

Problems of political power

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THE question should not be: "Is politics in South Africa civilised?", but rather: "Does politics allow the kind of civilisation which the majority of people, subject to decisions of state, want?"

This reformulation allows comparative analysis of politics and civilisation and in order to answer it for ourselves, let us consider some key problems that any society faces with regard to the state's monopoly of political power.

No doubt there are many others but I would briefly like to consider four key problems of politics about which a great deal has been written. These are the problems of stability, control, decision-making and change.

They are closely interdependent and more often than not simply highlight different aspects of the same problem.

● Political stability is almost pre-conditional for long term administration and planning as well as foreign confidence. Stability simply means the absence of dramatic and or frequent succession of political control as well as the absence of arbitrary violence, and upheavals within a society.

S. M. Lipsett has identified two variables which he regards as crucial for stability: the legitimacy or support of government and its effectiveness. More closely defined legitimacy means: the ability of government to elicit the voluntary support of major interest groups and sections of the population in society.

Legitimacy is defined here in a sociological sense, i.e. the sense in which groups and sections in the society demonstrate their support for government as being the acceptable government.

Effectiveness on the other hand, has to do with the ability of government to meet the material needs of the major interest groups and sections of the population in society.

This definition makes it clear that the effectiveness of government is closely linked to the state and potential of the economy and the manner in which government exploits this.

Even if a government does not enjoy high legitimacy, or support, i.e. support from major interest groups and sections in society, it can still maintain a reasonable degree of political stability if it is effective in meeting the material needs of these interest groups and sections in society.

Political instability will increase, however, if there is a downturn in the economy and when this happens, problems of legitimacy will compound the problems of ineffectiveness.

One way for government to re-establish stability and avoid problems of legitimacy, or support, is to get the economy on the move again. This can be a tall order in the highly interdependent and industrialised world we live in, where fluctuations in the economies of other societies reverberate on one's own.

● Closely linked to problems of stability are, of course, problems of political control, i.e. the measures and methods adopted by government to cope with problems of instability. Talcott Parsons, the well known American theorist in sociology, has applied his mind in several of his works to this issue and, briefly, some of his insights are as follows:

There is an inverse relationship between coercion and consensus in government's attempt to control the political order in society. Consensus refers to the voluntary co-operation of subjects, whereas coercion refers to the use of force or physical deprivation to establish co-operation.

It has been argued that even though it is sometimes necessary for a government to use coercive measures to control problems of instability, once such control has been established it is in government's own interest to make concessions to the sources of discontent, so that conditions for demonstrating consensus can be re-established.

An alternative to this possibility is that a government can maintain control even for fairly long periods of instability. Thus, Lipsett points out that governments in many African states with a poor economic infrastructure, experience continued difficulties with legitimacy and effectiveness and thus resort to interim military regimes as a means of maintaining coercive control, though in the long term, of course, such control is inherently unstable.

● Political decision-making has experienced the most fundamental changes during the 20th Century. Directly related to these changes is the conception of belief in the accountability of government. Accountability simply means that those affected by political decisions can call to account those who take such decisions, and the most familiar illustration of this is the extension of political participation to the average citizen.

This is in effect what democratic government means and it is argued that democracy allows for the highest degree of accountability on the part of government.

But the accountability of government and its effectiveness do not necessarily go hand in hand. For example, when there is a frequent change of government by electoral means, long term planning becomes impossible and therefore high accountability can compound the problem of ineffectiveness.

The problem of accountable government is, of course, particularly relevant to the underdeveloped or Third World. Modernisation theorists have argued that given the problems of industrialisation and urbanisation facing these governments it would be better to forego the advantages of accountable government by having a strong modernising oligarchy with coercive control pushing the society towards greater economic development.

This, however, is purely an academic argument, because if it happens to be a matter of fact that the majority of citizens believe and want accountable government, then any government that ignores such pressures will very soon experience problems of instability and control.

With the extension of accountable government, particularly in Western Europe and the United States of America, has been the development of the tradition of divorcing state and government.

The state is seen as a more or less permanent structure where police, military and courts provide the stability within which a particular government can attempt to implement its policies. If it is not successful, it is substituted through the electoral process by another.

Consequently, where there is a low accountability of government the distinction between government, state, police, military and legal process becomes blurred and are all seen as part of the instruments of political control.

Accountability has become such a universally accepted value for judging systems of government that whether the actual conditions for realising it are present or not, without exception, governments will claim that they are acting on behalf, or in the interests, of "the people".

Ironically "the people", or some of them, will at some or other stage demonstrate whether they accept this as valid or not. This demonstration can of course vary from the peaceful rejection of the claim through electoral means to more violent manifestations such as coups, riots or revolutions.

Because accountability plays such an important part in modern politics one can briefly relate it to the other variables which have been discussed. Thus accountability appears to stand in a more positive correlation to legitimacy, and consensus than it does with effectiveness and coercion, although a number of cross correlations can lead to interesting hypotheses.

● I would suggest that in the political context change is most closely linked to the redistributive function of the government. When significant interest groups or sections of the population become dissatisfied with the pattern of redistribution of government pressures for changing the quantity and/or quality of redistribution will develop.

These pressures lie at the heart of political conflict in any society and those who feel aggrieved at government can articulate their demand for change in utopian or incremental terms.

As a rule of thumb, I would suggest that the lower the legitimacy and effectiveness of government, the greater the degree of coercion and the greater the absence of accountability, the more likely that demands for change will be radical, utopian and violent.

Whatever the particular case may be, the problem of change for government is directly related to its ability to accommodate conflict. Conflict, i.e. the competition for scarce resources, is the most reliable indicator of the demand for political change in a society.

Governments can negotiate conflict more or less peacefully or simply try to suppress it by coercive means. R. Dahrendorf, a German sociologist, wrote a fascinating book titled, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, in which he pointed out that the one test for political stability in a society was not whether there was conflict in society or not (he regarded conflict as being present in any society), but whether the government created the instruments to negotiate conflict in a more or less peaceful and rational manner. To the extent that such instruments were not available conflict resolution would be more violent and radical.

Within the political context this simply means that whenever government is confronted with an aggrieved group demanding change and that group has no freedom of organisation and communication among its members, has no regular and representative leadership and the legitimacy of the group's claims are not recognised by government, then conflict will most likely be arbitrary, with the possibility of violence becoming the major means for applying pressures for change.

This, however, can result in a vicious circle in which coercion has to be used to contain violence which in turn precludes the possibility of effective instruments for conflict resolution developing.

Thus, the absence of instruments for effective conflict resolution can in turn exacerbate the other problems of legitimacy, effectiveness, control and accountability for government.

A government may: be low on legitimacy, make extensive use of coercive measures to control instability; not be accountable to the majority of its citizens and have inadequate instruments for negotiating conflict, and yet, it can for a con-

siderable period, monopolise political power if it can effectively meet the material needs of the major interest groups and sections of the population.

In short, given a growth-oriented economy and a healthy infrastructure, a government that wisely exploits these resources can remain in control and cope with most of the key problems of political control that I have discussed.

But, it is always a precarious control, for if the economy should not respond to the government's policies then these problems will present themselves with an intensity greater than can be expected in more "normal" political orders.

There are many more problems related to the "generation, distribution and use of political power" in a society, but perhaps those that have been discussed provide us with a tentative framework in terms of which we may briefly take a look at politics in South Africa.

It would perhaps be fruitful to use the various factors I have mentioned and frame questions under them with reference to particular circumstances in South Africa.

The implicit approach in framing these questions would be to identify trends and developments in South Africa which pose problems for the political order in terms of its support or legitimacy; its effectiveness; the degree of consensus or coercion; the accountability of government and the available instruments for negotiating conflict.

Support

● What are the available organisations at the disposal of the various groups in South Africa in terms of which they can demonstrate their support for, or rejection of government and their acceptance of its initiatives and policies?

Can we conclude that the available organisation for Whites, Coloureds, Asians and Blacks are equally representative and adequate for demonstrating such support?

Effectiveness

● South Africa is blessed with vast economic resources. To what extent is the redistributive function of government adequate to meet the material needs of the various interest groups and sections of the population or is it a potential source of conflict between its citizens?

Our economy is based on the principle of free enterprise: Is there a possible contradiction between the economic implications of government policy and the exploitation of our economic resources on the principle of free enterprise?

Coercion

● We have very severe coercive measures in South Africa. To what extent is the use of coercion by government intended to control an interim period of instability in order to establish

more favourable conditions for eliciting consensus from the major interest groups and sections of the population, or not?

If these coercive measures did not exist would the organisations that could develop among Blacks, Coloureds, and Asians, display consensus with or rejection of government initiatives?

Accountability

● At present we have a racially entrenched electoral process in South Africa where White voters can call the government to account for its decisions in relatively peaceful manner. What other forms of accountability are available to non-voters where they can do the same?

Is it possible for government to transfer some of its powers to the Black, Coloured and Asian political institutions it has created, so that their representatives can be adequately accountable to the people over which they will have separate control or will we have a situation where a Black citizen will be subject to political decisions from different sources of government?

Negotiation

● It is obvious that South Africa is a country locked in conflict. Conflict between those who have effective monopoly of political power and those who do not; between those who, on racial grounds, have easier access to social and economic opportunities and those who do not.

What are the available instruments at government disposal to negotiate the conflict between Black and White as rationally and peacefully as possible? How effective, representative and autonomous are these instruments for conflict negotiation?

Where such instruments do not exist, how can government create them without contradicting its own policy initiatives?

Obviously one can ask many more questions. I tried to frame these on as general a level as possible because I do believe that if they are taken seriously and investigated in more detail, one would be in a position to give a more reasoned response to the question: "Does the political order in South Africa provide the kind of civilisation that the people subject to political decision making want?"

All indications point to the satisfaction of the majority of Whites in this respect but it is (to put it in the delightfully cautious language of the academic) not clear whether the same can be said for the majority of the rest who are subject to political control.

How this problem can be solved and whether the overall majority will get the civilisation they want is, of course, an entirely different question and not the one I was asked to consider. However, I do believe that on the answer to the latter question hinges the possibility of a more peaceful future for all of us in this land.