The People and Their Representatives in Democracy: Who Went Wrong?

Edwin Michael and Rachel Yeoh Shu Wei
Department of Journalism, Faculty of Arts and Social Science University of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Perak, Malaysia
E-Mail: edwinm@utar.edu.my

ABSTRACT
Thrasyphas’ sudden burst of anger at the talk of the meaning of justice is one of the most interesting happenings in Plato’s Republic as the essence of the book revolves around justice. This paper strives to play out the points Thrasyphas expressed into the context of democracy today, and how Thrasyphas’ justice is seen today, in Malaysia. From relating Thrasyphas’ point of argument to the practice of democracy and ‘popular control’, a link will be drawn to explain how Thrasyphas’ meaning of justice differs from Socrates’ definition.

Keywords: Plato, justice, Malaysian elections, philosopher-king.

1. INTRODUCTION
In Plato’s book, Republic, it draws out many scenarios. Plato depicts the conversation of Socrates and his friends regarding elements of politics, art, music, geometry and the like but the basis of the conversation is centered on justice. Another interesting fact about Plato is that his writings are in dialogues. Therefore, characters in his works speak in an inaudible way. Also, his dialogues do not involve him personally, but a conversation of Socrates with his friends. Sometimes, it is confusing when identifying the ideas of Socrates and Plato. For this paper, there will be a close focus on a point that Thrasyphas made to Socrates regarding the question of justice. There was an argument between Thrasyphas and Socrates about the meaning of justice. Thrasyphas was rather cynical about justice and Socrates disagreed with him and has high regard for leaders or rulers. From here, it will be linked with the democratic rule in Malaysia. How does Malaysia define its justice? With the question of justice, or the presence of Thrasyphas’s definition of justice, how can a democratic country allow this? The term democracy is used very widely today. In fact, it is used at every level no matter, personal, corporate or political level. To narrow it down, ‘democracy’ would often relate to a collective term for a wide variety of regimes. To name a few from the wide variety are radical democracies and moderate ones, representative and direct democracy, parliamentary versus the presidential government, majoritarian and consensus democracy and established plus the partial democracies (Schmidt, 2002). Since there are so many from a few types of democracy, it is only logical to apply democracy in two ways. One would be to list down a proposed theoretical view of democracy, in which, though not all democratic countries may apply it to the full, but the countries have the gist of it. Another way would be to take it at the surface level in which every proposed democracy follows themselves.

That way, democracy would be generalized and it the application would be more flexible. Going with the latter, a taken generalization for democracy would be countries that practice ‘political equality’ or ‘popular control’ (Saward, 1994). ‘Political equality’ or ‘popular control’ is an indication that there are elections held where the people who take up their place as rulers or leaders are a result of popular vote by the masses. The people on top are an effect of the support of the people and afterward, the leader would be representing the voice of the people. Therefore, if it is the voice of the people that determine the rulers, who is in the wrong when a Thrasyphas definition of justice is practiced? Would that mean that democracy is actually faulty?

2. PLATO AND DEMOCRACY’S
Plato’s Republic will only lead to writings of justice because the whole book, threaded by a scarlet thread is discussed based on what justice is and how justice can be acquired. Many have written dissecting Plato’s justice, its meaning and also its goodness. Coby (2003) focuses on the first of these questions (touching on the goodness of justice briefly at the end) and offers as a definition of justice-order. It takes a route that is less travelled by determining Socrates’ justice as compared to Thrasyphas’ or his other companions. He reveals that justice, in simple terms is minding one’s own business. With his interpretation, he attaches the meaning to every class in the community.

Duncan and Stienberger (1990), on a different note, write about justice in the context revolving around three questions. They are;

(a) Can justice be found or created in a world of politics?
(b) If so, what does it look like and how is it to be achieved?
(c) Lastly, if not, what does this tell us about the world of politics (seeking justice)?

Instead of looking at each level of society and seeing that it maintains justice and how it maintains justice, here, it debates on Plato’s guardians and philosopher-kings with the use of justice. Who are philosopher-kings? Who can be guardians? If there were to be a city like what is stated by Plato, it would certainly not come from today’s era for today’s’ most celebrated form of political government is one that is democratic and it is obvious that in Republic, democracy is not looked at rather positively. Okpala challenges Plato’s Republic by identifying guardians and philosopher-kings and it’s fallability as compared to democracy. However, he does not go against Plato on all aspects but balances Plato’s views with the modern democracy views.
With the knowledge he gathers, he explains both sides of the story in where, Plato did not believe in money because he understood its power to corrupt with the advancement of democracy, where war may be viewed as a source of increasing national wealth, especially to the leaders of the United States of America. Okpala also states that a distinction between the democratic state and Plato’s Republic lies in the appointment of its leaders. He also says that in both the doctrine of Plato and the celebrated democracy, are weaknesses. Plato’s model doctrine puts too much power in the hands of a selected few, where for democracy it is that the masses are given the ability to govern the country.

An argument was also made by Saxonhouse (1998) arguing Plato’s response to democracy. Here, she takes a stand to oppose democracy. She explores Book Eight of Republic and agrees to the ‘formlessness’ of democracy. By ‘formlessness’ she wishes to illustrate a state without proper structure, where everyone has the right and where a state can move to a place where it can potentially destroy itself. However, how does one define democracy? Plato’s objection to democracy is not of the modern democracy. He looks back to the democracy that has been practices during that time. Self-evidently, the properties of democracy can only be derived and listed after democracy has been defined adequately. To take the same problem from a slightly different angle, it is no use defining democracy in terms of the politics of any particular country, for then no one can praise that country for being democratic - for it is not possible to praise a society for qualities which belong to it by definition rather than by political contrivance.

Therefore, Saward (1994) has provided an etymological route to the definition. The phrase ‘rule by the people’ is highly ambiguous and is open to highly diverse interpretations. According to him, a more promising route might be to define democracy according to certain basic principles (Saward, 1994). ‘Popular control’ or ‘political equality’ would be his way of defining democracy. With the general definition that Saward (1994) has proposed, it comes along with many other types of democracy. Schmidt’s (2002) essay explores the relationships between political performance profiles and major types of democracy from a comparative perspective. It focuses on the types of democracy available today to find significant patterns of relationships between performances of these democracies. Among the types of democracies mentioned are, representative and direct democracy, parliamentary versus presidential government, majoritarian and consensus democracy, and established democracies as opposed to partial democracies. From the point of types of democracy, where does Malaysia stand?

Lim comes to explain that In Malaysia, political mobilization follows ethnic divisions and the struggle for power is among political parties representing particular ethnic groups. Therefore essential basis of election of the country’s political system is based on a plural society. Lim explains that basic rules of the electoral system were formulated prior to independence for the first federal election in the Federation of Malaya in 1955. These rules, together with important additions and changes, were incorporated into the constitution adopted at independence in 1957. Important amendments were made to the electoral system both before and after the 1963 formation of the expanded Federation of Malaysia. Here, Lim takes on the yoke of examining of these various amendments, totaling six in number, providing the best way to understand the basic rules of the present Malaysian electoral system. Liow (2005) takes the Malaysian election at another note. He investigates the issues between the ruling party, that is UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and their continual success in Malaysia’s general election. His paper also explores the implication of the 2004 general elections for Malaysia’s former Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi. Along with it also comes tactics and steps taken by the party to ensure their win, which, again, brings us back to Thrasymachus’ challenge to Socrates, where ‘might, makes right’.

3. DISCUSSIOND

During a discussion, Thrasymachus was brought to anger by Socrates when he as asking and discussion matters of justice with Polemarchus. According to Thrasymachus, justice is on the side of the stronger ruling party. Leaning to the statement that Thrasymachus has laid out for Socrates, is the charges of contamination that Malaysian politics are tainted with. But before that contamination is unveiled, here is a snippet of the response of Socrates’ companions as documented by Plato’s Republic;

What is justice? It is truth telling and giving back what is owed, says Cephalus, the aging, metic patriarch whose home is the site of Plato’s Republic (331c). Not exactly, interjects Polemarchus, Cephalus’s solicitous son; justice, rather, is helping friends and hurting enemies (332d). Nonsense, thunders Thrasymachus, the impatient and petulant sophist. Justice is the advantage of the stronger (338c); it is ruling (with all of the trappings of law and justice) for the sake of the rulers-the strong. (Coby, 2003) Here, the focus would be brought to Thrasymachus and his flaming remark on justice. If one is perfectly unjust, Thrasymachus explains, and if one acts unjustly on a sufficiently large scale, they will obtain whatever you want. The particular person will be ‘nighthier, freer, and more masterful than the just’. Conversely, if you are just, you will always be taken advantage of by the unjust. Indirectly the question would form in this way, ‘If justice represents the injustice by the strong towards the weak, why then, be just?’ There are rulers who rule based on their own interest (Thrasymachus’s view).

‘I help you, you help me,’ Najib (Current Prime Minister of Malaysia) tells the people of Sibu during the by-elections campaigning. It is easy for the people to say that the rulers of this country are corrupted and with more power vested upon them, they have opportunities to become more corrupt. The people would most certainly agree with Thrasymachus’ saying that ‘Might makes Right’ wherefore the ruling is party is always stronger. A good example to be pointed out is the activities of Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, who is the Chief Minister if Sarawak, now alleged over timber corruption. Taib has been the Chief Minister of Sarawak for 30 years now and under him, Sarawak has suffered loss when it comes to development, resources and also environmental health.
Taib’s unseemly wealth while so many indigenous peoples are living in abject conditions can be seen as power over the people. It is action taken justly, in Taib’s interpretation. Along with the clearing of hectares of land, driving out indigenous people from their homes, he has also a list of companies he owns; not just in Malaysia, but also around the world. His position enables him to rub shoulders and make money at the same time.

Other cases revolve around the Sarawak Bakun Dam, and the raping of Penan girls (Aliran, 2011). So far, the Swiss Anti-Corruption Agency has frozen the assets of Taib Mahmud over the allegation of timber corruption. In the country, however, investigations have just started here in Malaysia by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Agency (TheStar, 2011). Mistakes are not usually made by leaders when it is for their own interest. In any case that they do make a mistake, it would be not covering up their wrongdoing as well as they should have, as per example above.

Socrates explains that ‘sometimes leaders mistakenly pass laws that are not their own interest.’ However, to refute Socrates, even if leaders make mistakes, and make laws that are not of their interest, no one would really know. If a leader makes a mistake on a law that costs his interest but does well for the interest of the people, it is most likely that he will go along with it because in a democratic country, it may help to win the people’s hearts, and most importantly, votes. If the leader is really desperate, he or she might just make amendments to the law made. He or she only knows that they made a mistake. Thrasymachus says that if leaders make a mistake, they should not be the ruling entity. There are two ways to decipher Thrasymachus’ statement. One is that the people will realize that the leader is not a capable one and therefore, he or she will have to let go of the position as a leader. Or, because ‘might makes right’, it is rather impossible for a leader to be wrong.

However, one cannot firmly accuse the government saying that whatever they do is for their own interest (Prime Minister just launched the New Economic Policy (NEP) and Key Performance Index (KPI), which is for the good of the people) so, what is to be done? Malaysia practices representative democracy, therefore, the people are required and are responsible to elect their leaders and the leaders are required to act according to the interest of the people. The people can vote representatives on and off the parliament but they can’t change anything in the cabinet.

A democracy allows for virtually all to take part in the election of a leader (with the possible exceptions of children, illegal immigrants and convicts). Campaigns are held during which candidates can debate in a national forum. Interviews are held to allow voters to gain knowledge of the candidates’ policies (Okpala). Here we see two sides; the people and the leaders. The people elect representatives and the representatives or leaders work for the interest of the people. We see that there are good and bad leaders too.

We also are aware that the people are the ones responsible in placing the representatives in their places to make decisions that are for the good of the people. The leaders, when elected, should take up their responsibility and make laws that are just, in accordance to the interest of the people. When a law is unwanted, or non-beneficial to the people, it is the strength of democracy that enables the people to voice up or step up for a change that is for the peoples benefit. When authorities are left unchallenged, their characters appear to be altered, inverting their true selves with alter egos incapable of putting the welfare of others before their own (Okpala). In spite of this, how many Malaysians actually evaluate all policies and subsequently vote based on what is relevant to them? Okpala asks, to Americans;

‘In fact, how many Americans understand the relevance of so many events that would allow them to make a truly informed decision? The media portray a narrow minded view of the world, showing only portions of what could impact life in the States. Many people knew nothing about Afghanistan and the injustices forced upon its people by the Taliban, until the events of 9/11. If people are not fully informed about events, domestic and foreign, then how can they understand any candidate’s proposed policies?’ (Okpala).

4. THE SAME HAPPENS IN MALAYSIA.

It is obvious that there is no reciprocity between these two groups of people. The question now is who went wrong? The people who choose the wrong leaders? Or are the leaders not fulfilling what they were supposed to do? Who is incompetent? The people or the leaders? This brings the topic to another section. Is democracy in Malaysia failing? The people’s voices can be proven to be wrong, and leaders that are not capable may be elected and this brings the country to a level that is rather chaotic. It can be said that there is no justice, and there is only justice defined by Thrasymachus. Another scenario played by the powerful in Malaysia would again side Thrasymachus’ argument.

In Malaysia, the Elections Commission will do the delineation exercise every eight years. They are elected by the King or ‘Yang di-Pertuan Agong’, on the recommendation of the government. However, they have been used regularly by the government to delineate or re-delineate electoral boundaries in Malaysia in order to maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of the ruling coalition party, which is the National Front (Liow, 2005). In 2004, the elections were announced with a campaign period of only eight days, which is the shortest in Malaysian history. This severely reduced the time for the opposition to launch a comprehensive election campaign. With the opposition facing limited resources, with an addition ban on political rallies and the government almost-total control over the media, the eight-day campaign proved to be far too strong for the opposition to let out even a squeak (Liow, 2005). Would this prove what Plato has written about democracy? Would this change if natural born leaders and those who are virtuous and have the ability to rule be handpicked to lead the nation?

The argument is that ‘might means right’ and therefore, those who have authority have the power to create laws that work for them. For example the Mahathir Mohamad (Malaysia’s fourth Prime Minister) was able to amend the Malaysian constitution regarding the Judicial Review and it actually works for the interest of the leaders. Plato’s Philosopher Kings can be applied in the Malaysian context.
to create a better political environment. Only the people who have the qualities to be a leader should lead the country represent the people because they would be better at making decisions for the interest of the people. They are also believed to be wise for they seek wisdom. In Plato’s work The Republic, such a knowledgeable being (philosopher-king) determines the laws in the city. Plato believed that the philosopher king was incorruptible since his only desire was knowledge (his thirst for knowledge surmounting that of any vice). Furthermore, since this portion of their souls is also rational, this ruling cadre will be just; assuring that the city they rule is also just (Okpala). Also the philosopher is complete, whole, and self-sufficient. He is all that he can be, exiting the cave of society. Implementation however, is much harder. It is idealistic answer to how Malaysia will function with philosopher-kings, in reality, who can be a selfless philosopher-king? It is dangerous to allow so few to govern so many. Without the checks and balances seen in a democratic society, an environment of tyranny can be fostered. Even with a philosopher-king to rule the country, human nature disappoints and hence the quote, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton).

5. CONCLUSIONS
From the form and function of democracy it can be seen that it involves two sides, the voters and their representatives. When judging on who is in the wrong in this system that has proven to make unjust, just in Malaysia. It is both the people and the leaders fault when mistakes are made in a country. The people do not know who they are voting for and at the same time, leaders are capable to deceive the people into voting for them by giving them incentives. Therefore, a leader that is deceiving is not eligible to be a leader. Leaning towards the argument Thrasymachus has made does not make his argument right. Both, Thrasymachus and Socrates are right, but they differ on the level of mutual understanding. They differ from their concept of the explanation of justice. For Socrates, the intrinsic worth of justice depends upon the proper apportionment of the soul. Although the unjust person may have acquired many goods through unjust means, he will not be free and will be friendless-not free because he will be bound to the satisfaction of his insatiable desires and friendless because there is no one of whom he will not take advantage to satisfy them. Socrates also argues that the unjust person will be poor since all of his resources will be consumed, just by satisfying his appetites. The unjust person will steal from family, friends, and strangers in order to secure temporary satisfaction. Lastly, the plight of the unjust person is to be haunted by fear; perpetually concerned that those of whom he has taken advantage will seek revenge when time or circumstance allow. Is the kind of life that Socrates calls the good life? Thrasymachus does not touch the intrinsic but the extrinsic, as does many people nowadays view life. The society today is wrapped by the influence of capitalist, generating a generation of materialists who fit the above description of an unjust person by Socrates. Based on that statement, it can be said that democracy is not good for Malaysia. Saxon house (1998) states that forgetfulness of form extends to the inability to distinguish between good and bad pleasures to the toleration of all. In Socrates’ democracy, freedom is not being forced into a shape. That is one reason why there is a classification called philosopher-kings. A philosopher-king, without the greed as of the leaders of today, (e.g. Taib) would be able to move Malaysia further in making Malaysia a better society. Implementation however, is much harder. It is radical view from book 8 of Plato’s republic. The American Political Science Review. 84(4): 1317-1322.

REFERENCES


