

Does it still make sense to talk of political doctrines or moral values in societies where values are so diverse? We are always being told by battle-hardened politicians that in real life politics is all about gaining the upper hand. With the political turmoil that erupted in September, when the legislature became enveloped in allegations of improper lobbying, the general public thought the whole thing was an ugly political dogfight, despite the attempts by President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) to dress it up as an issue of right versus wrong, of propriety against impropriety.

Earlier in the year, when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets demanding the abolition of military courts and for trials involving the armed forces to be heard in civilian courts, the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) was quick to promise something would be done, only to subsequently use all the tricks at its disposal to stall any amendments to the law. Politicians are becoming ever more sanctimonious, while the public watching them are becoming ever more disenchanted. Democratic politics in Taiwan has descended into a satire, and people are increasingly losing faith that a democratic system is capable of bringing about change.

It is this kind of environment that can be a hotbed for the rise of an autocrat. This is a tragedy in the making, and it is certainly not exclusively the KMT's doing. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), preoccupied with furthering its own interests, is the Brutus plunging the knife into the back of Taiwanese democracy.

When we were struggling against the autocratic regime in the past, we believed in more lofty values, striving for fairness and justice, as all the power was in the hands of the KMT, while the general public had none. The minute Taiwan became a democracy, we changed: We became cynical and forsook our former values; we no longer knew what we believed in; and politicians preoccupied with power and winning elections came to dominate democratic politics.

Democracy is not just about elections, or about the system, or about political or economic interest: Democracy is also about morality. A democratic politics that ignores concrete values is a false democracy. Without morals and values informing it, it ends up the same way, with the powerful controlling everything, while the citizenry, clinging on to their vote slips, are as

enslaved as they were before, only under a new system.

There have been examples of politicians in history that have strongly believed that democratic politics needs to incorporate actual values. Perhaps the most oft-cited of these is former US president Abraham Lincoln. In his Peoria speech of Oct. 16, 1854, Lincoln criticized people who defended slavery, deploring the “monstrous injustice” of the system they were supporting and saying that keeping slaves “deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world.”

Lincoln said he believed that slavery “forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty — criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self-interest.” For Lincoln, a political system that was of no help in the realization of justice was of little use.

Just over a decade later, in his March 4, 1865, second inaugural address, given at the time when the US Civil War was coming to a close, Lincoln noted that both sides “read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.” Given this, who has the right to decide who is just?

He closed with the sentiment: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in.”

Lincoln did not emphasize the superiority of his own moral stance: The tragic circumstance of the civil war had given him cause to reflect upon how a nation torn asunder because of a moral issue needed to come together once again. No matter how tragic the war had been, it was still important to care for the widows and orphans of the fallen enemy.

This “tragic pragmatism” was not to say that people could not decide for themselves the rights and wrongs of slavery. The shift in Lincoln’s rhetoric was merely representative of the need for humility in politics and morality, and that despite the incompatibility of the respective values, it was necessary, in the interests of the public good, to concede that the other party had the right to voice its own political beliefs, too.

Preserving the values of democracy

Written by Huang Cheng-yi 黃景義

Thursday, 14 November 2013 08:38

The prerequisite to this is that the candidates in the political arena come armed with their value concepts. Anyone there purely for the sake of winning is entirely lacking in the spirit of democracy. The soul of a democratic republic lies in the rational debate of concrete values, so that people can see how they can strive for ever loftier ideas. It is not founded merely on indulging in the endless pursuit of personal interest or of maintaining your grip on the monopoly of power.

Does Taiwan have a soul of its own? What values are we, as a nation, pursuing? It is OK for values to be diverse, but we must have some. Otherwise, the White T-shirt protests in August, September's furor over improper lobbying and the shoe-throwing protests that followed Ma like a second shadow last month would have just evaporated into thin air.

Without a value stance, how are we to evaluate what is happening in politics? Without values, we may as well slump into nihilism and consign our democracy to the ground ourselves.

Albie Sachs, a former judge on the Constitutional Court of South Africa, is scheduled to visit Taiwan next month. On the eve of the abolition of South African apartheid, Sachs spoke to his colleagues of the importance of not allowing your soul to become as depraved as your enemy's. The greatest victory of authoritarianism lies not in its continued actual existence per se, but in the ability of its adherents, in the post-democratization era, to corrupt all those individuals who had formerly advocated reform. It is important to remain vigilant at all times, if we are not to forget why we strived for democracy in the first place.

Huang Cheng-yi is an assistant research professor in the Institutum Iurisprudentiae of Academia Sinica.

Translated by Paul Cooper

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2013/11/13](#)