

PROMOTING
APPRENTICESHIP

As a society, we can do more to promote the importance of skills. Singapore companies such as CKE Manufacturing view internships as apprenticeships, investing in mentors and designing meaningful tasks for interns. Their practices should be commended publicly, so that others can learn and contribute to an apprenticeship culture here.

Human resource experts have called on the public sector — as Singapore's largest employer — to take the lead in signalling that skills beyond paper qualifications are valued. While there seems to be more non-degree officers rising through the ranks, the Civil Service could be more transparent on how it rewards non-academic skills and experience.

Private firms can also play their part. In Germany and Switzerland, companies hold open houses and take part in career fairs where vocational students can find out about advancement pathways. Such openness assures parents and youths that there are opportunities in the vocational route.

Singaporean academic Lynn Lim from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland explained that the popularity of the Swiss vocational path "starts from the recognition of graduates and the provision of equal employment opportunities ... by local firms, multinational firms and more significantly the governmental or public sector".

"(This) eventually makes the society and families realise that a youth is provided with a recognised path of learning and opportunity, which is not offered only to those who go to the traditional academic route of education," she said.

There is also value in considering the proposal by former Singapore Workforce Development Agency chief executive Ong Ye Kung to codify the knowledge and skills to maintain standards in the industry. In Western countries, there is codification to set rules on how things should be done, down to the smallest details such as cutting carrots.

Mr Ong also suggested forming professional associations or guilds to instil professional pride within the trade and promote continual education.

Singaporean Georgina Zoss-Koh, who lives with her family in Zurich, admires the Swiss apprenticeship system, citing as an example how gardening apprentices learn to trim plants and acquire theories on plant varieties as well. Upon completing their apprenticeships, "the kids can take on the jobs immediately, without having to train them from scratch", she said.

"We have a bunch of scholars in Singapore, but how many can speak of hands-on experiences and how many can take on a job after graduation without ... training?"

AUTOCRATIC SYSTEMS MAY TAKE OVER

When democracies fail to deliver

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In his pathbreaking essay *The End of History and the Last Man*, published 25 years ago, Dr Francis Fukuyama predicted universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. The essay was written as the Berlin Wall was demolished, the world witnessed Tiananmen and the Soviet Empire collapsed, eroding whatever confidence was left in the alternative system — state socialism and central economic planning.

He may be right. We do not know yet, but we do know that the freedom embedded in democracy is priceless — for those who are lucky to enjoy it and for those who dream about it.

But there is uneasiness creeping into the soul while watching what is unfolding in the world — an apparent difficulty for democracy to score where it may matter as much as fundamental rights of freedom does: The ability to deliver solutions.

It is painful that a schism between the ability to deliver and freedom opens up, resulting in the possibility of people being disillusioned with democracy. If so, they may start to flirt with less palatable regimes that do not respect fundamental rights of freedom.

The first political philosopher revealing this danger was Baruch Spinoza, writing in 1675 that democracy is the most reasonable form of government but suffers from the defect of promoting mediocrity.

Spinoza observed that the majority of people are steered by emotions and feelings, not reason. But without reason, logic and rationality, governing well becomes elusive. It could lead to two scenarios.

One, demagogues and populists win elections because they flatter and humour the multitude of people not able or willing to see through the maze. But the danger is, they could be ineffective leaders as they pander to the populace, or worse, are closet dictators who eventually subvert the democratic system for their own interests.

Two, wise people cannot accept being governed by those they regard as inferior; they flee the political arena, thus making it easier for less qualified people to get elected into office. This leads to an inevitable decline in the quality of governance, causing people to doubt whether a democracy can produce good leaders.

THE PROBLEMS WITH DEMOCRACIES

Looking at the world in the past 10 to 15 years, an immediate conclusion might be that propagating democracy focused more on whether the country had free and fair elections rather than ensuring good governance. As



a result, people in new or fragile democracies do not necessarily view democracy as synonymous with a better daily life.

Countries such as Egypt, Iraq and Thailand come to mind as examples of failed democracies, although each has its own set of problems as well. The Arab uprising in Egypt led to its first democratically elected president, who was eventually ousted by the military over his controversial constitutional changes.

Iraq bid farewell to dictator Saddam Hussein, only to have elected former prime minister Nouri Maliki, who was accused of leading a divisive, sectarian government that has fuelled the violence that has led to parts of the country being captured by militant group Islamic State. Thailand has been embroiled in political protests, leading to the ouster of its prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, and subsequently a military coup.

Even more established democracies are facing problems. In some countries (e.g. France and Britain) protest parties — often espousing radical views that smack of fascism, racism or communism — recently won about a quarter of the seats in the European Parliament.

In the United States, the system has bred gridlock that resulted in a government shutdown last October after Republicans and Democrats could not agree on a spending plan for the fiscal year.

The weakness of democracy is the temptation to follow the demagogues and populists, who tell voters what they want to hear. Since his inauguration in January 2009, US President Barack Obama has constantly predicted improved economic conditions. Though a recovery has taken place, there is still a long way to go before production and lost income has been regained.

It shows in the polls. Only 26 per cent of Americans think the country

An Iraqi man inspecting damage in the aftermath of a car bombing this month that killed many people in a crowded outdoor market in Baghdad's Sadr City, Iraq. Iraq's elected former prime minister Nouri Maliki was accused of leading a divisive, sectarian government, leading to parts of the country being captured by the Islamic State group. PHOTO: AP

is moving in the right direction, while 57 per cent disapprove of the job the President is doing.

FREEDOM MUST COME WITH A BETTER LIFE

Current politicians have moved into one of the most dangerous territories of all: Creating a discrepancy between perceptions and reality. They are constantly telling the electorate something else than what people feel and see in their daily life.

One wonders how long this state of affairs can last. The wondering becomes mixed with fear about the alternative: A more autocratic system giving lip service to individual freedom while gradually strangling it.

Are we unknowingly slipping into political systems wearing the mask of democracy, but in fact gradually and implicitly abolishing fundamental rights of freedom, as the Edward Snowden disclosures may indicate?

The scenario George Orwell painted in his book *1984*, where the state erodes citizen's privacy through elaborate surveillance, does not seem so far-fetched anymore. It has become a genuine risk.

Observing the decades after Dr Francis Fukuyama's essay, the lesson to heed is that democracy must convince citizens that it can square the circle of guaranteeing fundamental rights of freedom and deliver human security, economic well-being, and a sense of social fairness. If not, Spinoza may win over Dr Fukuyama, and the world may slip into a state where "people at last prefer tyranny to chaos".

The wave of democracy after the end of World War II might then give way to more autocratic, maybe even authoritarian, systems that are ready and willing to abuse power. Ordinary citizens may pay a heavy price for such a development, facing the risk of losing out on both fundamental rights of freedom and the quality of their daily life.

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