

Political Parties and Ideological Mainstreams

By Ronald Meinardus

It is a fundamental insight that more than one solution is available for any given societal problem. How and with what recipe a government chooses to tackle a political, economic or social challenge is strongly determined by ideological inclinations. Basically, we can differentiate between three political paradigms -- socialism, conservatism and liberalism. In pluralistic democracies, these three mainstreams (or combinations of the three) tend to be represented in competing political parties in one form or the other.

Still, in today's political world, it is not always easy to identify political leaders with clear-cut political profiles. Ideological convergence has led to political confusion. In many countries, political parties are mere voting clubs, political machines without ideological content. This is particularly the case in many Asian countries, where political parties and ideologies for various historical, cultural and sociological reasons play a rather different role than they do in the so-called developed democracies of the West. I have become aware of these differences in the past years working for the Friedrich-Naumann-Foundation, first in South Korea and now in the Philippines; in both countries, members of political parties are important target groups of our educational programs.

In South Korea, geography remains a stronger political force than ideology. The voters' decision on election day is not so much determined by ideological preference, but by regional criteria. I will never forget that not-so-funny political joke with which a Korean friend explained to me this phenomenon shortly after I had come to Seoul many years ago. "(Former political leader) Kim Dae-jung could nominate even a dog as a candidate for mayor in his hometown in the southwest of the peninsula, and the people would vote for it."

Importantly, all major political forces in South Korea agree that political regionalism is not compatible with a modern democratic order and must be overcome. Fortunately, there are indications that traditional voting patterns along geographical lines are weakening due to ongoing urbanization and modernization.

While in Korea the political parties are well-established and powerful organizations with branches in all parts of the country, political parties as organizational entities are more or less nonexistent in the Philippines. In a commentary titled, "The crisis of political parties," a well-known Filipino columnist and sociologist lamented "the increasing insignificance of political parties to our national life." Most observers here would agree with his observation that "Filipinos vote for individuals, not parties. They don't take political parties seriously." Another respected local columnist gave the following explanation for this state of affairs: "In the Philippines, political parties are indistinguishable from one another. They have no platforms, principles and programs of government. Politicians are political butterflies who flit from one party to another at their convenience."

A while ago, I read a commentary in an international newspaper entitled, "Right, left and center are out of fashion." There, the author argues that voters in many traditional democracies are no longer interested in ideological concepts and are solely looking for political competence or -- as the writer states -- "less incompetence, whatever ideology." While, indeed, disenchantment of voters with the political class is a serious problem in many democracies (and political opportunism and turncoatism tend to enhance popular disgust with politicians), I cannot agree with the generalization that the citizens don't have ideologically

(and also sociologically) determined political and partisan preferences anymore. In spite of all the talk about an "end of ideologies" (or even "the end of history!"), throughout the world, the labels left, right and center continue to dominate political discussions -- and decisions.

The popular political topography of left, center and right may be traced back to the early days of parliamentary politics in Europe some 200 years back. Until this very day, even a superficial analysis of political debates in more or less any country will reveal underlying ideological preferences. While, surely, not all democracies in Asia have competing socialist, conservative and liberal political parties, listening carefully one may easily identify politicians exposing these ideologies.

Then what are the main differences between these mainstreams? And what are their core principles?

Socialists share the fundamental belief that it is up to the state to solve the problems of society. This conviction has major implications for economic policies, for when they are in government, socialists tend to restrict economic freedom and private property as these, in their eyes, generate or perpetuate social differences. For a socialist, "collective ownership" is considered the best safeguard against inequality. This is the exact opposite of the liberal credo. For liberals, private property is a basic human right. Therefore, liberals support the market economy. The promotion of economic freedom and political freedom stands at the very core of the liberal agenda. The shortest -- and therefore, in my eyes, best -- definition of liberalism comes from the former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, who said that "democracy and the market economy are two sides of one coin."

Unlike liberals and socialists, conservatives share a fundamental belief in the existence of a God-given order, a metaphysically determined status quo that needs to be protected and "conserved" (thus, the term conservative). Therefore, throughout the world, conservative parties often have a religious dimension, with the Christian Democrat movement arguably the most powerful globally. For liberals, religion and politics should be clearly separated. Over the centuries, the demand for religious tolerance has been a cornerstone of the liberal agenda. The quest for tolerance has never been so timely as today with religious fundamentalists once more leading the world to the abyss of a "clash of civilizations."

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