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Public Opinion, the Public Sphere, and Quality of Governance: An Exploration

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Only fools, pure theorists, or apprentices fail to take public opinion into account.
Jacques Necker (1792), finance minister to Louis XVI

Introduction

Nobody knows for sure how to bring about and secure capable, responsive, and accountable government in developing countries, but ideas tumble out of learned papers with great regularity in this age of volubility. Thus, an agenda that began its life three decades ago with a preoccupation with public administration has now ballooned into something known as "governance" or "good governance." It is not easy to ask that we look at a fresh set of approaches to the challenge of how one secures responsive and accountable government in developing countries. What is proposed in this chapter can be justified as complementary to much of the excellent work already being done. The discussion here is a way of understanding the challenge of securing good governance that straddles both the supply and demand sides of governance by focusing on a dynamic force in politics, the power of public opinion, and a structural force in politics, the democratic public sphere.

This chapter develops two main arguments: first, that public opinion is a critical factor in governance and, second, that a democratic public sphere is a critical part of the architecture of good governance. Its organization follows these two lines of argument: the next section takes up public opinion, and the following section addresses the democratic public sphere. This introductory

section continues with a short discussion of the development context and definitions of key terms and concepts.

Development Context

Because this chapter is written as a contribution to thinking in international development, it is important to state at the outset that the overarching goal of all efforts in international development is the elimination of world poverty. As a result, before one can address the claims that this chapter sets out to defend, there is a prior claim: that good governance is crucial to the elimination of poverty. Now, although naysayers still, no doubt, exist, this claim is going to be taken as given. For instance, in its new governance and anticorruption strategy paper *Strengthening World Bank Group Engagement on Governance and Anticorruption,* the Bank (2007) reports that "a large body of research shows that in the longer term good governance is associated with robust growth, lower income inequality, child mortality, and illiteracy; improved country competitiveness and investment climate; and greater resilience of the financial sector. Research also indicates that aid projects are more likely to succeed in well-governed environments" (iii–iv).

Key Terms and Concepts

Good governance: An excellent definition of the term in a development context is offered by the white paper published by the U.K. Department for International Development (2006), the U.K. government's development ministry, titled *Eliminating World Poverty: Making Governance Work for the Poor:*

Good governance is not just about government. It is also about political parties, parliament, the judiciary, the media, and civil society. It is about how citizens, leaders, and public institutions relate to each other in order to make change happen. Good governance requires three things:

- State capability—the extent to which leaders and government are able to get things done;
- Responsiveness—whether public policies and institutions respond to the needs of citizens and uphold their rights;
- Accountability—the ability of citizens, civil society, and the private sector to scrutinize public institutions and governments and to hold them to account. This ability includes, ultimately, the opportunity to change leaders by democratic means (2006: 20).

Accountability: The sense in which the concept of accountability is used in this chapter has been well captured by Bessette (2001: 38–39):

> Political accountability is the principle that government decision-makers in a democracy ought to be answerable to the people for their actions. The modern doctrine owes its origins to the development of institutions of representative democracy in the eighteenth century. Popular elections of public officials and

> relatively short terms of office were intended to give the electorate the opportunity to hold their representatives to account for their behaviour in office. Those whose behaviour was found wanting could be punished by their constituents at the next election. Thus, the concept of accountability implies more than merely the tacit consent of the governed. It implies both mechanisms for the active monitoring of public officials and the means for enforcing public expectations.

Public opinion: In the literature, the term *public opinion* has at least four different usages. First, public opinion can mean the values, beliefs, and prejudices of a community. Second, it can mean elite opinion, especially the opinion of politically active elites. Third, it can mean the aggregate of individual attitudes to a public issue, which is what opinion polls mostly measure. Opinions are canvassed about an issue to which people have not necessarily given much thought. Fourth, public opinion can mean the majority view that comes into being on a public issue after that issue has been debated and discussed in the public arena. This usage is the discursive or deliberative conception of public opinion, which arises out of debate and discussion. It might not be wisdom, but it is not blind, irrational prejudice. In fact, it is wholly and entirely rational, and it is a critical force in public affairs. This is the sense in which *public opinion* is being used here (Glynn and others 2004).

Democratic public sphere: At the center of this idea is the *agora,* a bequest of ancient Greece. The agora was the heart—the main political, civic, religious, and commercial center—of the ancient Greek city. It was here that citizens traded goods, information, concepts, and ideas to try to better their situations and impact the powers that governed them. Thus citizens wanted to improve the quality of their lives. In political philosophy the agora has come to be known variously as the public arena, public realm, public domain, or public sphere. As a normative ideal, it represents that space between the state and the household where free and equal citizens come together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns. This is what this chapter calls the democratic public sphere (there can be authoritarian ones), the defining features of which are stipulated next.

Public Opinion, Good Governance, and Accountability

This section will argue that public opinion is a critical factor in governance.

Foundations

Why should public opinion be a central part of any framework for thinking about good governance and accountability? The beginning of wisdom in this matter is the realization that public opinion is the only true basis of power and legitimacy. A regime or a system of government is secure only to the extent that the relevant population willingly consents to the rule. If public support—really, public opinion—for a regime or system of government collapses, that

support will not survive for long. Arendt's claim that a people always have the "reserve power of rebellion" (1958: 237–38) explains why authoritarian regimes or dictatorships are the most assiduous in seeking to shape public opinion through propaganda and the fierce control of information flows—anything that might turn public opinion against them. Such regimes know only too well that when public support is completely eroded, their hold on power becomes as solid as the morning dew.

This attention by authoritarian governments to public opinion is true especially because the armed forces come from the people. The armed forces are part of majority opinion in a country. If it comes to a showdown between the people and the regime, the armed forces cannot be relied on to turn their guns on the same people from whom they have emerged. Recent popular revolutions around the world have involved that "tipping point" when the armed forces switch to the side of the people and the hated ruler or regime falls. Of course, contextual factors often delay this tipping point, but the fact that this switch can and does happen is the real reason dictators and authoritarian regimes seek to control access to information in their countries and to muzzle the press. They are terrified of the consolidation of hostile public opinion; they know how corrosive that consolidation would be of the very plinths of power.

Political philosophers have had much to say about the link between power and public opinion. One may begin with Thomas Hobbes's important insight that there isn't that much difference in bodily force between men, with the implication that you cannot base your control of other men on bodily force alone. In the *Leviathan,* Hobbes (1996) points out that

> … nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of body, and mind; as that though there bee found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind then another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himselfe any benefit, to which another man may not pretend, as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himself. (1996: 87)

Hobbes supports authoritarian control of a political community once the people cede the power to the sovereign, so he is quite adamant that the latter must control all opinions. His recognition of the power of public opinion is striking:

> It is annexed to the Soveraignty, to be Judge of what Opinions and Doctrines are averse, and what conducing to Peace; and consequently, on what occasions, how farre, and what, men are to be trusted withal, in speaking to Multitudes of people; and who shall examine the Doctrines of all bookes before they be published. For the Actions of men proceed from their Opinions; and in the well governing of Opinions, consisteth the well governing of mens Actions, in order to their Peace and Concord. (124)

The great philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume (1994), is even more trenchant. He argues that all government is based on opinion:

> Nothing appears more surprizing to those, who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission, with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we enquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find, that, as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and popular. (1994: 16)

Hume goes on to argue that three prevalent opinions are the true basis of government: the opinion that the government can take care of the public interest, the opinion that the government has a right to be in power, and the opinion that the right to property of the governed is protected. He concludes: "Upon these three opinions … are all governments founded, and all authority of the few over the many" (17).

James Madison, the philosopher of the Constitution of the United States of America, agrees that all governments rest on opinion and says that in every nation there is an advantage in making sure that a government has public opinion on its side. In *Federalist* 49, he writes:

> If it be true that all governments rest on opinion, it is no less true that the strength of opinion in each individual, and its practical influence on his conduct, depend much on the number which he supposes to have entertained the same opinion. The reason of man, like man himself, is timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires firmness and confidence, in proportion to the number with which it is associated. When the examples, which fortify opinion, are ancient as well as numerous, they are known to have a double effect. In a nation of philosophers, this consideration ought to be disregarded. A reverence for the laws would be sufficiently inculcated by the voice of an enlightened reason. But a nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosopher race of kings wished for by Plato. And in every other nation, the most rational government will not find it a superfluous advantage to have the prejudices of the community on its side. (Madison, Hamilton, and Jay 1987/1788: 314)

It is important to restate at this juncture the meaning of public opinion as used in this discussion: "collective judgments outside the sphere of government that affect political decision making" (Price 1992: 8). Because much of what happens in international development is shaped by macroeconomic frameworks, it is interesting to note that the person credited with popularizing the phrase "public opinion" (*opinion publique*) is Jacques Necker (1732–1804), French minister of finance in the 1780s. He noticed that the attitude of the French public to the king of France determined whether or not they bought his treasury bills. He figured out that public opinion was thus crucial to the

financial standing of the king and, hence, his power. Necker pointed out that the minister of finance "stands in most need of the good opinion of the people" (quoted in Speier 1950: 380). In Necker's view, fiscal policies should be pursued with "frankness and publicity," and the minister of finance should "associate the nation—as it were, in his plans, his operations, and even in the obstacles that he must surmount." Necker began systematic management of public opinion to reassure public creditors. His great innovation was the regular publishing of fiscal statements (*comptes rendus*). Palmer quotes Necker, who in 1792 said, "Only fools, pure theorists, or apprentices fail to take public opinion into account" (cited in Price 1992: 12).

This statement brings us to the role of public opinion in the stability of financial markets and the entire financial system. The key concept here is public confidence. For instance, at the beginning of a study of the confidence game in Latin American emerging economies, Martinez and Santiso (2003) point out that "at the heart of financial transactions lies a question of confidence. Economists from Smith to Coase have emphasized the importance of confidence, whether to explain the wealth of nations or the birth and death of firms. More recently, Paul Krugman has highlighted the contemporary 'games of confidence' that lie behind financial turbulence" (363). Krugman himself says, "The overriding objective of policy must … be to mollify market sentiment. But, because crises can be self-fulfilling, sound economic policy is not sufficient to gain market confidence; one must cater to the perceptions, the prejudices, and the whims of the market. Or, rather, one must cater to what one hopes will be the perceptions of the market (quoted in Martinez and Santiso 2003: 363).

Those who manage financial markets know that if they do not build public confidence—really favorable, sanguine public opinion—in the markets, investors will flee in droves. This is why all the corporate governance work designed to build public confidence in financial markets is so crucial. Banks and the banking system face a similar challenge. If citizens and customers have faith in a bank or the banking system as a whole—really favorable, sanguine public opinion—savings will be deposited and all will be well. If that confidence is shattered, when public opinion becomes negative, savers will all show up at once to demand their money. A run on the system ensues, and the system might very well collapse. That recognition of the power of public opinion is why heads of central banks always have to speak with the utmost care.

In an important essay on this point published in 1892, Arthur Ellis wrote,

> Good credit is public opinion that particular firms, or people in general, can pay up. If opinion goes the other way, credit breaks.… The appetite to buy [shares on the Stock Exchange] is only based on a belief or opinion that there will be others to buy in their turn. That has been the history of all great booms, or bubbles, from the South Sea bubble onwards, and it is also the history of a number of little known booms of which the public have heard little, and would understand little even if they heard.… Facts are "a good horse to ride"; but the knights who tilt in the markets know that opinion is their most trenchant weapon (113–16).

As it is with markets, so it is with politics. Public opinion is a critical force in politics, and it can be a force for social and political change favorable to the poor. Public opinion is normally understood to be important for shaping electoral results. Elections matter in governance not least as a device for accountability. Informed, considered public opinion does not have an impact on governance only at election time. It is at work all the time and leads very often to protests, demonstrations, petitions, even riots and rebellions. Intelligent rulers worry about public opinion all the time; however, they also continuously take the pulse of the public. This phenomenon is sometimes known as the permanent reelection campaign. Above all, in modern governments, such as Great Britain's, the communication function is a fundamental part of the machinery of capable and effective states. Citizens are always being studied, surveyed, and bombarded with messages packaged in various attractive ways (Kohut 2008; Lavrakas and Traugott 2000). It is thus surprising that governance frameworks used by the development community do not as yet include the power of public opinion.

A major thinker who was never in any doubt about any of this is Jeremy Bentham, Utilitarian thinker and the leader of the Philosopher Radicals who pushed successfully for the reform of government in nineteenth-century England. Bentham's argument regarding how public opinion helps to secure good and accountable government can be summarized as follows. The goal of constitutionalism is to make the state pursue the greatest happiness of the greatest number of the citizenry. However, the constitution maker cannot afford to assume that human beings are essentially selfless, altruistic creatures. It is far more sensible to assume self-interest. The task, then, is to make the few who govern on behalf of the many in a representative democracy pursue the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Crucial in this regard is to organize a coincidence of duty and interest, and this organization is done by making the operative power of the governing few rigorously subject to the constitutive power of the subject many. The best method to deploy between frequent elections is to publicize all the activities of the governing few. This, together with a free press, will bring official wrongdoing to the attention of what Bentham calls the "Public Opinion Tribunal." This tribunal is like a court composed of all citizens who take note of a public issue (including others overseas who do the same). The subcommittees are everywhere, witnessing everything, telling other citizens, and discussing what is going on. Once it is made aware of a matter, the tribunal will debate the issue and pass judgment, as well as make suggestions for better governance. This tribunal is all-powerful. Not only can it impose the moral sanction of ill repute, but also it can carry out acts of civil disobedience. Finally, it can also withdraw its allegiance and thus bring the system of government to an end. Such is the force of public opinion that, with the spread of public information, education, and understanding, through free and fair debate, public policy will eventually coincide with the greatest happiness of the greatest number (Bentham 1983, 1990).

The ever-evolving and much disputed framework for achieving capable, responsive, and accountable government in developing countries that are badly run is at bottom a theory of change, one that is supposed to provide an adaptable blueprint for changing political communities in which elite interests crowd out the general welfare into ones in which the preponderance of public resources will go toward securing the general welfare. That task is massive. If real change is to happen, whatever theory of change is developed must have robust explanatory power. This discussion now turns to a detailed explanation of why the power of public opinion—in the overarching context described by Bentham earlier—is a fundamental part of the answer.

The Centrality of Communication Influence

Public opinion processes matter if governance reform initiatives are to succeed. If they matter, then deliberate work to influence public opinion will matter as well.

Abundant evidence suggests that governance reform initiatives depend for their success largely on crucial stakeholders, and they always need to have these stakeholders go through noncoerced changes in attitudes, opinions, or behavior. The only trouble is that initiative managers do not always tease these needs out and call in the relevant expert support. These expectations of different publics or stakeholders are often signaled by some well-known, often loaded words or phrases, which need unpacking. It is only when they are unpacked that one can see what influencing challenges they portend for each initiative. The set in table 2.1 comes from a survey of World Bank project appraisal documents for different governance initiatives.

Table 2.1. Examples of Communication Influence Requirements of Governance Projects

Where the Critical Stakeholders Are	Where You Need Them to Be
Deep disagreement	Consensus
Indifference to public opinion	Active dialogue
Opacity	Transparency, access to information
Government doesn't care/elite opposition	Cultivating political will and using public will to generate political will
Focus on elite priorities	Responsiveness to citizen needs
Political interference from vested interests	Political buy-in
Isolated reformers	Broad pro-reform coalitions
Apathy	Active participation
Tepid support	Broad ownership
Disobedience	Increased compliance
Divided and weak communities	Effective demand by citizens
Public backlash	Public support
Voiceless and ineffectual citizens	Citizen voice and oversight
Widespread cynicism and despair	Public trust and confidence

Source: Author.

Unless the communication influence work is done, critical stakeholders will not move from the left-hand side of the table to the right—where they are required to be if the project is to succeed. In addition, a qualitative survey of public sector reform task team leaders in the World Bank conducted in late 2006 revealed that technocratic reforms almost always run into the following communication influence challenges (Garcia 2007):

- Encountering shallow political will: Many reforms fail or are reversed because political support is shallow. Many reforms are started with one single champion in government. When that person leaves, the reforms are reversed. Clearly, there is the need to build deeper and broader leadership support.
- Facing weak pro-reform coalitions: Many reforms fail because the coalitions that support them are weak and are not able to overcome the resistance of entrenched interests.
- Gaining the support of middle managers in public agencies: Many reforms fail because middle managers resist the reforms. It is not that middle managers are inherently conservative, but they need to be won over for reforms to succeed.
- Overcoming hostile public opinion: Many reform efforts collapse because public opinion is hostile. In some countries, this hostility has led to protests, riots, and even loss of power by reform leaders. Clearly, this adverse opinion is a major concern.

Communication influence is clearly needed for dealing successfully with all these challenges. This need is especially the case where the usual tools of the technocracy—manipulating incentive structures—turn out to be ineffective. The task is how to bring about noncoerced, nonmanipulative opinion and, hopefully, behavior change through engagement, information sharing, discussion, and deliberation. No matter how excellent the technocratic work is—and it is of major importance—without these efforts at communication influencing governance, reform efforts are not likely to succeed or be sustainable.

The same argument covers so-called demand-side initiatives (that is, initiatives designed to generate citizen demand for accountability and good governance). The leading intellectual frameworks undergirding this work recognize the crucial role of information and communication processes, as well as the communication media. Two of them will be discussed briefly.

The first is the empowerment framework. Empowerment is defined as "the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives" (Narayan 2005: 5). The conceptual framework contains the following building blocks:

- Institutional climate
- Social and political structures
- Poor people's individual assets and capabilities
- Poor people's collective assets and capabilities.

Communication influence challenges run through this framework, but the one explicit discussion of information needs falls under "Access to Information" as part of the necessary institutional climate for empowerment. On this point, Narayan (2005), the lead author of the framework, writes, "Information is power. Two-way information flows from government to citizens and from citizens to government are critical for responsible citizenship and responsive and accountable governance. Informed citizens are better equipped to take advantage of opportunities, access services, exercise their rights, negotiate effectively, and hold state and non-state actors accountable" (80). Although all this rings true, this question arises: How do we do all these things? Not surprisingly, the empowerment framework does not tell us—a clear gap that needs filling.

The second framework is the ARVIN framework (World Bank n.d.). It aims to synthesize the conditions that affect the ability of civil society organizations to "engage in public debate and in systems of social accountability." The enabling elements in the framework are the following:

- *A*ssociation: the freedom of citizens to associate
- *R*esources: their ability to mobilize resources to fulfill the objectives of their organizations
- *V*oice: their ability to formulate and express opinion
- *I*nformation: their access to information (necessary for their ability to exercise voice, engage in negotiation, and gain access to resources)
- *N*egotiation: the existence of spaces and rules of engagement for negotiation, participation, and public debate.

As with the empowerment framework, the communication influence challenges of the ARVIN framework are clear and enormous, but the framework does not spell out how to deal with these challenges, which is, assuredly, a gap.

Particular interest surrounds the use of social accountability mechanisms as part of the role of communication influence in generating demand for good governance and accountability. Several social accountability (SA) tools have gained widespread acceptance and application in development today, particularly as mechanisms for improving the delivery of basic services: for example, the Citizen Report Cards, the Community Scorecard, the Social Audit, Participatory and Transparent Monitoring, and the Public Expenditure Tracking Survey.

To capture first-hand knowledge on the use of these SA tools systematically under real-world conditions, qualitative and quantitative surveys were conducted on behalf of the World Bank's Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP).

For the qualitative survey (Garcia 2007), 15 task team leaders and country sector specialists were interviewed. Respondents were selected on the basis of their experience in using social accountability mechanisms in their operational work in various regions of the world.

Main findings include the following:

- Access to information is indispensable but insufficient.
- Securing political commitment is necessary to achieve real and sustainable change.
- Lack of effective public advocacy and communication strategies weakens the impact of social accountability.
- Incentives influence stakeholder attitudes toward social accountability initiatives.
- Participatory spaces amplify citizen voice and build confidence in citizen engagement.
- Strategic partnership with the media is essential in generating citizen demand and eliciting public response.

The quantitative study (Petrie 2007) was conducted online from June to August 2007. The sample consisted of social accountability practitioners of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe, and the survey instrument was translated into four languages. Main findings include the following:

- Support of social accountability is strong among NGOs and donors but low among government stakeholders.
- Insufficient government support and funding are key drivers behind the lack of effectiveness of existing social accountability tools.
- Receiving support from local community groups and the government is most important to practitioner social accountability work.
- Overall, practitioners are generally upbeat about their past work and are even more enthusiastic about the potential for social accountability programs in the future.

This section has tried to show how public opinion is a critical factor in governance and how governance reform initiatives depend crucially on the attitudes and opinions of key stakeholders, hence requiring communication influence work. This discussion moves now to the second of this chapter's two arguments: the democratic public sphere and the architecture of governance.

Why the Public Sphere Matters

This section will argue that a democratic public sphere is a critical part of the architecture of good governance.

What Kind of Caesar?

Faith in the possibilities of public opinion cannot be blind or naive. When Enlightenment political philosophers such as Hume began to argue that public opinion created obligations for rulers that those rulers had to heed, it was a claim made on behalf of the growing educated middle classes in Europe and

America, and it was a means of challenging the claim to absolutism by kings. This growing educated middle class met in salons and coffee houses and read the same periodicals and books. They discussed public affairs, and majority views crystallized around public issues. This emergence was the birth of the idea of public opinion as a critical force in politics. At the time, there were very few doubts about the virtue and competence of public opinion.

This confidence was to change. By the late nineteenth century, reform movements were becoming successful. The franchise was spreading, particularly adult male franchise. The idea of public opinion, just like the idea of democracy, now had to embrace the great masses of the people. But can one be sanguine about the virtue and competence of public opinion when that concept is inclusive of the views of the great unwashed masses? Skeptical voices began to be raised, including notable philosophers of liberty like John Stuart Mill (1946). He and others raised fears regarding the tyranny of majority opinion, especially where it is *uninformed* or *unconsidered,* two words that matter a great deal.

We have to be frank; public opinion is a powerful but problematic force. It has pathologies: for example, blind prejudice, irrational fears, and ethnic and sectarian prisms. Many readers will be aware, for instance, of an oft-repeated criticism of politics in many developing countries, that it is not issue based because primordial sentiments and deep divisions in society play too large a role. Thus, the public policy question "Where do we build a power plant?" is not merely about the political economy of a power plant but about ethnic, sectarian, or regional rivalries as well. What that criticism—the lack of an issue-based politics—is really after is a process of rational debate and discussion about public affairs. The real issue is how one encourages the evolution of informed and considered public opinion.

The answers that democrats gave in the nineteenth century remain the proper ones, for the two problems are connected. If one is willing to trust ordinary citizens to elect their leaders, why is one not willing to take their opinions seriously? If the people need help, then help them to get better at fulfilling their duties to the republic as the body of electors. Democrats and reformers thus set about thinking through how to help the people. An outstanding example is Jeremy Bentham. In *Political Tactics,* he directly addresses the issue of the fallibility of public opinion and argues that the fallibility of the public should never be an excuse to set up a system of government that insulates representatives from the influence of public opinion. What is proper is to act as though the public were infallible (Mill 1999: 144). If one objects that this might make rulers "disposed to sacrifice their real opinions to the general opinion," his answer is that what is needed is mental courage and strength of character. Gradually, people will learn to distinguish "between the clamour of the multitude, which is dissipated in noise, and the enlightened opinion of the wise, which survives transitory errors" (144–45). He concludes confidently that "it is, therefore, in a correct knowledge of public opinion, that the means must be found for resisting it when it is considered ill founded: the appeal lies

to itself—as from Philip misinformed, to Philip correctly informed. It is not always according to public opinion that an enlightened and virtuous man will decide—but he will presume, in consulting general utility, that public opinion will take the same course; and there is no stronger moral probability in a country where discussion is free" (145).

Bentham (1983), as well as the other reformers and democrats, provided two solutions that are still relevant today and ought to be a part of the governance agenda: first, you spread good basic literacy, by compulsion if necessary; second, you organize your public realm such that citizens have access to official information and a free press as a forum for information, debate, and discussion.

There is an elitist tradition of thought that remains skeptical about the capacity of ordinary citizens to acquire the information necessary to make sound decisions on election day or to form rational, considered opinions (Lippmann 1922). Others, such as Dewey (1927), have countered that citizens do not need to be policy wonks to be able to form sound opinions about public affairs; in any event, opinion leaders and others have information shortcuts that they use, and the threshold requirements for civic competence cannot be set absurdly high (Delli Carpini 2004). The discussion here agrees with the latter view, but, in any case, this is a foundational question. Once one accepts the moral equality of all citizens in a political community, one has to accept their right to have a say in how they are governed. The question then becomes how ordinary citizens can be helped to be better able to discharge the obligations of citizenship, including the forming of informed and considered opinions on public affairs. That question takes us back to the solutions offered by Bentham and others: the spread of basic education—which nobody disagrees with today—and the constitution of the public realm/sphere.

What Is the Public Sphere?

In a small, reasonably inclusive political community, the public sphere or realm is a physical site where members gather from time to time to talk about common concerns, agree what to do about them, and go and get these things done. In old Hollywood Westerns, for instance, when a bank in a small town is robbed, citizens rush to the sheriff's office to discuss the event and what to do. Very often, they agree to form a posse and go after the robbers. History furnishes us with a number of classic examples of the public sphere:

- The agora in ancient Athens
- The Roman Forum
- The New England town meeting in pre-Independence America
- The African-American church in periods of political struggle
- The gathering of the tribe(s) in stateless communities in Africa and other parts of the world.

So we can agree that the public sphere is a site where members of a political community gather to discuss common concerns. When the discussion

produces agreement, it is as though the many become one. A public emerges; a common will emerges. An emissary can say of a decision, for example, "The community has asked me to tell you that it is of the firm view that if you do not release the hostages war will be declared at its next meeting." The many have become a unity.

The problem with the idea of the public sphere arises once we leave the world of political communities whose members can fit into the same physical space and enter those whose members cannot all fit into the same space. As we all know, most modern political communities are vast entities—some are as vast as continents. In such situations how does one speak of a public sphere? The modern answer is that the means of mass communication re-create that open site where citizens gather to discuss common concerns. The modern public sphere is mediated by the mass media system in each country. We have moved from knowable political communities to imagined ones.

The mass media can indeed be said to act as the key institutions of the modern public sphere, but they are not the only players. As even notable media scholars agree, reality is not completely mediated by the media (McQuail 2005). Citizens witness and participate in public events and affairs directly. Above all, ordinary citizens talk about public affairs all the time. People are affected by the acts of public authorities and public events. People meet all the time in the normal traffic and intercourse of life in any community. When they meet they will naturally talk about public affairs. As they talk, public opinion will form, albeit slowly if the machinery of the modern media is absent. This phenomenon is now known as *everyday talk,* but it is an old insight.

It is possible to argue that there is no political community without some kind of public sphere. For unless every citizen is locked in solitary confinement, people will meet up for all kinds of reasons in the normal traffic of life; and where two or three are gathered there shall be talk of common concerns—or politics! It is true, nonetheless, that the kind of public sphere that will be a force for good governance and accountability will be a *democratic public sphere.* Before one stipulates what that is, however, it is important to appreciate that there is an intimate connection between the idea of civil society and the idea of a democratic public sphere. If civil society is the dense associational life outside the state, it needs a certain kind of public sphere to thrive. For the exemplary users of the public sphere are not really ordinary citizens acting alone but are those acting in civil society organizations, especially social movements. It is in the free and open public sphere that social movements acquire a public voice, fight for recognition, assert themselves, seek to shape public opinion, influence leaders and policy makers, and bring about change. Every successful social movement is a creature of a certain kind of public sphere. As Sales (1991: 308) argues, "[T]he capacity to form public opinion is closely linked to the existence of a vital civil society capable of developing without constraints.... [C]onversely, civil society can only develop in a system

which recognizes freedom of opinion and freedom of association. That is why, despite the distortions and manipulations to which it is subjected, despite its trivialization and reification by surveys, the capacity for public opinion formation and the sensitivity of power to these changes are two of the fundamental characteristics of democratic systems."

It is clear, then, that the idea of the public sphere is normative; we are talking about a democratic public sphere, not an authoritarian one. The idea is simple. One of the ways good and accountable governance is secured durably is to have in the political community a domain of free flow of information, free expression, argument, debate, and discussion about common concerns. Such a domain is a grand corrective of political evil, and it tends to promote responsive and accountable governance. It is the idea of truly inclusive, participatory governance as the best security against misrule. Leading political thinkers have promoted this idea: Jeremy Bentham, John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, and Jürgen Habermas. Within development, versions of the idea can be traced to Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz.

What, then, are the characteristics of a democratic public sphere? They are as follows:

- Constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties, especially freedom of expression, opinion, and assembly
- A media system that is free, plural, and not under state control (including independent public service broadcasting on the BBC model)
- Access to official information (that is, freedom of information legislation and a culture of transparency and openness)
- A public political culture of free debate and discussion on issues of common concern
- Equal access to the public sphere: voice, having a say, especially the protection of minorities.

Participants in the democratic public sphere include citizens, individuals living in the country, the state and its organs, foreign powers (via public diplomacy initiatives), businesses with a social concern, social movements, and other civil society organizations. The democratic public sphere is also undergirded by certain principles:

- The public use of reason: one must advance reasons for policy preferences (Kant 1784)
- Openness to public argument (although people will always use emotional appeals)
- Respecting facts and evidence in public debate
- Ability to compromise
- Right of reply, the fairness doctrine, and other principles of fair public debate
- The principles and ideas of socially responsible media, such as truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, and objectivity (McQuail 2005: 172).

It is important to note that these are learned behaviors; they evolve over time and are always contested. As was pointed out earlier, the democratic public sphere is a normative ideal. No country is a perfect example.

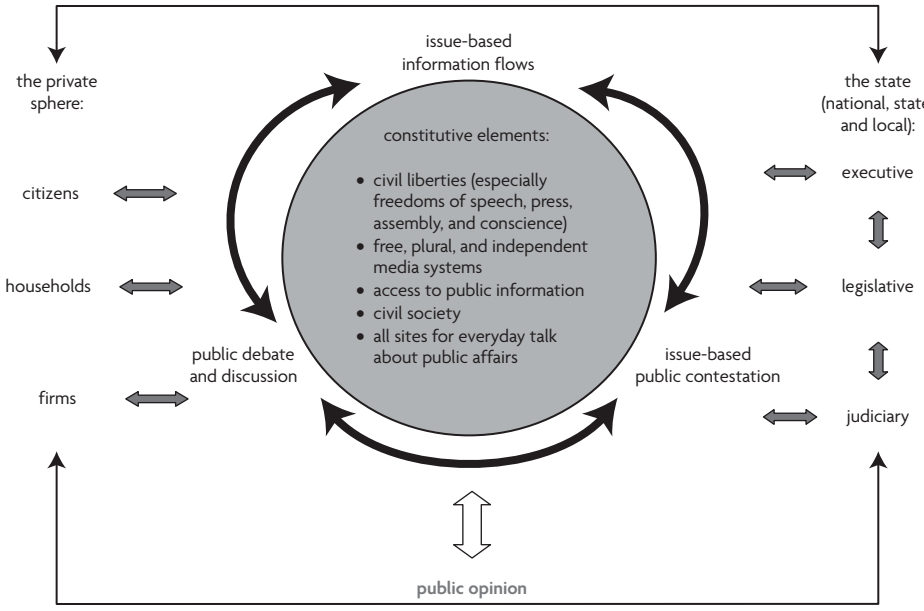
It is important to see, first, that the democratic public sphere is a force for capable, responsive, and accountable government, and it is a permanent, self-acting force. Second, it is a structural fundamental for any governance system keen on promoting accountability on a permanent basis. The only opponents of democratic public spheres are dictators and authoritarian regimes.

Figure 2.1 sums up what has been said about the nature of the democratic public sphere. Note that in authoritarian and totalitarian states, the constitutive elements of the sphere are either absent or very weak. Particular attention should be drawn to the dynamic element in the democratic public sphere: the process by which informed, considered public opinion is produced. This process is, as we have seen, one of the most powerful forces for good governance and accountability. Yet it is a process that needs constant work and vigilance everywhere. It is about the creation and sustenance of a culture of free, open, and rational public debate about public issues. Powerful forces, peculiar to every political community, are always trying to subvert this process for their own selfish reasons.

Constitutive Elements and the Governance Agenda

Three of the constitutive elements of the democratic public sphere do not need to detain us. The first is the civil liberties agenda. Since the signing of the

Figure 2.1. The National Democratic Public Sphere



Source: Author's drawing.

Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948, no country today objects to basic civil liberties as a matter of principle. The actual securing of these liberties in individual countries has been the focus of brave struggles across the world. All we can say is that progress is being made, although much remains to be done. Brutal regimes still scar the conscience of humanity and remind us how feeble our efforts often are. Of greater concern has been the view often expressed by a variety of technocrats: that the priority in developing countries is economic growth; one worries about rights once a country has become better off. Happily, this view is now discredited. As Sen (1999) and others have shown, the object of development is the full human being. The idea that it is all right for citizens to be brutalized so long as the gross domestic product is burgeoning is now generally regarded as a crass misplacement of priorities. Moreover, it has been shown by Sen and others that polities with free speech and a free press provoke greater government responsiveness. Famines, for instance, tend not to happen.

The second constitutive element of the democratic public sphere that need not detain us is this: sites of everyday talk. All that we need to appreciate is that everyday talk is an important part of how public opinion forms and hence a critical process in politics and governance. At homes, theaters, work places, wine bars, coffee shops, and other public gathering places, citizens will talk about public affairs. Local opinion leaders will hold forth on this or that topic, shaping the opinions of those around them. Debates will happen. Father will disagree with son; friends will argue. Then the process rises to a semiformal level: debating societies in schools, colleges, universities, and clubs discuss public affairs all the time.

The third constitutive element of the democratic public sphere that need not detain us is the vibrancy of civil society. Increasingly at the heart of the governance agenda in international development today is a concern with building up the associational life in developing countries as countervailing centers of power. The work generally typifies the demand side of governance, and tremendous resources are flowing into that work—an excellent development and one that ought to continue. Those who work on the strengthening of civil society need to understand that a democratic public sphere is crucial to their efforts. For without that deliberative space, associational life will atrophy and social movements will be far less effective. True voice is a public sphere phenomenon. As a result, these efforts need to be pulled together and coordinated much more than they are now.

This brings us to the fourth constitutive element of the democratic public sphere: access to official information by citizens or the transparency revolution. Much work has been done over the years to show that a culture of transparency and access to official information help the fight against bad rulers and corruption—for the simple reason that evil deeds need secrecy (Islam, Djankov, and McLeish 2005; Stiglitz 1999). Pushing for open government, as well as freedom of information legislation, is now a central pillar of the governance

agenda. Beginning with the first act granting freedom of the press, adopted in Sweden in 1776, a large number of countries now have freedom of information laws. (For an online database of these laws, see http://www.ijnet.org/director.aspx?p=home.)

Although these are all excellent advancements, one problem is the tendency of many of those in the so-called access-to-information community to see the issue as an isolated one, even an information technology challenge. They often forget that a culture of transparent and open government will not be created or sustained without the other constitutive elements of the democratic public sphere. Publicity, for instance, is vital, an insight as old as Bentham's reflections in the early nineteenth century. The media system, associational life, and everyday talk are all crucial aspects of how a culture of transparency has an effect.

We come to the final constitutive element of the democratic public sphere: free, plural, and independent media systems. Two concepts need to be clarified immediately. The first is the idea of the media system, by is meant simply the totality of the media in the country as an aspect of the political system. The media system can be fragmentary, consistent, or confusing, but it is always dynamic, since it is always evolving (for an elaborate view, see the introduction of Hallin and Mancini 2004). The second is the ideological debate about what the formula "free, plural, and independent" might mean. In this discussion, it does not mean simply the commercial press; an independent public service broadcaster on the BBC model would qualify. When one has cleared these points, it is important to realize that the media system is seen by many as the main institution of the public sphere. For instance, McQuail (2005) describes the public sphere as follows:

> The conceptual "space" that exists in a society outside the immediate circle of private life and the walls of enclosed institutions and organizations pursuing their own (albeit sometimes public) goals. In this space, the possibility exists for public association and debate leading to the formation of public opinion and political movements and parties that can hold private interests accountable. The media are now probably the key institution of the public sphere, and the "quality" will depend on the quality of the media. Taken to extremes, certain structural tendencies of media, including concentration, commercialization and globalization, are harmful to the public sphere. (502)

The question thus becomes: Where do the media stand in the governance agenda today? Were one to ask governance specialists active in international development today if the media system has an impact on quality of governance, probably most of them would say yes. If one were to ask whether or not they should be doing something about it, perhaps half would say, "Not sure, and not sure what to do anyway." A major stumbling block is power politics. In every political community, the media system is part of the configuration of power. Totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, in particular, tend to see any attempt to create free, plural, and independent media systems as attacks on

their grip on power. They are loath to see this as part of the business of international development. They shout "Interference!" when donors push the issue. This protest also creates particular difficulties for multilateral institutions like the World Bank and the United Nations, whose mandates forbid any interference in domestic politics.

Yet the work goes on here and there, and the evidence mounts that the media system, if liberalized, is a factor for good governance. There is growing evidence in the new political economy literature (see, for example, chapter 10 of the *World Development Report 2002* in Bank 2002; Islam, Djankov, and McLeish 2005; Norris 2005), and the evidence base for the importance of the news media to good governance keeps getting larger as well.

Nonetheless, one particular area of challenge is that the governance agenda does not yet fully embrace the sheer scope of what is involved in the necessary work of building free, plural, and independent media systems to secure responsive and accountable governance. The work involved is so multidimensional that some like Paul Mitchell (2007) of the World Bank have argued that it ought to be a sector in development in its own right. Some recent research has pointed to the scope of work needed in this area. For instance, the BBC World Service Trust and a couple of leading African universities recently surveyed the media sector in Africa under the Africa Media Development Initiative and identified the following areas of need:

- Regulatory reform and work on the enabling environment to create media systems independent of state control
- Low levels of professionalization of both journalists and managers
- Poor technical equipment and facilities
- Weak financial sustainability of media enterprises
- Low levels of local programming and content.

This area is clearly one where much work remains to be done regarding the *why* and the *how* of media development as a part of the governance agenda.

The Dynamic Elements of the Public Sphere and the Governance Agenda

One often hears the call for something called open, inclusive, and participatory governance. It is universally agreed as something worth aiming for. What is not realized as often is that open, inclusive, and participatory governance cannot be secured and maintained unless one has, among other things, a democratic public sphere. Nothing makes this point clearer than the dynamic element of the public sphere. As figure 2.1 has made clear, the dynamic element of the public sphere is what produces informed, considered public opinion through issue-based information flows, issue-based public contestation, debate, and discussion. This process creates competent citizens, citizens able to hold rulers and representatives to account. This process keeps rogues honest,

and its beauty lies in that, once the elements are in place, it has the potential to stay in perpetual motion. It should, and can be, a permanent force for responsive and accountable government. Above all, this process is relevant in all political communities, not simply in developing countries. One can always improve the quality of public debate and discussion in any public sphere. The work never stops. The machinery always needs oiling and tending and strengthening. To adapt Voltaire, the price of good government is eternal vigilance.

We thus have a bill of four particulars:

1. *Principles of rational public debate and discussion.* Many developing countries are deeply divided polities: Ethnicity and sectarianism are both rife. Several countries are just coming out of conflict. Communal distrust and intergroup divisions are all sharp. In such environments, it is of fundamental important to promote rational public debate and discussion. Otherwise, every policy question, every reform proposal will be viewed from the prism of ethnicity or sectarianism. It is important, for instance, to work to promote the ethics of socially responsible journalism. Media policy needs to secure free access to the airwaves by all groups, all voices. It is also crucial to promote a culture of rational public debate, which should be a universal commitment to public argument using evidence and reason and not a reliance on the authority of rival deities or other primeval prejudices. Efforts to promote public deliberation such as phone-in shows and deliberative opinion polls are some of the possible approaches.
2. *Training skilled intermediaries for the public sphere.* Two feeder groups are central to the workings of the dynamic element of the public sphere. In one group are those who take what is hidden into the public domain as *exposés.* They can be leakers of secrets, whistleblowers, or investigative journalists. Happily, efforts to train or protect these groups are now being recognized as key parts of the governance agenda. The second group of feeders is not as recognized. In this group are the skilled interpreters. There is so much that ordinary citizens need to know to execute their duties as citizens that is too technical for them to grasp without the help of specialists able to make the arcane accessible. This is not a question of mere literacy. As George Bernard Shaw said in his play *The Doctor's Dilemma,* every profession is a conspiracy against the laity, and the professions all rely on abstruse, impenetrable language. So there will always be a need for those who can be interpreters for the rest of us. Examples of good work in this area can be found in public involvement in the crafting of annual budgets. Increasingly, effective work is being done to explain budgets to ordinary citizens to empower them, but there is much more to do in that direction.
3. *The spread of advocacy and public argument skills.* It is now generally accepted that a docile and apathetic citizenry will be badly governed, and it will deserve to be badly governed. Citizens will not be effective in the face of bad government if they cannot make their voices heard, make a case,

deploy arguments, or use the media skillfully. They need to know how to do these things. Work of this kind is currently being done at the community level, but that is not enough. Citizen voice must be able to operate at scale, depending on what level of the government needs to be assailed and compelled to listen. Not all issues can be settled at the community level. Depending on the issue the local government might be the relevant focus of the citizen campaign; or it might be the provincial or state government or the national government at the center. The important point is that the spread of advocacy skills for operating at scale is a fundamental aspect of the agenda.

4. *The communication capacity of governments.* It must be accepted that the state is a major part of the public sphere, and the public sphere is democratic to the extent that the state does not dominate it. The state has legitimate interests to pursue in the public sphere. It has to listen carefully to the public, take the pulse of the citizenry regularly and on different issues, and put its own point of view across. The state has to do all these things competently and skillfully. State communication capacity at any level is an important part of state capability. *A state that cannot engage in effective, two-way communication both internally and externally cannot be a capable and effective state.* Yet today ministries of information and similar outfits in the governments of developing countries are mostly backwaters characterized by lack of skills, lack of equipment, low pay, and low morale. The anecdotal evidence is compelling that many reform efforts are hampered because of the lack of government communication capacity. Filling this gap is a fundamental aspect of the agenda, for in the leading postindustrial states today, modern government is an enormous communication operation—sharp, alert, responsive, and sophisticated. Governments of developing countries that have to face regular elections are asking for support to build communication capacity. Work in this area might also be a good way of negotiating the opening of the public sphere and, especially, the media system. This is clearly an area in which public sector reform specialists and communication specialists need to work together.

Conclusion

It should be clear that we have two exceedingly useful complements to the excellent work being done to secure capable, responsive, and accountable governments in developing countries: (1) the power of informed and considered public opinion as a critical force for good governance and (2) the power of a democratic public sphere as a fundamental part of the architecture of good governance. It is also clear that these boons will not, on their own, descend from the heavens. They ought to be essential parts of any serious agenda for social and political change to help the poor.

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