

“Without the Trust of the People, There Can Be No Government” – from the *Analects* of Confucius

By Kazumasa Kusaka

Confucius, on being asked what the requisites of politics are, replied, “Sufficiency of food, sufficiency of arms and the people’s trust.” Pressed for his views on what should be done if these conditions cannot be met, Confucius replied, “Part with your arms, then your food. Death is inevitable for all humanity, but without the trust of the people there can be no government or society. If government loses trust, the sovereign ruler has to go.”

In Northeast Asia, these words have since ancient times served as a norm for governance. Japanese prime ministers, including Junichiro Koizumi, called general elections based on this phrase asking for the people’s trust. The People’s Republic of China learned lessons from Russia’s failure of *Perestroika* with which people expressed dissatisfaction over the non-delivered promise of food and economic prosperity. China was afraid of the people’s voice and kept following Asian developmental dictatorship which prioritizes economic development over democratization. However, Confucius argues that without trust, it is time for the ruler to go, even in an imperial age, and much more so in the modern world.

Winston Churchill, in a famous speech in the British parliament in 1947, remarked: “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” He was, of course, being humorous, and making the point that through elections, orderly transitions can be institutionalized in democracy.

But recently we have observed in the US presidential election that even in a matured democracy, the outcome of an election can bring extreme difficulties for the losing side because of the sharp divisions among political and social groups. This is a fundamental challenge of democracy. The 2000 US presidential election between Al Gore and George Bush was a precedent. Then Undersecretary of State Frank Loy told us at the UN COP6 plenary session that when democracy is at an early stage, the election outcome is known even before the election; it then leads to a stage when it takes a few days to count the votes, and when it advances further, three weeks are too short to tell the outcome. He was jokingly referring to the then still ongoing process. The big difference with the 2020 US presidential election was that the loser, while sharply disagreeing with the Supreme Court verdict, offered his concession, for the sake of unity as a people and the strength of democracy.

We have to note that this time former defense secretaries issued a letter urging that the military should play no role in the outcome

of the election. This certainly marks a clear difference from recent political moves seen in some countries, and has kept the United States as a leader of democracy.

Trust in institutions and between individuals has been shaken. The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly highlighted the underlying income and asset discrepancy issue, and social and political divisions in society. If those who feel left behind cannot find a political party to represent them, they may feel their only outlet is in SNS or on the streets. In Europe, social democratic parties have declined, and in Japan the liberal wing of the LDP has lost momentum. Established political institutions seem to have failed to catch up with ongoing fundamental changes.

Even before the pandemic, the OECD reported that only 45% of citizens trusted their governments in 2019. Trust is essential for social cohesion. It affects governments’ ability to govern and enables them to act without having to resort to coercion. In coping with the current pandemic, some scholars point out that female leaders of governments have communicated better with their people, and also in Africa strong social cohesion among tribes was proving effective together with their traditional medicine.

Trust matters, but how can we respond to declining trust? Why did political parties fail to listen to the people? In his book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (1970), Albert Hirschman writes that quite often those dissatisfied just exit without expressing their frustrations. It then requires acute political or business leaders to detect what is going on with such people, as they could potentially turn their loyalty to an authoritarian leader. There have to be voices from within, if political parties or other institutions want to stay relevant. A good case to observe now will be how the US Republican Party shapes its strategies.

Trust matters even more in our globalized world where no legal coercion is effective otherwise. Our challenge is to address the issue of “inclusive growth” so that no one is left behind. With the US returning to multilateral relationships, it is time for us to restore trust in international institutions. Voices are the key, and we need to have more players to have stakes and to share a sense of participation and ownership.

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