

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AS DEMOCRACY: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON CORRUPTION & OPEN GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore recent global trends on corruption, open government and freedom of information as the key principle practice to restore faith in the idea of Democracy. Since the end of World War II, there has been drastic regime shift in many countries, mostly in Asian, Eastern Europe, Africa, Middle East, and Latin America, from an authoritarian model to democratic model. This trend, as perceived by one school of thought, believed to be a positive development in terms of human progress. Even though the change has taken place in terms of the system as a whole, but the functioning style and process of the governments remain so rigid and secret from the public. I will explore the role of corruption and the style of governance in the process of making open governments. Another crucial puzzle to unlock/ unleash is how freedom of information laws can strengthen people's participation in the process of decision making on the issues, which affect them.

Keywords: Corruption, Democracy, Open Government, Right to Information, & Secrecy

INTRODUCTION

Many theorists have been testing democracy and ideas on democracy both in theoretically and empirically. New meanings are being entrusted to democracy every next minute. The fact is that there is no single democratic theory but there are many democratic theories. Similarly, there is no single democratic country but there are democratic countries with the difference of levels of democratization. Robert Dahl, who known to be the esteemed theorist of our times, believed that institutionalization of the democratic process is crucial to any system, especially in Polyarchy. For him, no modern democracy qualifies as democracy in its full sense. He outlines five steps of institutional criteria. (R Dahl, 1989). One, Effective participation means that citizens must have opportunities to participate other than mere voting in the election. Expressing one's reasons on the outcome and express reasons on public agenda etc. is very much important. Two, voting equality. Voting equality at the decisive stage makes every citizen believe that she/he is part of the democratic system without parameter of different perceptions. Three, enlightened understanding by which Dahl means that in a system if at we want to believe that it is a complete

democracy, people must enjoy the equal opportunities to affirm best choices to serve their interests. Fourth, control of agenda. It is not a surprise that few organized control the agenda and force its decisions on the great-unorganized majority. For Dahl, it is the people, who must have an opportunity to decide on what political matters are important and what matters should be brought up for the deliberations. Fifth and final, Inclusiveness. The principle of inclusiveness must be extended to every citizen's equality without any considerations. Citizens are the stakeholder in every state. Robert Dahl defends democracy by suggesting that we can realize the essence of democracy by the process of decision-making.

Democracy, as Amartya Sen, a Nobel Laureate, and prominent political theorist of our times, expounded is that in a system justice must be considered as the assessment of Niti in the Nyaya perspective. The idea Niti is all about institutions and rules and regulation applies to them whereas Nyaya is about the realization of those institutional guarantees in order to see every citizen enjoying equal opportunity. In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen listed five instrumental freedoms, which contribute to individual capacity (A Sen, 1999). Economic facilities, social opportunities, political freedom, transparency guarantees and protective security. As Amartya Sen argued, open governments cannot be possible without these guarantees to every citizen. Corruption has crept into every corner of public offices. Corruption spreads like a viral disease from office to office and person to person. One of the major reason is that lack of openness and transparency in the institutions that affect the public. How to achieve this freedom for transparency guarantees? Sen suggests that absence of corruption is the key while giving the public access to police, justice and disclosers of various decisions. Sen also laments that few constraints that need immediate consideration to deliver transparency guarantees to every individual in society. There are a lot of unpublished contracts and tenders, no regular audit, no laws on disclosure of potential conflict of interest, not much freedom to civil society and no facilities to report crime etc. These are some kind of serious constraints to transparency guarantees.

In its recent report, Transparency International has released a corruption perception index 2018. As shown in fig.A, Denmark, New Zealand, Finland, Singapore, and Sweden occupying to five ranks as the clean state or least corrupted while Somalia, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, and North Korea listed in top five from the bottom as most corrupted. If we analyze these states and the style of government, two things are apparently clear, even though many reasons may be contributing to both success and failures to each country as a nation and as a democratic system.

One, countries ranking the best and the top five or ten are actually complete democracies. Two, freedom of information laws were made in these countries much before the rest of the world. Sweden is the first country in the world to bring the law on freedom of information. That could be one of the major reason to tackle the issue of corruption. Various things like political

activities, health care facilities, education system, and levels of opportunities are much different in these countries from the rest of the world.

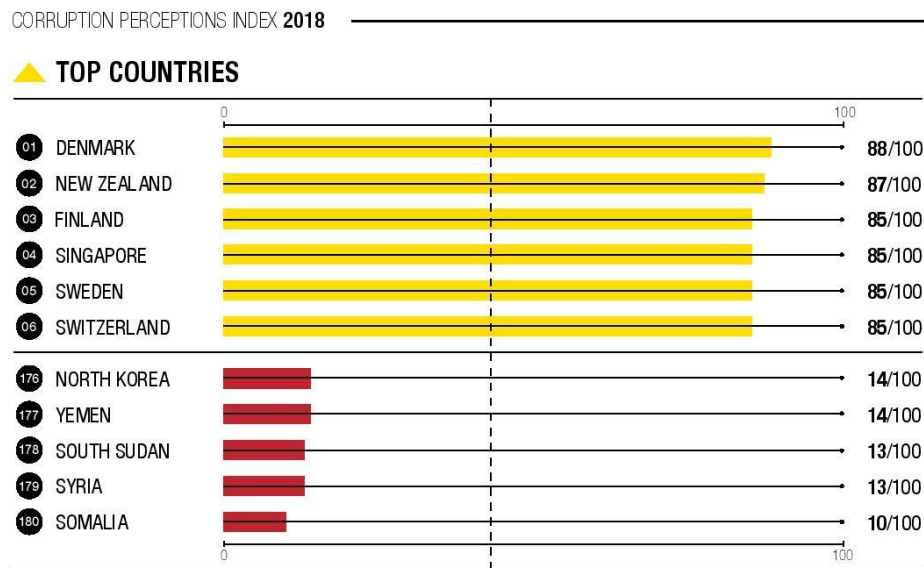


Fig. A: Shows the least corrupted and most corrupted

Source: Transparency International, Corruption Perception Index 2018

Freedom House, is an independent organization, in its annual report on political rights and civil liberties title as ‘Freedom in the world 2018’, it shows that there is no much difference in the world in terms of political rights and civil liberties that people enjoy. As fig A1 released that in 1987, 34.5% of countries are free, surprisingly with an equal percentage, 34.5% of countries are partly free while 31.0% of countries are not free. After 3 decades, which is in 2017, the report says that there is a good increase in the percentage of free countries from 35.5 in 1987 to 45.1 in 2017. However, the percentage is much smaller with respect to countries listed in the ‘not free’ category. The percentage of Countries not free in 1987 is 31.0% while the percentage has slightly reduced to 25.1% only in 2017, which means that there is only near about 6% improvement in three decades.

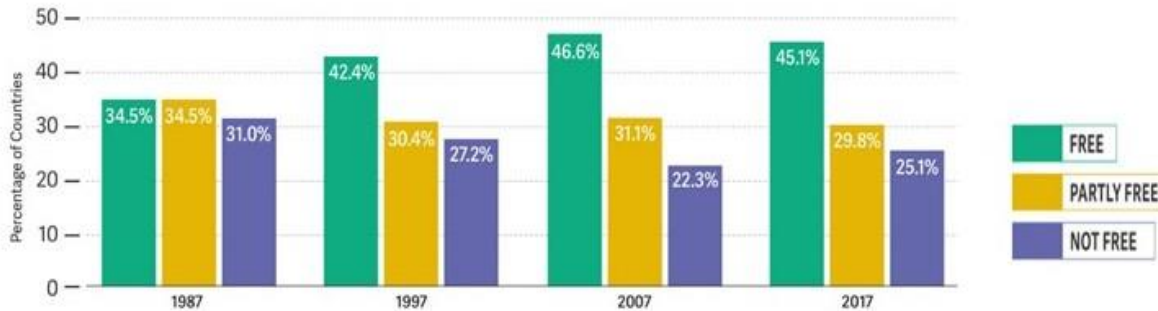


Fig. A1: Source: Freedom House in the world 2018



Fig. A2: Shows Global status by population and by country

Source: Freedom House in the world 2018

It is not a wonder to say to half of the world’s population is not free from authoritarian rule and restraints. Look at the Fig A2, 39% of total populations (7.4 billion) is either living in free countries or free systems. 24 % of the population is partly free while 37 % of the total population is not free. This explains the reduction in governmental transparency, economic crisis, and lack of free and fair elections, restraints on freedom of expressions and so on.

Looking at the other dimension that the level of participation and the kind of democracy existed is much interesting. The Economist Intelligence Unit in its Democracy Index Report 2018 (as shown in Fig.A3), shows that the participation in North America and Western Europe is much higher than Sub-Sahara Africa and the middle east. Democracy in the Middle East has been always in crisis. It is a challenging task for any system to survive and flourish as a democratic system without much participation from its citizens. As the report further says that participation may be less in these countries but the public debate, protests against governments, rise in a number of women participation, movements for proactive laws has been a very significant part of the recent phenomenon.

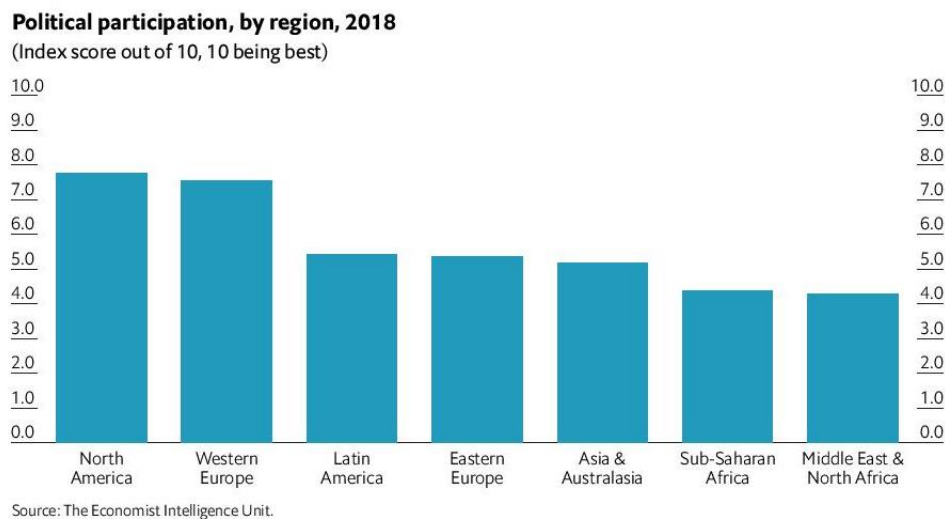


Fig. A3: Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2018

My research findings:

After going through various annual reports like Corruption Perceptions Index 2018, Democracy Index 2018, Freedom Index 2018, I want to know what exactly people think about changing scenario of democracy in the information world. I chose few academic and activist across the globe randomly and sent them survey question. Fig.AA4 & Fig AA5 shows that 66.7% of respondents fully agreed to the question ‘is there any connection between corruption and secrecy in law in governmental activities and 20.8% agreed with the view yet reserved their reason in between yes or no. This data tells us that the majority of the population still believe that there is a connection between corruption and secrecy and most people demand proactive legislation to bring transparency at all levels of governmental activities.

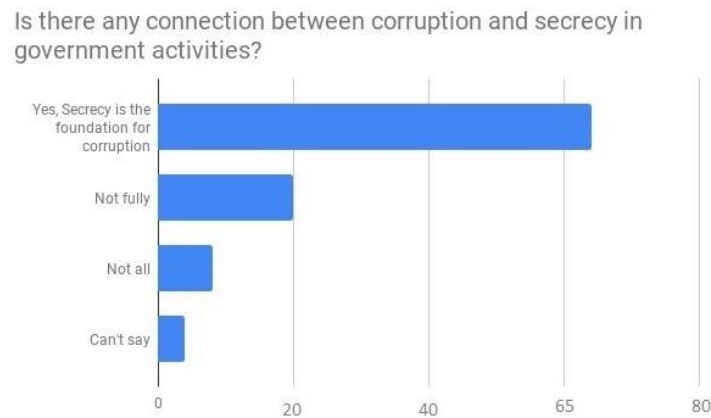


Fig. A4: Total count of respondents

Is there any connection between corruption and secrecy in government activities?

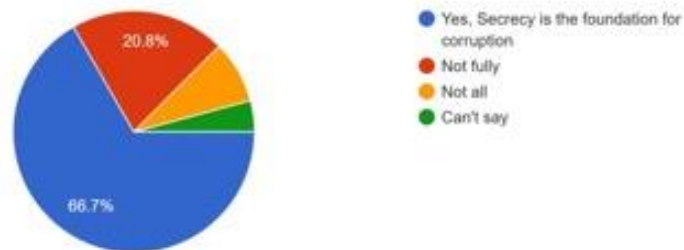


Fig. A5: Total percentage of respondents

Another disturbing finding is that the majority of respondents assumes that there is a considerable decline in Democracy and its institution across the world. As Fig AA 6 and Fig AA 7 highlights, 91.7% agreed with the question ‘Do you that democracy is a decline in the world?’ This is a huge indicator to explain the changing scenario. Those who believed that there is no connection in corruption and secrecy also agreed to the second question on the decline of democracy. Some of the response in their remarks says that the rise of right-wing parties across the globe is partly a reason for the decline of democracy and also mentioned other reasons like lack of transparency, restriction of freedom of expression, restriction on media, the rise of masculine nationalism, the collapse of democratic institutions etc..

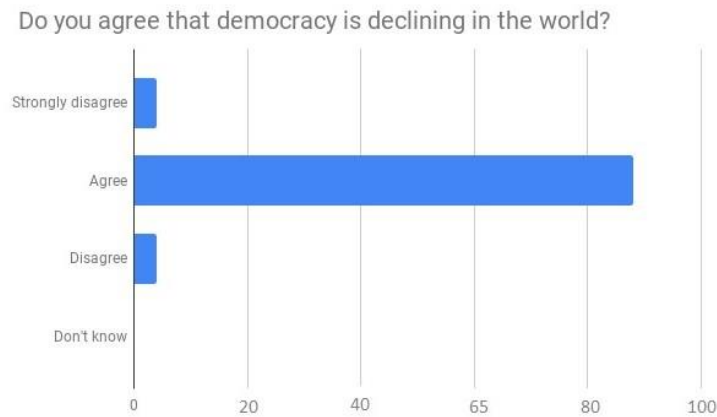


Fig. A6: Total count of respondents

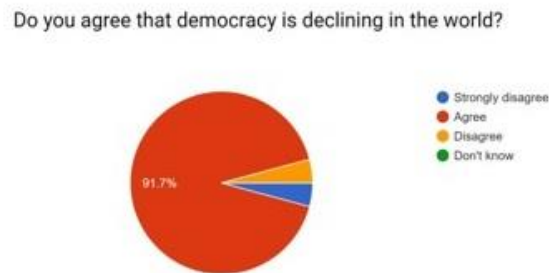


Fig. A7: Total percentage of respondents

In spite of lack of hope in the rise of democratic setup or institutions, the majority of respondents agreed positively to the question ‘do you think open governments/proactive laws will strengthen the democracy?’. By looking at Fig AA8 and Fig AA 9, it explains to us that 66.7% of people said yes and 25% partly agreed with ‘may be’.

Do you think open governments/proactive laws will strengthen the democracy?

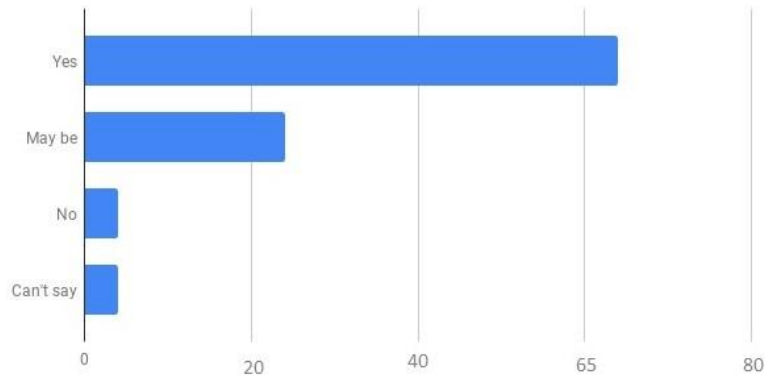


Fig. A8: Total count of respondents

Do you think open governments/proactive laws will strengthen the democracy?

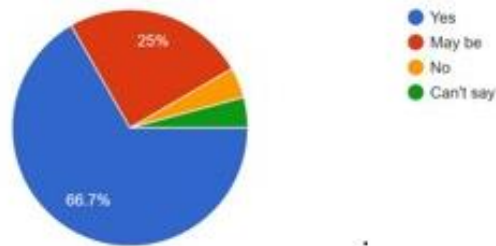


Fig. A9: Total percentage of respondents

CONCLUSION

Findings from both various secondary data analysis and my research draw few inferences without any further perplexity. One, the prevalence of corruption can lead a country into a non-democratic model of governments where it is impossible to see people practice notable and flawless democratic values. It is high time that one must realize the importance of proactive rules and actions to bring good governance values like transparency and participation. Every state must strive to expand its boundaries to improve the technology to connect with people and engage with people in its decision-making. Ineffective institutions must be restricted with effective values and solutions. Weak democratic value and things that cause that to democracy must be properly reformed from time to time to promote justice, transparency, development. One should learn lessons from the experience of countries like Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. As data shows, there is still plenty of hope to remove every authoritarian institutions and system. Enormous efforts are made to strengthen rule of law and democracy as the open disclosure of information and freedom of information laws are being practiced to make courtiers corruption-free.

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