendums to debate on national issues, educate people, and deepen the praxis of democracy
- Parallel mobilisation of ordinary people to counter the high risks of a right-wing counter-attack as happened in Chile.
- Creation of new, more pro-people institutions to circumvent the old bureaucracy that is wedded to pro-corporate interests.

Conclusion

Democracy is here to stay! It is a significant step forward for humanity, and it should be preserved and deepened. It has become part of popular culture the world over, and ordinary people throughout the world will reject attempts to curtail their newly won democratic rights.

The two-party system is a step towards the further maturity of the democratic status of a country. It signifies a certain maturity of the civil service. But it will not automatically solve the problems facing the nation.

There is a crucial need to mobilise ordinary people on a class basis to:

- uphold and deepen democracy,
- safeguard against ethnic and religious chauvinism
- protect the democratic process from right wing counter-coups.

There is an equally crucial need for a party that is able to present a clear analysis of the current problems facing our country – for example the neo-liberal assault on the living conditions of the majority because of the demands of corporate-led globalisation, so that the Malaysian people can mobilise to work towards a more equitable society.

P.S.

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