

## **A Cacophony of Dissonance**

David A. Andelman

*World Policy Journal* 2013 30: 107

DOI: 10.1177/0740277513506388

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://wpj.sagepub.com/content/30/3/107>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



World Policy Institute

**Additional services and information for *World Policy Journal* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://wpj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://wpj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 23, 2013

[What is This?](#)

# Coda: A Cacophony of Dissonance

DAVID A. ANDELMAN



GENT SHKULLAKU/  
LSA

**T**IRANA, Albania—In the last national elections here in June, there were 66 political parties, many with names so similar that the banners stretching across streets in even the humblest of villages, identified not only the name of the party and its standard-bearer,

but the party's number on the ballot. "Vote #44," the banners for the Democratic Party of incumbent Prime Minister Sali Barisha screamed in blue and white. "Vote #29," pleaded the red and white banners of the Socialist Party and its challenger, Edi Rama. But they were only the most prominently and widely displayed. A kaleidoscope of other numbers and politics vied for attention.

So why so many parties in a nation of barely 3.2 million people? Everyone, it seems, wants a voice, at least once every four years. "Get three Albanians in a room, and you'll have five opinions," smiled one leader of the opposition Socialist Party, which wound up victorious. Of course the same is also said of Israel where 12 political parties have seats in the Knesset, the nation's parliament, but at least 22 others contest the national elections.

I've promised to devote each of my four Codas this year to examining a different branch of government that impacts directly the people it rules. Thus far, I've taken on the judiciary and the bureaucracy or permanent government. This time it's the legislative function. And no more disparate a system exists across all the nations of the world. Outwardly, of course, the concept is virtually identical. In a democracy, even in many forms of oligarchies or outright dictatorships, a small body of men and women is selected to pass laws and, at least in theory, represent their constituents' interests. But all too often, this devolves into representing a single particular interest—that of the legislator him- or herself.

All too often, a system of multiple

parties or factions and, dancing on the periphery, special interests seek to influence the product or even the composition of the body for their own profit.

#### PROFITING FROM DISSONANCE

From this cacophony of political dissonance emerge systems of governance designed to produce outcomes that serve less the interest of the ruled than the ruler. In the case of nations like Albania or Israel with a score or more parties, to avoid total chaos many band together in grand coalitions, which can themselves spawn a host of troubles. In late June, Albania staged its first really trouble-free election since the rigged system of communism came to an end in 1991. Among the 66 nominal parties, there were really two leading contenders, plus a third—the Liberal Socialists (LSI). This curious, small third-party had become known as the "king-maker's party" because in 2009 it threw its lot in with the Democratic Party of Prime Minister Barisha and led to his squeaking through to a second-term victory. This time around, a couple of months before the balloting, at the very moment when, some charge, it was becoming clear that Barisha's Democrats might be going down in defeat before Rama's Socialists, the king-makers suddenly shifted gears and announced they'd be throwing in their lot with the Socialists. As it turned out, Rama didn't need their votes. But this shift created some very odd bedfellows.

Plainly, it appeared the LSI still retained much of the DNA of their old Democratic allies. Its leaders were prepared to back a "flat tax," which favors

---

*David A. Andelman is editor of World Policy Journal.*

the wealthy—the mainstays of the Democrats’ supporters—rather than a graduated tax that hits the wealthy harder and is backed by the Socialists and their more heavily working-class voter base. In numerous other programs, from universal health care to the size and shape of the bureaucracy, the new Socialist-LSI coalition are at best strange bedfellows, at worst outright hostile. Likely this will make for some interesting sessions in the national parliament where fisticuffs and thrown chairs are not unheard of—providing endless entertainment to Albania’s eager viewing public for whom this political soap opera plays out on live, nationwide television.

The problem with many such parliamentary democracies is that the very nature of the system precludes their functioning in any sort of truly democratic fashion. Without a viable system of checks and balances, where the excesses of the legislature can be controlled by the executive or judiciary, a host of abuses can and often do result.

The oldest such experiment is the British parliamentary system. And in each of its successive clones around the world, it’s functioned in a comparable fashion, though given the vastly disparate nature of the various electorates, its effectiveness has varied widely. This system is based on the fundamental concept that voters elect the parliament, with the majority of parliamentarians selecting in turn the prime minister, from among their ranks, with he or she selecting a presumably like-minded cabinet

to run the various ministries or departments. The prime minister then rules as the head of government—often, though certainly not always, with a figurehead head of state. That’s the case in England where the Queen, or a future King, serves as such a symbol, whose only real governmental function lies in “summoning” the leader of the majority party in parliament to Buckingham Palace to “invite” him or her to form a government. Apart from the BBC Television series “House of Cards” (the original series, predating its Washington-based Netflix successor by more than two decades), there has never been, in the memory of anyone alive today, a case of sovereigns in any fashion overstepping their quite limited functions.

Still, there ought to be such an option. For one very good reason. The head of state (or even government) in a pure parliamentary system has no real veto power, or at least any that is likely ever to be exercised, over whatever laws or regulations might emerge from such a legislative body with its own, at times peculiar, or at least loaded agenda. Is such a veto ever likely to be

exercised? Certainly not in Britain which, officially at least, has no constitution, relying simply on Acts of Parliament to establish what Brits can and cannot do. An executive, separate but equal in influence to the legislature is essential, with the power to neutralize acts of the legislative branch—a function exercised regularly where it’s available. Checks and balances arrived in the new American document precisely to circumscribe abuses the revo-

---

IN THE PAST YEAR,  
THE ENTIRE  
ECONOMY AND  
SOCIAL SYSTEM  
OF FRANCE HAS  
PLUNGED INTO  
A SPIRAL OF  
DECLINE AND  
MISERY.

lutionaries of 1776 saw as inherent and inevitable in the British system.

#### PERVERSION A LA FRANÇAISE

All too often, however, the system can be used to pervert itself, generally in the interest of those who've been chosen. And this can easily percolate throughout the electorate. Take France, for instance. Now here is a nation that, outwardly, has everything going for it—the world's most fabulous cuisine, most beautiful capital, most elegant fashions (okay, full disclosure, in these and many other respects I am an unreconstructed Francophile, having spent seven marvelous years living a block from the Seine and working a block from the Champs-Élysées). Yet on the front page of the weekend edition of *Le Monde* in late January, the banner headline reported on a Gallup poll of 54 countries, with the French identified as the nation where its citizens describe themselves as the most unhappy, most fearful of their future, and most dissatisfied with their elites, particularly their rulers. Breaking it down, France was the second to the bottom, outdone only by Portugal, truly one of Europe's fiscal basket cases, when asked whether this year would be one of economic prosperity and financial happiness. When it came to their overall "net happiness," of course, the French *joie de-vivre* resurfaced, but they still ranked just 30 of 54 nations.

Yet barely a year earlier, French voters had ousted their right-wing president, substituted his Socialist opponent

and promptly turned around and elected a Socialist-dominated parliament. When I was living there in the 1980s, it was still possible to have a head of state of one party and a legislature controlled by the opposition, which acquired the typically French name of "cohabitation." When his party controlled the National Assembly, the head of state and party leader, in those years François Mitterrand, decided who would be his prime minister, and named

---

LEGISLATURES CAN  
ALL TOO OFTEN  
CONTRAVENE  
THE WILL OF VAST  
STRETCHES OF THE  
BUREAUCRACY,  
EXECUTIVE, OR  
JUDICIARY THAT  
HAVE LITTLE OR  
NO POWER OF  
THEIR OWN.

the entire cabinet, unchallenged. But back then, the electoral cycle of the parliament was not synched with that of the President, so the possibility of cohabitation was quite real. This did provide a more realistic "check" on the unrestricted powers of one political party and its leader. But in 2002, the French changed the system so that, today, the parliamentary election is held just a month after the presidential contest. What this means is that the glow of the presiden-

tial vote is unlikely to have faded by the time voters choose their parliament. And indeed, this time the electorate gave their new president, François Hollande, a rousing chorus of approval and sent the Socialists into the new National Assembly with a comfortable majority. Comfortable for them, and certainly comfortable then. But no longer.

In the past year, the entire economy and social system of France has plunged into a spiral of decline and misery. There's no way the French can remedy that by an interim ballot for a new National Assembly—as can American vot-





ers, for instance, every two years if they don't care for their president's conduct or accomplishments (or their absence). The French, however, are virtually powerless to express their dissatisfaction at the polls today. So what do they do? They take to the streets in a tradition going back to their revolution, or the youth rebellions of 1968. "To the barricades," is a frequent shout heard from French dissidents. Nor is there any incentive at all, really, for the president of France to exercise his power to dissolve the National Assembly and call for a new election since there seems to be little doubt that his Socialists would come a resounding cropper. What France especially needs is a return to a system where the people can exercise their own veto more frequently than once every five

years—another check and balance.

So in a case like France where that's simply not possible, what does Hollande do? He stumbles on. Meanwhile, across the Pont de la Concorde, the National Assembly and its ruling Socialists have themselves dissolved into a welter of re-primations and factions. This has effectively reduced Hollande to the kind of bargaining and arm-twisting that Barack Obama must do each time he wants a major measure passed through a Republican-dominated House. Only in France, it's still a Socialist-dominated legislature—if by now a thoroughly fractious one. Which gives considerable heart to the opposition, especially the far right Front National, even the ousted and at the moment of his defeat last year, ap-

parently thoroughly repudiated, former president Nicolas Sarkozy. Indeed, close aides confide, Sarko is seriously considering a return to the lists four years from now.

Still, that's likely to be a long four years, with a president attempting in some fashion to work with a sharply fragmented legislature. For in the case of countries with a small number of parties, powerful outside forces—economic collapse, international challenges, wars or revolution—can fracture these parties into a host of competing factions and ideologies. Nominally, they are still Socialists (or Democrats); in reality, they are any number of independent freelancers looking for the best bargain or the next handout. The battles are playing out within the ruling parties. Gone are the days of “cohabitation” (living with the enemy). Now, it's living with your friends. Hardly less amicably. Often these forces work at cross purposes with other interests or branches of the real or shadow government.

Legislatures can all too often contravene the will of vast stretches of the bureaucracy, executive, or judiciary that have little or no power of their own, at least in this respect. As for how legislatures—fractured or not—actually function with respect to fulfilling their mission and laying down a law of the land that is both consistent with the mood of the nation or its historical traditions, is another question. For 380 years, the Académie Française has been charged with safeguarding the integrity of the French language. A largely self-perpetuating body with no real legislative mandate beyond its own, undeniable hubris, it has lately devolved into a pursed-lipped little school m'arm decrying the insidious in-

jection of Americanisms into the French vernacular. But now, at the very moment of its biggest challenge, along blithely comes the National Assembly with a plan to expand “the teaching of foreign languages, notably in English, in French universities” adopted last May after “more than two hours of passionate debate.” While in fact this may serve the needs of a far larger proportion of the French people than the whims of the Académie, the balance between the responsiveness to the often hotheaded will of the people and the cooler and more deliberate reactions of the permanent bureaucracy needs to be more finely calibrated. Neither has a purchase on truth, or even the right path. In the end, it may be the province of yet another branch of the government—the judiciary—to set the record straight. But if the basic institutions of government are out of whack, no tinkering will succeed in setting the system back on the right track.

The French have had more than three centuries to get it all right—nearly as much time as the Americans. The sad fact is that there are any number of nations that are just beginning to learn legislative democracy, which should be natural to the human spirit, but all too often is not.

#### LEGISLATING AT GUNPOINT

Democracy-at-gunpoint continues to be the rule in a disturbing number of otherwise, at least nominally, democratic nations. Thailand, for instance, is a constitutional monarchy with a benevolent ruler and a lively democratic tradition. It boasts six political parties as part of the ruling parliamentary coalition, five more in opposition and at least six more wannabee parties waiting in the wings

for the next election. That's down from more than 40 parties that stood for the first election I covered there in 1975. And 22 of those sent members to parliament. That incapacity to achieve any degree of legislative stability has led to 11 documented coups since the first one that brought an end to the absolute monarchy in 1932. Indeed, there were two that I chronicled during the three years I lived in Thailand from 1975 through 1977—the first of them on my birthday in 1976. And they weren't much fun at all.

The Thai system is founded on the role of a military leadership that alternates between roles as the government and on the sidelines, its helmeted generals looming over the scene, the people just waiting for it to pounce. Two years ago, on a return trip to Thailand, with my son who'd been born there 34 years earlier, and was six months old during my second coup, we dined overlooking the Chao Phrya River in the Oriental Hotel with a giant of Thai industry and his family. One of his sisters, as it happened, was the mistress of a leading Thai general, and there'd been rumors of an impending military intervention (when there isn't a coup underway, there are perpetual discussions of when the next one might be coming). Each time her cell phone rang during dinner, all conversation came to a halt as we awaited word whether it would be safe to move through the streets that evening and head home or whether the tanks might be rolling. Indeed, the only advice the head of security at the United States Embassy gave to my wife and me

during the first of our Bangkok coups was to stay inside our compound, keep the gate locked, and don't exit until the takeover was complete and parliament had been dismissed and dispersed.

These coups often were not some anodyne exercises with a tank rolling into the parliament compound, or soldiers taking over the local television station. Often, there were real shots fired. Indeed, in a later 1985 coup that lasted just a few hours, a close friend, NBC reporter/photographer Neil Davis, a veteran of the wars in Indochina and a host

of other conflicts, in short a veteran war correspondent, was killed by an errant tank round, fired haphazardly in an action that today is hardly recalled, except for those of us who still hold his memory dearly.

In such circumstances, individuals who carry none of the power conferred by an electorate able to express its will freely are able to subvert either the

proper or improper functioning of a legislative or parliamentary system. A powerful military can often subvert or even neutralize the entire legislative process, thwarting the will of the people. Even without overt action, the overhang can prove pernicious. The threat or fear of military action by armed forces unchecked by any civilian power can have legislators looking constantly over their shoulder, running every measure through the litmus test of whether it will stand the scrutiny of military leaders who become the ultimate power, with neither check nor balance on their activities.

---

**KAGAME BOASTED  
TO ME OF HOW  
PROUD HE  
WAS THAT HIS  
PARLIAMENT HAS  
A MAJORITY OF  
WOMEN AMONG  
ITS MEMBERS.**



At the same time, of course, presidents or prime ministers can equally subvert the entire process, if their constitution allows, simply by appointing a cabinet larded with political allies and cronies whose principal goal is not to carry out any legislative will, but rather to enforce the ideology or other aims of the nation's chief executive.

This was the accusation by the military and millions of democracy demonstrators who managed to topple the regime of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt. His nation's first-ever president, elected in some form of a democratic election, Morsi quickly moved to place Muslim Brotherhood members or sympathizers in the most critical spots within his administration, thereby effectively subverting the entire democratic system that brought him to power. The answer in that circumstance was a total re-set, engineered by the military, which has styled itself as the only truly non-partisan check and balance left in the country. Still, all that seems to have created is a system of democracy-at-gunpoint. The next time around, what needs to be fixed is not the election but the very constitution itself that establishes the electoral process, whenever that might take place.

As it happens, a host of nations in the developing world, or the world still in the throes of revolutionary transformation, may be in the process of redrawing their entire system of governance. The military overseers of Egypt began by pledging yet another new constitution.

Without question, whoever emerges as the new leadership in Syria will be drafting a new document. And many of the nations emerging from the former Soviet Union, the Balkans and communist Eastern Europe are still tinkering with their systems of government, as are a host of real or proto democracies in Africa.

Last Fall, Rwanda's president Paul Kagame boasted to me of how proud he was that his parliament has a majority of women among its members—though given his domination of the politics of his nation, how useful that may be remains open to question. Kagame pleaded for time to let this work out and for truly democratic institutions to develop in a nation that still censors its press unmercifully and imprisons many opponents of the ruling majority. Rwanda is still less than a generation removed from

an appalling genocide, he pointed out. Those wounds need to heal. At the same time, democratic institutions do need time to earn the trust of their citizens. A democracy cannot rely solely on the people's belief in one charismatic individual. The real test for Rwanda is what happens when President Kagame nears the end of his term and prepares to step down.

#### FINGER ON THE PULSE

There is nothing to prevent a parliament from participating in such a healing process. Indeed, a truly representative legislature can and should be the single branch government with its finger the closest to the pulse of the nation. There

---

A TRULY  
REPRESENTATIVE  
LEGISLATURE  
CAN AND  
SHOULD BE THE  
SINGLE BRANCH  
GOVERNMENT  
WITH ITS FINGER  
THE CLOSEST TO  
THE PULSE OF THE  
NATION.

are several rules that might be useful for these newly nascent legislatures to consider as they form, or re-form themselves.

First, there's nothing like the concept of checks and balances. Where there are none, not only does the legislative process fail, the entire concept of truly representative democracy hangs in the balance. The Russian Duma, for instance, is elected by the people in nominally free elections. But there is none of that. Once these legislators take their seats, they are little more than a rubber-stamp for the will of President Putin. Effectively they serve at his pleasure. Now there is no question that this is a most efficient system. But it differs little from the system that prevailed throughout the Communist block through half of the 20th century. In many of these countries, the "parliament" would meet briefly once or twice a year, approve unanimously a budget and a docket of legislative items "proposed" by the head of state, aka the communist party chief, then adjourn smugly, returning to their lives of privilege that were their reward for unquestioning, mindless approval of the actions of their betters. If the best justice is blind, this is hardly the case in the best legislative systems.

A legislature that can truly judge what is best for the nation, though this may well contravene the will of the leader, is in the long run the most likely to produce a body of laws and system of governance that works both for those who brought them to office. Certainly, at times, this would appear to be questionable. But when the executive can reject an action by the legislature, which in turn can overturn his or her veto, while an independent judiciary can monitor both (while at the same, a truly free fourth estate, namely the press, can observe the

operations of all three), then we have a functioning democratic system. I would suggest we could probably count the numbers of such countries on the fingers of one maimed hand. Still, it is an ideal to be sought, if all too rarely attained.

Then there's the problem of professionalization of the parliamentary function. We discussed the need for such a concept with respect to bureaucracies, but it applies even more profoundly to the legislative branch. In all too many nations, being a legislator is barely a hobby—certainly a part-time avocation. The French National Assembly took a first, baby-step toward removing one obstacle to full concentration on their day-job. Under a new statute, no longer would a member of the assembly be allowed to serve simultaneously as a local mayor or town councilman, as so many do routinely—for centuries one of the little perks that assured them both a local powerbase and a lucrative little sideline. Still, they're easing their way into this revolutionary concept. It wouldn't be mandatory until 2017. Moreover, there's a good chance that later this Fall, the Senate, stuffed to the doors with local poobahs, will drive a stake through the heart of this reform—the many cynics with which French media is amply supplied believing that was the rather cynical plan of the Assembly all along. Why not look like a hero when in the end it costs you nothing?

Professionalism must be accompanied by competence. And that is far more difficult to guarantee, while at the same time maintaining a truly democratic system. Again, however, a free electorate and a vibrant, freely conducted campaign process are the ultimate assurances that such a goal is within reach. Unfortunately, all too often today this process itself

is subverted by campaign consultants, with access to broad and deep methods of campaign financing, who do their best to manipulate and play to the emotions of the voter. Viable campaign finance laws are a good first step, as are public debates between the candidates. But again there is a caution here. All too often, such methods—a key part of the American and other western political processes—are not so easily transferred in tact to less developed nations with less sophisticated voters. The system must be tailored closely to the nation, its history, political culture, and sophistication. The plea by Rwanda's Paul Kagame is not entirely unreasonable nor unrealistic. Often, it takes times and, as in the case of Egypt, perhaps several times, before a nascent democracy gets it right.

At the same time, there must be a system that can tap effectively into the broad competencies that so many legislators bring to their jobs—physicians who would understand deeply the implications of changes in a national health care or insurance system, diplomats who understand the fine points of treaties and foreign aid, businessmen and bankers who have experienced the nexus of regulation and free enterprise.

Finally, is the issue of how to get the bums out. If a legislator or an entire legislature or its dominant party or coalition is simply not working, how quickly can this failure be addressed at the ballot box—versus the need for some degree of continuity in office. Back to France for a moment. For many years, under the Fourth Republic, France was turning over its governments as frequently as every five months. Between its creation in 1946 at the end of World War II, to the moment less than 12 years later when the Fourth

gave way to the Fifth Republic (where it remains today), the office of prime minister turned over 20 times. The entire system finally collapsed of its own weight. But today, there's effectively no way to remove members of parliament in less than five years—and the body and its members are tied directly to the vicissitudes of the head of state. While it may be problematic for national continuity to replace both chief executive and legislature every two years, requiring a nation to be stuck irrevocably to their choice for five years in an era when fortunes of a nation or a region can turn overnight may be even more destabilizing.

So we return to a mantra, which I believe should become a core tenet for global relations between nations and their political systems. Every country, when left to its own devices, eventually arrives at a system of government—legislative, judicial, and executive—that works most effectively for its people, though within a broad framework that has proven most effective through history. There should be some universal truths: checks and balances, professionalism, and responsiveness to the voters who placed them in their positions of authority. That should be the goal of every democratic nation that contemplates imposing its model on others. Just because it works here, doesn't mean it works everywhere.

When it comes to nascent democracies, the world must be patient and cut them a bit of slack as they feel their way toward the right solution. Imposing our solution or any solution may appear to work in the near-term, but will all too often lead to backlash that may prove deeply hurtful to all sides. Democracy needs time to find its own feet. ●