

A lesson on democracy from Down Under

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COMMENT The making of a democracy is not only on paper but in practice.

Australia leads the world in this commitment as the nation goes to the polls today to elect a new government.

Tony AbbottAfter six years of what Liberal-National coalition opposition leader Tony Abbott calls "a bad government", political observers and the polls point to a political wipeout of Kevin Rudd's Labour government.

Abbott (), a former Howard government minister will become the 28th prime minister of Australia if the pollsters on the federal elections, which have been more often right than wrong, are accurate again.

If any nation deserves the tag of "world's best democracy" Australia in my opinion can confidently be given the accolade.

This federal election will see traditional Labour Party voters in the Muslim communities and some Labour-held seats swing to the opposition according to a news report, and Kevin Rudd may have to relinquish not only the country leadership but his own parliamentary seat as former Australian PM John Howard did in 2007.

The imminent defeat of the Rudd Labour minority government that won originally in 2007 in a landslide is the culmination of the people's frustration with a government that has failed to deliver on the crucial fronts of economic management and border sovereignty.

Implementation bungling of government policies such as the roofing insulation that resulted in loss of lives have typified a government accused of incompetence and waste as the country's foreign debt and the boat people problem escalate and myths are debunked by research findings that claim government spending to soften the effects of the global financial crisis of 2007 were overrated.

indian community protest in australia racial violence 090609There is widespread disenchantment with both major political parties in a country where politicians fare slightly better than used-car salesmen in credibility polls. Even then many of the politicians work hard to serve the people and there is nothing of the corruption

scandals of the nature and proportions of the Malaysian Cowgate and Altantuya scandals involving those in high public office.

Many Australian politicians approach their work seriously and appreciate their roles and responsibility in upholding democracy in their country. Debate is what they do best and they do not produce dirty videos of their political opponents even though Canberra, the seat of power, is also Australia's porn video capital.

The idea that anyone especially a politician criticising the government can be charged for sedition would be regarded as insane. Sedition is not a word known in their political vocabulary and the government would be surprised if the media and public and the opposition do not attack them in whatever they do.

Unexplained wealth

Politics in Australia is a profession, a calling and public life is seen as a service to the community and country. Unlike in many developing countries, it is not regarded as a route to riches. Retired politicians do not show the trappings of unexplained wealth unlike in Malaysia where politicians and certain public servants display wealth and living beyond their means. Several self-made wealthy Australians enter politics to serve their country through the use of their talents.

NONE Some Australian politicians like Independent Senator Nick Xenophon (right), unfairly barred from entering Malaysia, are highly-respected for the issues they raise to safeguard Australia from social ills such as gambling and other social justice concerns.

Xenophon will win his seat comfortably and deserves to be in the Senate which is elected, not appointed as in Malaysia, because the Upper House should not be occupied by clueless rubber stamps and political zombies. It is supposed to check the Lower House.

No Australian in high office functions above the law and I recall former PM John Howard voluntarily paying for the cost of his government jet when he made a detour for a private visit on his return from official business abroad.

It is such small acts of personal integrity of its leaders and their accountability that make Australia's political system distinctly democratic and admirable. Political parties do not condone corruption, especially when they involve members of parliament, and will not hesitate to sack their errant political comrades and subject them to the law.

Malaysia risks entering a dangerous phase if criminals and police and politicians form a triad of evil as newspapers report.

NONEThe Fitzgerald Inquiry in Queensland in the 80s exposed the criminal collusion between the police and criminals and the police and politicians that resulted in the prosecution of the police commissioner and indictment of a government minister and eventual routing of the 32-year-old state government.

Australia's democracy works because dishonest and corrupt politicians are charged in court, convicted and jailed. It is the government that fears the people and not the other way round because the police act independently and will not hesitate to arrest anyone, including a government minister, who breaks the law. The hectoring of citizens by government ministers that you often see in Malaysia is unheard of and no government minister dares to bully the people.

In the heyday of corrupt politics in the 80s, several high fliers were brought down to earth and none more dramatic than in the WA Inc scandal that resulted in former Western Australia chief minister Brian Burke and his deputy David Parker jailed, along with several tycoons including Alan Bond.

Cops not above the law

What makes Australia a paradigm of democracy?

The answers lie in the commitment of its people, from the politicians to the people to its constitution and democracy. There is genuine widespread freedom in the country and while you can find the crimes you find anywhere in the world, there is the certainty all criminal activity will be dealt with by the independent state and federal police forces.

Australia is by no means Utopia and dangerous bikie gangs on powerful Harley Davidson motorcycles occasionally rule the roads but the police have them under their watchful eye and the proper enforcement of the rule of law ensures the balance between freedom and law and order.

Rogue police officers are not above the law but subject to internal discipline and public backlash. There are crooked cops in Australia but their criminal lifespan is short and sooner or later the law catches up with them. Whether it is sexual crimes in the armed forces or halls of power, the guilty ones will be punished.

Australians know how - as in the slogan of the politically defunct Australian Democrats - to "Keep the bastards honest." And when you have a federal politician

allegedly using a credit card at public expense for his brothel visits, it is understandable why the police investigate. Corrupt government ministers have gone to jail for a pittance unlike in Malaysia where billionaire politicians are almost becoming the norm.

The litmus test of a democracy must be the ability of its voters to replace a bad government at the ballot box without fear or favour as what we have witnessed in Australia over the years and will again today.

A false democracy is where an incumbent government enjoys endless tenure in office because of cheating and undemocratic practices. That is why you won't find long-reigning political parties in the most democratic countries, unshackled by wanton and widespread corruption in government.

The rare exception is Singapore which albeit considered totalitarian in comparison to Australia nevertheless has a government that has delivered what Singaporeans need and now faces the challenge of changing demands to stop its sliding popularity. Australians admire Singapore for its 'no-nonsense' approach to corruption and discipline.

An unpopular government can only stay in power because its electoral system is fundamentally flawed and democracy reflecting the will of the people through the ballot box is thwarted. A government thus elected is not a good one and will continue to live up to its bad reputation.

Australia has seen the sins of the other nations - corruption in high office, police brutality and collusion with criminals, political murder, lying and cheating, robbery, rape, legal and illegal prostitution, and a litany of other social ills including an increasing social underclass.

NONEBut those problems are not swept under the carpet and the government, whether from one political party or the other, will not stop anyone from highlighting the problems. The nature of Australian democracy is its openness and freedom not to label any subject as taboo or sensitive and to abuse the powers of government to browbeat or unjustly prosecute anyone.

It was not always that way in a country that was once the colonial outpost for racial discrimination. But the repeal of the 'White Australia' immigration policy and the granting of voting rights to indigenous Australians saw the country make strides in social justice. It is still a country in transition and everyone gets to have a say, not just the government.

Remedies for victims of discrimination in Australian society whether in the workplace or society in general make it a safe place for everyone, albeit undercurrents of discrimination will always exist even among new migrant communities. Institutional discrimination is illegal and meritocracy is another hallmark of its democracy.

It is the commitment of its politicians to resolve the problems and the freedom of the media in bringing matters of public interest into public scrutiny and the punishment without fear or favour of perpetrators of crime including government ministers that mark out the country as a democracy where the rule of law is supreme.

Celebrating Malaysia Day

In a few days, Malaysians will celebrate Malaysia Day, but what will we be celebrating?

Malaysia will be a better place if patriots like poet laureate A Samad Said, student activist Adam Adli, people's activist Haris Ibrahim, electoral reformer S Ambiga, refugee advocate Irene Fernandez and a long list of altruistic Malaysians are recognised for their noble contributions to Malaysia instead of being demonised and unfairly charged or pilloried.

The Malaysian government can do better than its present crop of spokespeople who seem better at upsetting the people than winning their hearts. You want to see politicians transform into compassionate human beings rather than ogres who use the whip to lash the people as if they are slaves without rights.

Ultimately a national day must be of the people, by the people and for the people - a time of remembrance of what nationhood is about - and a time to honour those citizens who have sacrificed much for their country regardless of their political or ideological leanings.

NONEThe imminent political demise of Kevin Rudd (left) is a timely reminder that no politician can have an endless love affair with the voters built on hype and hypocrisy. Credit goes to the Australian voters - the crucial swinging voters - who will decide the fate of their nation for the next three years and beyond.

Whatever happens, the world will witness how a true democracy works in electing its politicians into power and discarding those who have failed their country. There is no fuss or fury from whoever wins and loses power.

There is no hooliganism and thuggery, or vote-rigging, the police enforce the law, the electoral umpire watches over the elections with open eyes, and the media gives the caretaker government and the opposition and even minor politicians a fair go, even if the Rupert Murdoch-owned media is pro-opposition this time.

Whoever eventually is declared the winner, the world will see the maturity and graciousness of the winners and losers congratulate or console one another, and the changing of the political guard is a ho-hum event among Australians.

Australians will go to vote today and they don't even have to show proof of their identity at polling booths and later this evening will find out who has won and who has lost. Those who travel and are abroad are adequately facilitated to cast their votes. All is done without incident and there is no cheating.

That's Australian democracy and why Australia is a great country.

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