

Sunil Bastian and Robin Luckham (Eds.)
Can Democracy Be Designed?
(London: Zed Books, 2003, 336pp.)

In the 1970s, a wave of democratization throughout the world began. Some states have been successful at implementing democratic reforms while others have not. This book, edited by Sunil Bastian of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka and Robin Luckham of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex deals with South Africa, Uganda, Ghana, Fiji, and in depth with Sri Lanka — all of which were heavily influenced by the years of British colonial rule, although, to be fair, it was only late in the game that colonial administrators were interested in forming democrats rather than clerks and tax collectors. There is also a useful chapter on the constitutional puzzle of Bosnia-Herzegovina of former Yugoslavia.

Constitutional issues involve questions about the balance of power between central and local government, the executive, legislative and judiciary, about the rights and duties of citizens and the military, and the role of the government in the economy.

Ultimately, all conflicts can end only when there is an agreement about the shape of government and the rules of law under which people agree to live. For such constitutional forms to last, there must be a spirit of compromise and an effort to balance interests so that no protagonist is left completely out of the final agreement. For in established democracies, the effectiveness of checks and balances, the vigilance of opposition parties, an independent and sceptical press, and dissenting voices from civil society groups all contribute to the democratic ethos.

The editors make a clear distinction between democratic institutions and democratic politics. This distinction is a reminder that democratisation is not just a process of implanting formal institutions of liberal democracy but a project of norm creation and cultural change. One must work with the deep politics of society. As M. Mamdani notes in his important book *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda*, “Logically and historically, the creation of a political community must precede multi-party competition. The creation of a political community requires a minimum consensus within that community — of all, not just a minority.”

There is no clear “road map” to the creation of a democratic society. While today, many authors stress the important role of civil society, civil society often reproduces the class, gender, and ethno-racial hierarchies which make governmental structures unjust or fragile. Decentralization, getting government decision-making closer to the people is not a cure-all, for it may also only reinforce the power of local elites. As A.M. Goetz and R. Jenkins note in a Sussex Institute of Development Studies paper on Uganda “poorer people usually have as little influence in their local settings as they do in the national political arena, and sometimes substantially less ...largely obscured from the scrutiny of either the media or public advocacy groups, local political environments frequently reduce the incentives for elites to reorient their priorities.”

Although the structure of society has an important impact on the structure of government, this does not mean that institutions are only a reflection of society. As Bastian and Luckham point out “ *Institutional choices can be made in a great variety of ways, ranging*

from entire new constitutional settlements, to piecemeal reforms, to the accretion of small changes, to the failure to make appropriate decisions when institutions are failing.”

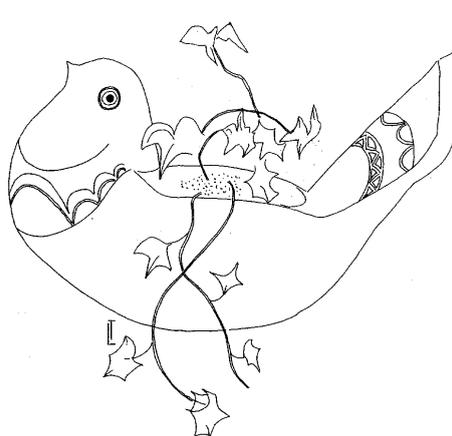
It is likely that in most societies, the way open will be for the accretion of small changes. The specialist of Nigerian politics R.L. Sklar has developed the concept of “democracy in parts” to characterise democratic spaces in authoritarian systems such as semi-autonomous courts and legal system, to non-intimidated press, to parallel clan and tribal structures. Sklar “*used the concept both to question the idea that authoritarianism was monolithic, and to initiate a discussion of how democratic politics could commence without waiting for the formal establishment of democratic institutions.*”

As Sklar notes, democracy “*comes to every country in fragments and parts: each fragment becomes an incentive for addition of another.*” Thus Bastian and Luckham stress that “*The design of institutions needs to be based upon a proper understanding of shifting power relations and societal transformations. For this a historical perspective is needed — both to offset democracy triumphalism and to counter pessimism over conflict and state failure.*”

As Bastian and Luckham note “*A great deal depends upon how decision makers use the political opportunities and spaces open to them at critical junctures in their history, especially at moments of crisis or transition...They must respond to history in order to make history.*”

Creating a spirit of democratic compromise and flexible institutions in multicultural countries will not be easy. In fact, there are many “winner takes all” people around. If democracy can not be designed on a constitutional drawing table, it can not be left to chance either.

René Wadlow



Drawing: Lona Towsley