POLITICAL INCLUSION, DEMOCRACY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

LESSONS FROM SINGAPORE AND BOTSWANA

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ABSTRACT

Democracy is said to cause economic growth. Authoritarianism, on the other hand, has the opposite effect. Thus as far as the material welfare of the populace is concerned: democracy is good; dictatorship is bad. Anomalies and outliers are insignificant and therefore can be ignored. I disagree with this assessment.

This paper calls for a more nuanced explication of the contributions of politics and political attributes in a country to determining economic development. We need to move beyond simply prescribing democratisation on the basis of statistical correlations between democracy, as measured by survey or unnamed ‘expert’ based indices, and economic development. We need to build a much better appreciation of and come up with a more consistent theory about the mechanics of how politics drive economic development.

I argue that Acemoğlu and Robinson’s introduction of the concept of political inclusion provides a promising starting point as it is a more concentrated effort in looking at how economic development happens given that state legitimacy and a degree of political centralisation has been achieved. The trouble, though, is with the tendency to just assume that inclusion and democratisation are one and the same. They are not. Subtle differences have a significant effect as we see in the cases of Singapore and Botswana; both hailed as miracles of their respective regions. The difference is that Singapore is an inclusive state but not a democracy, whereas Botswana is only partially inclusive and has been democratic since independence. The difference in their economic success is striking.

Using the experiences of these two countries, I echo Hirschmann’s (1986) call for us to always be on the lookout for unusual historical developments, like those of Singapore and Botswana, to deepen our understanding and challenge our assumptions about development, rather than simply ignoring outliers and concentrating on data close to our lines of best fit.

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INTRODUCTION

The connection between dictatorship and poor economic performance, and consequently democracy and economic growth has received much attention in the field of political science and political economy in recent times (e.g. Ellis & Fender, 2014; Olson, 1993; Sangmpam, 2007; Sen, 2014). Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that indeed political institutions are determinative of the success of a national economy. The culmination of their years of research, set out in Why Nations Fail, developed a two tiered framework for the sort of sustainable economic growth that the West enjoys. First, the political system, on which an economy is built needs to have a degree of legitimacy and centralised core functions. Second, it needs to be supported by inclusive institutions that allow for broad political participation, which accomodates ‘creative destruction’ – a process of renewal and regeneration so critical to development. Assuming that the first pre-requisite for sustainable growth has been achieved, it appears that the equation is then quite simple: democracy causes sustainable growth; dictatorship does not (Acemoglu, Naidu, Restrepo & Robinson, 2014). But the truth is not so straightforward. This paper challenges the assumptions that political inclusion is necessarily synonymous
with democracy. I do this by comparing the inclusive economic growth of ‘authoritarian’ Singapore against the disappointing stagnation of ‘democratic’ Botswana – often hailed as the success story of Africa. Botswana’s unremarkable performance in the 21st Century is a result of entrenched elitism that exists despite its democratic political system (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2003; 2012; Fukuyama, 2014; Seidler, 2010). I argue that we need to have a more nuanced explication of the mechanics of inclusive growth. This requires deeper insights that are best offered by way of focused or comparative case studies as opposed to broader statistical analyses.

Understanding the contribution of a political system to the engine of economic growth is important if policy makers, international bodies, civil society organisations and the public at large were to prescribe the right course of action in pursuit of development. We have witnessed the catastrophe that resulted from the attempt to improve security the Middle East by way of a violent pursuit of ‘democratic peace’. Without a good understanding of the mechanics behind statistical correlations, policy decisions taken on the basis of quantitative inferences become extremely risky. The same applies to economic developmental policies and initiatives.

DEFINING DEMOCRACY

A big problem with prescribing democracy as a solution to the ills of the planet is the fact that there is no concrete definition of what democracy is. The literal meaning of the term ‘democracy’ simply refers to a ‘rule by the people’ (Greenberg & Page, 2006; Maddox, 2005; Schumpeter, 1943). The necessarily broad interpretation of this term encompasses any type of government supported by the majority of voting citizens. The types of majority tyranny and illiberal democracies described by Zakaria (2004) and Brandt (2004) must necessarily be included because after all, they are not any less ‘ruled by the people’ than a country under the French or Irish pluralist democracy model. By this logic, Hitler’s (1925) model of ‘German Democracy’, in which citizens elect a supreme leader whose power is unrestricted by parliamentary hindrances, must also meet the benchmark set by the ‘rule by the people’ definition. It is interesting how there’s a tendency to associate democracy with the rule of law, while at the same time Twitter and Facebook today are being regarded as a mean of ‘democratising’ the media. There is no rule of law in social media – when participants are out to get someone, it’s pure unrestrained mob rule. Yet, it’s still ‘democratising’.

Note that the literal interpretation of democracy does not imply pluralism or liberalism, which bring to prominence the rights of the individual (Gray, 1988; Hobhouse, 1911; Rawls, 1972). Liberalism is the antithesis, not of autocracy or dictatorship, but of communitarianism, which emphasises the significance of society over the individuals (Taylor, 1979). Proponents of liberalism seek to limit the powers of the elected government in a democracy so as to protect the interests of individuals including minorities (Mill, 1910); thus opening the door to pluralist politics, concepts very often awkwardly and erroneously associated with democracy (Hewywood, 2004; Maddox, 2005). Private property rights arise from this idea that the right of the individual is supreme and the powers of the government must be limited insofar as the wellbeing of the individual is preserved (Laski, 1962; Locke, 1965). This is a critical element of growth and development that economists often associate with democracy (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2000; 2012; Acemoğlu, Johnson & Robinson, 2005; North, 1990; 1993), because this preservation of individual rights cannot take place in the context of an autocratic rule, where the political leader has the power to confiscate properties at will. But to say that sustainable economic growth must come from liberal democracy is also missing the point because Singapore successfully developed its economy without liberal democracy. The key is political inclusion, regardless of where it originated and what causes its origin.

POLITICAL INCLUSION AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Sustainable economic growth that can deliver a country to the level of prosperity enjoyed by the first world today, according to Acemoğlu and Robinson (2012), requires a foundation of solid political stability and inclusive institutions that allow for broad political participation. The reason for the latter is because such institutions promote a contest of interests and ideas that are necessary to foster innovation through ‘creative destruction’ – i.e. renewal and regeneration. Unfortunately, the authors subsequently tied political inclusion to a democratic system of governance (Acemoglu et al, 2014), which fed into critics’ claim that it is too simplistic and merely a reassertion of the Eurocentric notion that democracy brings economic growth (Sachs, 2012;
Boldrin, Levin & Modica, 2014); therefore, democracy good, dictatorship bad. Additionally, Levin and Modica (2014: 2) remarked that there is a lack of “an axiomatic definition of what is ‘inclusive’ and what is ‘extractive’ that is independent from actual outcomes, the classification of historical institutions as belonging to one or the other group can end up being based on ex-post evaluations of the outcomes themselves, thereby making the argument circular and subject to a selection bias”.

A more in-depth evaluation of the mechanics of sustainable economic growth by inclusive institutions, supported by an inclusive political environment (per Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012), would reveal that the above criticisms are unfounded. In fact, the links between the two variables are much more complex than the traditional notion of: ‘democracy good, dictatorship bad’. Important mediators in the model include level of education, commitment to economic reforms, supportive environment for business investment, the provision of public goods and control over social unrest (Acemoğlu et al, 2014) – all are associated with inclusive politics. Neither inherently requires democracy. Education, for example, empowers the masses to participate in political life including in ways other than through voting. Public goods such as rail network and government libraries provide the infrastructure to assist this process. It is quite regrettable, however, that the Acemoğlu et al (2014) associate these with the label ‘democracy’ because pluralist politics and democracy can and do exist independently of one another. The next section of this paper provides an illustration of my point by way of a case comparison between Singapore and Botswana to show that political inclusion plays a much more important role in sustainable growth than democracy in its own right.

COMPARING SINGAPORE AND BOTSWANA

The Republic of Botswana has been hailed as Africa’s success story in terms of economic development and political accountability (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2003; 2012; Fukuyama, 2014; Seidler, 2010). It is the least corrupt country in Africa as ranked by Transparency International’s 2014 Corruption Perception Index (2015), and one of the wealthiest with an impressive nominal Gross Domestic product (‘GDP’) Per Capita of US$7,757 and land rich in diamonds (CIA, 2014; The World Bank, 2015). Botswana has a population of 2.1 million people, only 30% of whom live below poverty (c.f. Sub-Saharan African average of 47% according to the latest data in 2011 as per the World Bank, 2015). The Economist’s Intelligence Unit (2015) ranks its democracy index as number 28 in the world, above that of Italy and only one rank below India. Importantly, its electoral process is ranked 9.17 out of 10. The political freedom and well functioning electoral processes in Botswana make it undoubtably a country “ruled by the people”. With well established political institutions at the time of independence in 1966, it is regarded as a prime candidate for a groundbreaking African economic miracle. Yet its economy stagnated.

Singapore gained its ‘independence’ only a year before Botswana, having been kicked out of the Federation of Malaya (CIA, 2014). It found itself as a colonial backwater with no natural resources to speak of, an ethnically diverse population, no sense of national identity and a leader who admitted that his government:

... intervened on very personal matters – who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit, or what language you use. We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think. (Lee Kwan Yew, National Day Rally, 1986)

“Singapore is not an electoral democracy” (Freedom House, 2012). Its democracy index score is below Namibia and Senegal (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015). Its electoral process is ranked 4.33 out of 10, which makes it comparable to Iraq on that criterion – the same Iraq that just emerged from Saddam Hussein’s dictatorial regime with the help of America’s arguably illegal attack, where its people feel so disenfranchised that they marched on the streets yelling at its politicians “all of you are thieves” (France-Presse, 2015). As it approached its 50 year anniversary of independence this year, Singapore’s nominal GDP per capita is US$56,286 – higher than that of the United States and more than seven-fold that of Botswana. Out of its 5.5 million citizens, a negligible number lives below the poverty line (CIA, 2014). It is the least corrupt country in Asia and 7th least corrupt on the planet. This means that authoritarian Singapore is not as corrupt as liberal democratic Canada, Australia, Germany and certainly not anywhere near as corrupt as the United States.
If democracy was such a critical element to sustainable economic growth, then surely the gap between Botswana, Africa’s miracle, and Singapore, a former colonial backwater under the tight grip of an autocratic government, is an anomaly that must be explainable by other means. Perhaps it is due to the fact that Botswana is landlocked – just like Switzerland, Austria and Liechtenstein (see Faye, McArthur, Sachs & Snow, 2004). But given all the advantages that it had over Singapore, not only in terms of democratic institutions, but also natural resources and sense of national identity, this explanation appears to be far fetched. Verweij and Pelizzo (2009) made an argument that had Singapore embraced liberal democracy, then effectively all the challenges that it faces today, including some of its people being unhappy, will disappear and it will transform itself into a joyful utopian state. But this isn’t the point. The reality is that fifty years without democracy did not stop it from becoming richer than America, while fifty years of democracy did not turn Botswana richer than America.

DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL INCLUSION ARE NOT ONE AND THE SAME

Drivers that are quoted as being responsible for ‘democratic’ prosperity, namely education, commitment to economic reforms, supportive environment for business investment, the provision of public goods, control over social unrest (Acemoğlu et al, 2014), the rule of law and private property rights (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012; Fukuyama, 2014) necessarily need to be supported by inclusive policies. But there is no critical connection between inclusive policies, derived from inclusive politics, and people freely marking ballot papers to elect political leadership. Obviously ‘rule by the people’ by way of adult suffrage and inclusiveness are not mutually exclusive, but neither must one necessarily be accompanied by the other.

Singapore has succeeded in establishing the aforesaid elements of a prosperous ‘democracy’ without adopting democratic governance (Sarker, 2006). Despite its hostility to Western-style liberal democracy, Singapore is a highly pluralist society, and its public and political institutions are based on strong pluralist values. The ethnic riot that led to Singapore being expelled from the Federation of Malaya in 1965 prompted its government to adopt and rigorously enforce a zero tolerance policy towards racial and religious discrimination (Hefner, 2001) including in the spheres of public service and political leadership. The country’s drive for an educated workforce produced a population that is politically aware and an administrative culture based on meritocracy as opposed to political patronialism (Mackie, 2010). The dominant People’s Action Party for its part was conceived out of the combination of multiple diverse ideological groupings (Chin, 2008) and thus is itself a product of much compromise between diverse interests. Party governance today relies on a strictly meritocratic system that is representative of the diverse aspects of Singaporean society, unrestricted by patronialism and clientelism (Sun & Chen, 2013). All these provide an environment, in which political advancement relies on merit rather than personal relationships with elite powerholders, thus the inclusive and pluralist nature of Singaporean public administration. Additionally, the small size of the country means that geographical barriers to social and political inclusion are nonexistent.

But given that Malaysia, Indonesia and other states that emerged from the colonial period fell prey to corruption and developmental patronialism, Singapore’s experience appears to be unusual. Here, one of the explanations lies in the fact that at the outset of independence, the country didn’t have the sort of politicised military that, say, Indonesia had after its independence. Indeed, Singapore was left with barely any self defence mechanism at all when the British pulled out. Its drive for national security necessitated an effective and efficiently functioning military, which is meritocratic and independent of political affiliation. This reflected the experience of Prussia in its state-building years of the 19th Century (Fukuyama, 2014). In Prussia, according to Fukuyama, this process assisted in the development of a professional, meritocratic bureaucracy for which Germany is well known today. Another contribution is the ideological drive of Lee Kwan Yew, whose political activities are grounded on socialist philosophies rather than the simple drive to capture public wealth – there was very little of it to speak of in the first place. Furthermore, the imposition of English as the main national language was based on its appropriateness as a lingua franca rather than on the basis of the number of its native speakers. This reflects the imposition of Bahasa Melayu as Indonesia’s national language at the outset of its nation building program despite the fact that it is not one spoken by the largest ethnic group (Montolalu & Suryadinata, 2007). Ceylon’s Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956 (‘Sinhala Only Act’) under Prime Minister Bandaranaike did the opposite and replaced English, the lingua franca, with Sinhala as the official national
language of the newly independent state. Sinhala is the language spoken by the Sinhalese ethnic group, which makes up roughly 70% of the country. The move was largely seen as being suppressive and alienating of its minority ethnic groups especially the Tamils (Weiss, 2014). Where the imposition of English and Bahasa Melayu (later Bahasa Indonesia) brought different ethnic groups together in Singapore and Indonesia respectively, Sinhala Only Act created division and a sense of exclusion in Ceylon. Returning back to Singapore, the factors I mentioned above, combined with the fear of division based on ethnic and religious grounds, in addition to the need for Singapore’s political leaders to accommodate for ideological differences among them, all contribute towards the ‘inclusive’ governance landscape that Singapore enjoys today.

Botswana presents a different story. Yes, there is an adequately centralised, democratic and legitimate government (Acemoğlu, Johnson & Robinson, 2003; Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012; Robinson & Parsons, 2006; Seidler, 2010). It’s true that its political institutions feature inclusive elements and much more so than those in other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa; and this did lead to the development and maintenance of strong private property rights regime, which is such a critical element of economic development. But as von Soest (2009: 7) identified, patrimonial relations:

have always existed, but to a limited extent. Yet, in the face of decreasing electoral dominance and elite cohesion, the government is currently reverting to some neopatrimonial and authoritarian means in order to safeguard its rule…. [Africa’s] “miracle” is stagnating or even regressing.

The presence of patrimonialism in Botswana is not unknown to those promoting it as Africa’s unique success story (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012). But their argument is that such practices, which constitute the misuse of state resources for private gains or personal favours (Fukuyama, 2014; Snyder, 1992), is limited among others by “a remarkable unity or purpose and continuity of policy choices in relations of corruption and spoils limitation” (Charlton, 1990: 21-22). This can be translated to a system of checks and balances between the different groups that make up the political elites in the country. But corruption does still exist and when it is evident, it appears to be found at the highest levels of the political elites (Goop, 2013), and it’s worsening (von Soest, 2009). Poteete (2014) reported:

The long-ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has resorted to desperate strategies to retain power. Private radio stations broadcast leaked recordings of BDP politicians discussing the inclusion of ruling-party campaign managers in cabinet meetings and using fake Facebook accounts to discredit critics. The president and the BDP campaign manager attacked the character and personal life of an opposition candidate who is also the leader of a rival tribe, inflaming ethnic tensions and personalizing (sic) the campaign....

Abuse of state resources has become more blatant... pictures of the president’s campaign team travelling to a campaign event using military aircraft went viral... conflicting intelligence leaks have flooded the media variously claiming the government is preparing to steal the elections, smuggling in fake ballot papers, or bringing in high-tech military and intelligence equipment.

As in any modern Western liberal-democracy, none of the above would have been imaginable in Singapore today. The erosion of inclusiveness and transparency in national governance, policy formation and implementation has many implications for the national economy. Political risks are higher, removal of ineffective political elites is much more difficult, government contracts are not given to the best bidder on merit, creative destruction become extremely difficult.

But is it not then the job of Botswana’s democratic system to curb this type of behaviour? Molomo and Molefe (2005) noted that out of the nine elections that the country has held in its 40 years of independence, only two enjoyed a voter turnout of more than 50%. They argue that much of this may be the result of alienation from mainstream politics.
The predominance of the BDP may also give voters a feeling of resignation, that even if they vote, their vote would not make a difference. This scenario is exacerbated by the split and fracture of opposition parties, which divide the opposition vote to the advantage of the BDP. (Malomo & Molefe, 2005: 101)

Here, a comparison with the voting turnout in Singapore is meaningless because voting there is compulsory. But the point that I want to relay here is that democracy has not done a very effective job at all in ensuring that Botswana advances its political inclusion.

It is worthwhile to note also, that as I mentioned earlier in this paper, political inclusion runs contrary to certain types of democratic practices, namely populism and majority tyranny (Brandt, 2004; Kane & Patapan, 2012; Zakaria, 2004). Both are extremely damaging to inclusiveness and political pluralism and something that Singapore’s People’s Action Party successfully suppressed in the early years after independence. This supports my contention that democracy and political inclusion or pluralism are not necessarily one and the same or go hand in hand.

DISCUSSION

We need to escape simplistic assumptions about theories, concepts and ideas if we were to truly understand the mechanics behind what they describe and create something that is worthy of policy consideration. The comparison I drew between Singapore and Botswana in this paper highlights the importance of not mistaking political inclusion with democratic processes. But there are a myriad of other concepts that call for a more nuanced understanding than currently provided by econometric analyses. Take private property rights, for example. There is an important distinction between rigorously enforced laws to protect private property rights and the level of public ownership over assets, land, infrastructure, commodity and other output in an economy. When one asserts that private property rights is ‘good’ and no private property right is ‘bad’, the above distinction needs to be clarified.

When we say things like democracy is ‘good’ because it promotes economic growth and makes the world a peaceful place, so often is the explanation for ‘why’ get overwhelmed by lengthy and sophisticated data analyses on strength of correlations and beta coefficients. As far as policy making is concerned, I question the usefulness of knowing that an increase of one unit in Freedom House’s democracy rating corresponds to an increase in GDP growth by a certain factor, ceteris paribus. I question even more the response of: ‘this is what other economists are using’ when addressing concerns over the definition of ‘democracy’ according to the dataset used. Statistical analyses are extremely useful and have made significant contributions to understanding economic development. But they have their limits.

When Polity IV measures for constraints in my home country Australia’s executive function, for example, it is unclear what consideration it took regarding the fact that our executive head of government also has control over the country’s legislature – sometimes in both houses of parliament. When Freedom House collects its data to determine our democracy rating, it’s unclear about how many of its survey respondents consider various High Court and Supreme Court judgments on criminal organisation laws when assigning Australia its ‘civil liberties’ score. It’s unclear about whether they have considered the fact that our constitution does not limit terms for a Prime Minister (or even mention the position of Prime Minister at all), or that although Section 51(xxxi) of the Australian Constitution states that any acquisition of property by the Federal Government must be on “just terms”, this restriction does not apply to individual State governments. What consideration statistical indices make of this and legal debates about the Australian Federal Government’s ability to persuade a State government to acquire a property not on ‘just terms’ is unknown.

Due to the limitations outlined above regarding the definition of democracy, many of the metrics used to calculate the level of democracy in a state, incorporates within it elements of political inclusion and liberalism. Both of these, as I’ve explained earlier, are distinct although not mutually exclusive from the concept of a ‘rule by the people’. Polity IV’s measure of constraints in the executive function is an example of a measure of a state’s liberal character rather than democracy per se (see Maddox, 2005). The Economist Intelligence...
Unit’s Democracy Index incorporates ‘civil liberties’ into its measure, which has more to do, again, with liberalism and political inclusion than democracy.

In depth historical and case studies into individual countries of interest and institutions within them can assist to enrich the literature on the nature of inclusive attributes and institutions. We should also have a better understanding of the nature of democracy, as an ideology distinct from political inclusion and liberalism. In turn, these will significantly contribute towards finding the true engines of politically driven economic growth in developing economies in transition and subsequently allow us to develop more informed models. I propose that we should not ignore outliers like Singapore and Botswana. As Hirschmann (1986: 176-177) noted, we should instead:

*train ourselves to be on the lookout for unusual historical developments, rare constellations of favorable events, narrow paths, partial advances that may conceivably be followed by others, and the like.*

**CONCLUSION**

In a country with a sufficient level of legitimacy and centralisation of political power, sustainable economic growth needs to be supported by the types of innovation and progress that can only be achieved through inclusive institutions. At the fundamental level, this necessitates pluralist and inclusive political institutions. Econometric analyses have identified a positive relationship between democratisation and economic growth, and negative relationship between corruption and economic growth. But our understanding of the mechanism that leads to inclusive politics supporting sustainable economic growth needs to be further developed, beyond the capacity of mass data analysis by statistical means.

The relationship between democratic institutions and sustainable economic growth is more nuanced than what econometric modelling reveals. Although democracy and inclusive politics very often go hand in hand, this is not always so. Each can exist independently of the other although they are obviously not mutually exclusive. Democracy, of course, can act to assist social and political inclusion (Kane & Patapan, 2012). But it can also act against it in the case of majority tyranny. The experience of Singapore over the last 50 years shows that sustainable inclusive growth can take place in the absence of fully functioning democracy. A comparison between it and Botswana’s experience 50 years after independence show that democracy per se, does not produce the sort of sustainable growth that takes a third world nation into the ranks of the first world. Political and subsequently economic inclusion (per Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012), on the other hand, do turn third world into first world countries – even in the absence of fully functioning democracy. Understanding the subtle differences between democracy and political inclusion serves to contribute towards truly identifying engines of economic growth, which should serve as a driver of policy and interest based agenda in developing countries. My hope is that this paper takes us a step further towards this goal.

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1 I wish to thank Professor John Kane for his input and guidance on this paper.
2 The term ‘political’ here is defined as being associated with politics as per Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary definition, that is: “activities associated with the governance of a country or area”.
3 The Greek roots of the word are *demos* meaning ‘the people’ or ‘the citizens’ and *kratein* meaning ‘to rule’.
4 Voting citizens do not include those individuals who are deprived of the right to vote. Infants, children and teenagers up to a certain age are included in this category. So are slaves, and sometimes women and minorities.
5 Here, I define the term ‘political inclusion’ as broad access to participation in state governance, whether it be through running for political office, participation in public service, influencing decision making through lobbying or by other means.
6 A term used in Acemoglu and Robinson’s work to describe the antithesis of inclusive institutions.
7 Although the two are obviously not mutually exclusive.
8 Of Ceylon, later Sri Lanka.
9 Subsequent acts of Soekarno and Soeharto in Indonesia undermined the inclusiveness that Bahasa Melayu helped to create throughout the nation building process.
10 Perhaps with the exception of Australia’s recent Choppergate.
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