

Consent and chaos

In many different guises, an ancient question still haunts human society: "What is the source of government legitimacy?" While this is largely settled in the Western industrial countries, David Rowe argues it is likely to disrupt parts of the Islamic world for generations

Instant global communications can make the world seem like a very confusing and chaotic place, animated by a wide variety of circumstances and viewpoints. Occasionally, though, a particular idea seems to offer a flash of unifying insight. For me, such an insight is offered by Alan Ryan in his recent book *On politics*.¹ The book is a magisterial overview of the theory of politics to which Ryan has devoted his long academic career at Oxford and Princeton.

The fundamental question of politics is how human beings can run their collective affairs effectively while preserving an acceptable degree of personal freedom. Moving beyond the law of the jungle necessarily requires some form of government authority, which begs the question: "From what source does the legitimacy of government authority arise?" It is a theoretical query with profoundly practical implications, helping determine whether citizens are willing to accept limits on their personal autonomy or are constantly on the cusp of organised rebellion.

In most societies that are heirs to the European renaissance, this is a largely settled question. With the exception of a small minority of dissenters, the accepted view is that government legitimacy rests on the consent of the governed. This leaves open the question of how – and how often – such consent is established and what rights are given to those who do not share the majority's decision. Needless to say, it also leaves plenty of room for the wide variety of controversy and vitriol so evident in political campaigns and legislative debates.²

The Western consensus is what Ryan calls the bottom-up or ascending basis for government authority. The alternative is a top-down or descending approach – with religion being the oldest rationale for this. Europe's kings and queens were thought to have divine rights. Today, this thinking is most clearly seen in the theocratic government of Iran.

Much of European history is about the unravelling of the top-down approach. The process accelerated

during the European enlightenment, animated by the realisation that, however perceived, God's will must be intermediated through the actions of flawed and too-often selfish – in religious terms, sinful – human beings. Despite the present settled consensus in the West, it is important to remember that divine right was the basis for the rule of Russian czars into the early twentieth century.

A top-down approach can also be based on non-religious grounds. The government of the Soviet Union sought legitimacy in the idea that it was serving the irresistible forces of history. Adolf Hitler sought legitimacy through the notion of a master race. At a more mundane and currently relevant level, governments also claim legitimacy by arguing chaos and anarchy is the only viable alternative – an ever-present strand of the dialogue between former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and his Western allies.

Ryan points out that a system need not be totally top-down or bottom-up. Indeed, he argues that medieval Europe held these two concepts in tension. Laws needed to conform to certain top-down principles deemed to be immutable, but this left room for a bottom-up approach to specifying instrumental details in some situations.

The removal of Muhammad Morsi as president of Egypt has given this issue a new relevance. Clearly, the Muslim Brotherhood views sharia law as the God-given basis of its legitimacy, and is now arguing that democracy is a false promise – with the country's military coup as evidence.

The millennia-old issue of the roots of government legitimacy is far from settled in the Muslim world. Any hope that the Arab Spring would quickly lead to tolerant, pluralistic societies with governments based on the consent of the governed was a triumph of hope over history. A similar misjudgement lay behind the belief that removing Saddam Hussein in Iraq would quickly usher in a pluralistic and tolerant democracy.

It took centuries for the West to reach a workable, if still messy, consensus on the basis for government legitimacy. It will continue to be a source of upheaval and uncertainty in the Islamic world, especially in Arabia, probably not just for years but for generations. ■

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¹ Ryan A, 2012, *On politics*, Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of WW Norton & Company, New York

² A wonderfully appropriate saying about democratic legislatures in action is that: "Anyone who loves sausage or the law should never watch either being made"

