

Fukuyama and Dirty Politics

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Francis Fukuyama's [*Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*](#) is a follow up to his earlier [*The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*](#). For someone as jaded and mistrustful of politics, establishments and power as I am, it is a breath of fresh air and realism. Though sadly, it gives no cause for optimism.

Fukuyama tempted fate with his [*The End of History and the Last Man*](#) in which he stated that:

“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of **Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.**”

It is true that Communism has manifestly failed, as have the world’s dictatorships and theocracies. The proof is that so many of the people who inhabit such benighted states, even if they excoriate the decadence of Western democracies, simply cannot wait to emigrate to them. On the other hand, the financial collapses caused by the greed and incompetence of Western liberal democracies can hardly justify the claim that this is as far as we can get in improving forms of government.

Wherever you look democracies are incompetent, corrupt, or deadlocked to the point of dysfunction. America, Britain, and Israel are all examples of states that we might love for their freedoms but at the same time are dominated by a small percentage of rich and powerful, run by bureaucracies, hamstrung by incompetence, fraud, and vested interests. Politics is populated by ambitious, concupiscent, corrupt, ideologically straightjacketed, second-rate egos. So-called democratic systems are still full of gerrymandering, dubious varieties of proportional representation that disenfranchise huge portions of the population or allow a minority to hold them to ransom. And politicians are generally held up to ridicule. “Don’t play politics with me” is another way of saying, “Don’t lie to me.” The result is that at each election fewer and fewer people seem to care enough to vote.

Fukuyama identifies the essential ingredients of successful government; the State, Rule of Law, and Mechanisms of Accountability. In his analysis of systems historical and current, he identifies the examples of failure in one or more of these crucial elements. Even where the first two exist, the absence of accountability leads to decay. He writes:

“Human beings are social animals...this takes the specific form of

altruism towards family and friends...it is universal to all cultures...humans are also norm creating and norm following and make possible the collective action of groups...which tend to be highly conservative and resistant to change...they start with band and tribal societies and then advance to state level societies.

“Natural human sociability is based on kin selection and reciprocal altruism, the preference for family and friends. While modern political orders seek to promote impersonal rule, elites in most societies fall back on networks of families and friends... and when they succeed are said to capture the state...which makes it less accountable”

Fukuyama qualifies his earlier writing:

“All liberal democracies are no less subject to political decay than other types of regimes. Some have argued that accountable political systems have self-correcting mechanisms to prevent decay...but there is no guarantee that this self correction will occur.”

Most significant is the replacement of nepotism or tribalism with patronage or clientelism. Patronage is usually face-to-face, whereas clientelism is more a matter of mobilizing voters and involves mass party organizations distributing favors through complex hierarchical political machines. This is so obvious nowadays in the way left-wing cabals or unions influence politicians through their numbers. Similarly the other side, the Tea Party or anti-immigration groups, mobilize the right wing. Wealthy patrons on both sides invest vast sums of money in the expectation of reciprocity. The battle lines are drawn in the West between those who apply group blackmail and those who use money and influence to countermand ideologies or policies they see as detrimental or immoral.

The USA is a dysfunctional system in which checks and balances make it all but impossible to reform taxation or immigration, let alone curb excessive expenditure. Like two aging boxers, the two sides batter each other into a state of paralysis. “Pork barrel politics” means that you can mobilize large blocks of votes; be they unions, churches, minorities, or sexes, as well as Chasidic dynasties. You can demand a quid pro quo for your support on one issue, which will often contradict your own strongly held ideals on others.

So, for example, Obama wants to help underprivileged black children but cannot support charter schools, which evidently help them, because he is in hock to the teachers’ unions who oppose them. New York City has passed a law requiring that before performing circumcision in the Chasidic manner one must have written parental approval, because of the risks of infection. But because certain Chasidic dynasties command such big blocks of votes in New York, the authorities dare not enforce the law. Similarly, a Brooklyn district attorney avoided prosecuting cases of Chasidic child abuse for fear

of offending Chasidic backers. Examples such as these are replicated across the country.

The saving grace of corrupt Western liberal democracies is that there is a better chance of the common man having a say or rising to a position of influence than there is in oligarchies or dictatorships, where it is the man at the top and his cronies who make the decisions and filter out opposition. The situation in China and Russia seems to indicate that so long as people have the opportunity to better themselves financially politics matter less. It is when things turn economically for the worse that the illusion begins to crack.

The challenging question is what can be done. The obvious answer is to move to a state one thinks is less evil or corrupt than the others, or to a state with whose religious or cultural ethos one is more in tune. But this may not always be possible. The second option is to go into politics to try to change it. However, all the evidence is that such moral individuals get compromised or crushed by the system, and the party machinery always wins out, sometimes with beneficial results, sometimes not. In the end one can only try to ensure one's own bubble is an ethical one and to do as much good for others as one possibly can. Humans are corruptible animals, and clearly some are more corruptible than others.

Fukuyama's analysis and scholarship are a good way to start the new civil year!