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Mahbubani on "What is governance?"

Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, responds to Francis Fukuyama's "What is governance?":

Francis Fukuyama has done the West an enormous favor with his essay on "What is governance?" He is subtly introducing a distinction between democracy and good governance, a distinction which is almost inconceivable in Western minds.

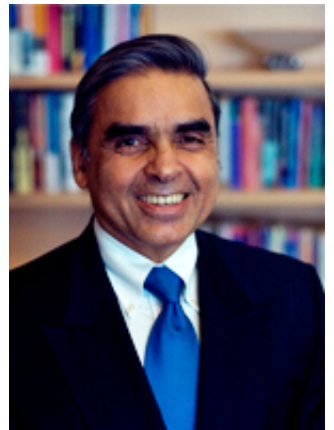
To put it bluntly, democracy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for good governance. And, yes, it is possible to have good governance without democracy. Anyone who doubts this should look at the record of China's government over the past thirty years. It is not perfect but it has lifted more people out of poverty, educated more people, increased their lifespans and generated the world's largest middle class. No other society in human history has improved human welfare as much as the Chinese government. It would be insane to deny that China has enjoyed "good governance."

The reason why Western minds cannot state this obvious fact is that they believe that good governance without democracy is as inconceivable as a semi-pregnant woman. Yet, as Fukuyama delicately argues in his essay, it is "more of a theory than an empirically demonstrated fact" that "the current orthodoxy in the development community" is right in believing that "democracy and good governance are mutually supportive."

For the record, to avoid misunderstanding, let me emphasize that democracy is a desirable goal. I do not want to live in a non-democracy. This is why China too will eventually become a democracy, especially after it has developed the world's largest middle class. The destination is not in doubt but the route and timing are.

This is why it is essential to draw a clear distinction between democracy and good governance and try to understand what good governance is. Fukuyama's essay introduces many key elements we have to pay attention to. These include: procedural measures, input measures, output measures and measures of bureaucratic autonomy. But these measures are not enough. They focus more on the methods of good governance than the results. To state the obvious, there is no point having the best processes in place if the results are bad. At the end of the day, the people want to know if they are better off.

Fukuyama asserts that "the quality of government is the result of an interaction between capacity *and* autonomy." And on the next page he shows that Singapore stands highest on the axes of capacity and autonomy. Curiously, he does this without any explanation or reference to Singapore in his article. Having worked in the Singapore civil service for 33 years, I believe that Singapore has done well because it scores high on capacity



and on the culture of service. The Singapore civil service has performed brilliantly but it has not done so because it is the most autonomous. It has done so because it has imbibed a culture which focuses the minds of civil servants on improving the livelihood of Singaporeans.

Sadly, the Singapore success story has never been properly studied because most Western minds—with their usual black and white mindset—cannot conceive of “good governance” as an independent and desirable good. The greatest contribution that Fukuyama’s essay can make is to open the Western mind to new possibilities. And when the Western mind opens up, it will discover a treasure trove of examples of good governance, a treasure trove which has become even more relevant to the West given the travails that both the American and European governments are having in delivering even basic levels of good governance to their populations.

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