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## Politics Need To Change, in Three Fundamental Ways

*By Han Fook Kwang*

### SYNOPSIS

*Politics in many countries has become divisive and fractious, driven by leaders who are more focused on defeating their opponents and creating discord rather than improving lives and promoting harmony. There needs to be fundamental changes to how it is practised to achieve its original purpose of making society better.*

### COMMENTARY

Politics had a bad run in 2024. In many countries, it dominated the news headlines for the wrong reasons. In South Korea, impeached President [Yoon Suk Yeol's attempt to impose martial law](#) to neutralise his political opponents backfired spectacularly and he is now [facing arrest](#). In the United States, the unseemly spectacle of a [presidential candidate being convicted of an offence](#) related to a sexual abuse case and facing imprisonment seemed too surreal to be true. But American politics proved it can outdo Hollywood scriptwriters when Donald Trump not only prevailed in the election but did so decisively after narrowly [surviving an assassin's bullet](#). Elsewhere in Europe, [Japan](#), Canada and Southeast Asia, there were other developments that shook the political ground.

### What Is Politics Meant To Achieve?

There appears much that has gone wrong with how politics is being practised and especially what it is meant to achieve. Ultimately, it is about improving the well-being of society, raising living standards and promoting peace and harmony in the community so that all may achieve happiness, prosperity and progress.

In a democracy, you do this by exercising your right to elect leaders you believe can

best succeed in doing so. Looking at what has happened, especially in the recent past, the opposite has happened.

Political leaders have become more focused on destroying their political opponents by demonising them instead of enhancing goodwill to achieve the common good. As a result, the community is divided and the hatred and contempt for the other side consumes the body politic so much that the intended purpose is completely lost. Beating up the competition becomes more important than improving lives.

In the West, partisan politics has become more fractious and divisive, as seen in the recent elections in [the US](#) and the [United Kingdom](#). President-elect Trump was called a fascist by his political opponents; in turn he returned the favour with several choice offerings of his own. When politics has descended to such a level, how can it be seen positively?

In [Thailand](#), [Malaysia](#) and the [Philippines](#), politics appears to be mainly about the infighting taking place among the parties. The result is not only that progress is impeded but the community is weakened by division. Politics itself becomes a casualty. People see it as a problem instead of a positive force for good and lose trust in the leadership and its institutions.

A Pew Research Centre survey of 24 countries last year found that a median of 74 per cent of respondents believe elected officials don't care what people like them think, that leaders are basically out of touch. Hence, in many of the more than 60 elections held last year, incumbent parties were booted out of office or lost significant ground, including in the US, UK, France, Germany, South Africa, India, Japan and South Korea. Voters were clearly dissatisfied with the status quo, including how politics was being practised.

The Pew survey found that in 12 high-income countries surveyed, only slightly more than a third of respondents were satisfied with the democratic process in their country. When asked how it could be improved, the overwhelming answer from all: Politicians need to do better, in representing the people and responding to their needs, not to vested interests.

## **Do Better**

Alas, too many are so intent on winning at all costs, they lose sight of what it is all about. What is required is a fundamental change in how politics is defined, starting with three redefinitions.

First, it is not a zero-sum competition where I win only if you lose, and the worse your loss, the better my win. When politics is viewed as such a competition between opposing sides, it can only lead to greater division and disharmony, not just between competitors but among their supporters.

If the ultimate purpose is to improve lives and promote harmony, politics must be seen as a collaborative effort involving as many people as possible in the society working towards a common aim. Viewing it as a competition between opposing sides is the worst possible way to achieve the common good.

This might seem difficult to do because of the nature of the first past-the-post, winner-takes-all feature in most democracies but it is precisely because such a system promotes extreme behaviour by politicians that it needs to be moderated. Otherwise, there will be no limit to what they will do since the stakes are so high. (It is also why some countries adopt a proportional representation system, but that is another story.)

Second, it should never be viewed as a do-or-die mission where the fate of the country hangs in the balance and the alternatives mean the end of the world. It is almost never such a dire choice except perhaps in failed states fighting for survival. But political leaders always over dramatise their aspirations and their indispensability.

Even in a stable democracy such as France, when President Emmanuel Macron called [snap elections](#) last year, he argued that the country faced an existential crisis after his party lost badly to right-wing parties in the European Union elections and that, if he did not act, it would descend into "chaos". In the event, his gamble failed, but I doubt if France is any worse or better off than before.

The presidential election in the US was also full of such hyperbole, including that it was about the future of democracy and the fate of the world. The trouble with raising the stakes to unrealistic heights is that it encourages an "anything goes" approach. If the future of mankind is at stake, how can you not go to the end of the world to achieve your aims, legal or not, morally correct or otherwise? It can only lead to political corruption and excesses.

It also ignores all the other important players in society, including the private sector, non-government organisations and public and private institutions that contribute to the well-being of the country. This goes back to the first point – when politics is viewed as a collaborative effort and not a destructive competition, there will be greater recognition of other actors and their roles in achieving the aim of improving lives.

Politics is important – and political leaders especially – but you cannot justify their importance by letting them define everything in their own terms. There are others who are also critical and though they may not be overtly political, they help fulfil politics' ultimate purpose.

Third, the notion that politics is all about power and what to do with it needs to change. Power is, of course, an integral part of politics and when used to benefit society can do enormous good.

But how to ensure it does? There is no way of doing so and it is often the result of good fortune (the right leader at the right time) than anything else. When power falls in the wrong hands, it leads to catastrophic consequences, as has happened too often in human history, resulting in wars and violent civil conflicts.

### **What Can Be Done?**

There is no silver bullet for this, and various ways have been tried including curbing state power, introducing checks and balances into the system and giving non-partisan institutions greater power and autonomy.

But more important than any of these is the political culture of the country that views politics as less about power and more about moral and ethical behaviour. A society that requires political leaders to act to the highest standards of morality will not tolerate the political excesses seen in recent years, including the role played by wealthy billionaires to influence elections and the blatant disregard for truth during campaigning. In such a place, the ends do not justify the means, and the people judge their leaders and hold them accountable by what they do, not what they say.

The three requisites of a more enlightened political system that I have highlighted above are interrelated. You cannot have one without the other. If leaders view politics as a zero-sum competition in a do-or-die mission, they will not behave ethically.

And unethical politics is never about improving a people's well-being.

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