

# **The Accountability Ladder: Five Steps Toward Democracy**

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## **Introduction**

Accountability is the missing conceptual link in the current debate over how best to advance democracy.<sup>1</sup> Democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives: it is a system that connects the values of the individual with the decisions of the collective. The preferences of citizens revealed by fair elections (representation) or organized and definitive discussion (deliberation) are the starting points of democratic legitimacy. In exercising this right, citizens have the responsibility to participate and to make informed choices. In turn, those who have been delegated the power by citizens to make decisions for the collective must answer for how they have discharged the duties that they have been delegated.

Government, therefore, rests on the ethic that people in positions of power take responsibility for their actions. Accountability is about responsibility, the responsibility to answer for your actions. There is a ladder of accountability: the first rung is individual responsibility, the second rung organizational accountability, the third rung political accountability, the fourth, democratic accountability and the last global accountability. We learn by doing. Practicing responsibility and accountability individually inculcates habits of the heart, which can then be displayed in organizational, national or international arenas. Even where oppression prevents democratic accountability, the practice of individual and organizational accountability is an investment in the basic value of democracy.

Developing or improving accountability systems is a precondition for democratic governance. This is a task that all of us can practice – in established, consolidated or transitional democracies – or in those committed to bringing freedom to authoritarian states and waiting for their democratic opening. All of us should be climbing the accountability ladder.

### **The Accountability Framework**

Accountability answers the question, “who reports to whom for what?” Politically, it means that the who have been delegated to make decisions for the collective – the president, prime minister, ministers, permanent secretaries, the director-general, etc., must answer for how they have discharged the duties that they have been delegated. A clearly defined accountability system is crucial to any system of representative democracy because citizens, through their vote, legitimize or give authority to leaders to act.

If citizens do not understand or cannot readily get information on how their representatives have used the power that they have been given, then the legitimacy of the government is deeply affected. Transparent and timely information on who is responsible to whom for what is fundamental to democratic governance. As Adam Przeworski emphasizes in *Sustainable Democracy*:

“The conditions under which democratic institutions generate incentives for governments to be accountable are quite stringent: they are not met by all institutional frameworks. Governments are accountable only when voters can clearly assign the responsibility for performance to competing teams of politicians, when the incumbents can be effectively punished for inadequate performance in office, and when voters are sufficiently well informed to accurately assess this performance.”<sup>2</sup>

Locating authority is the first step in developing a usable framework. Authority is the formal power to act, but how does it happen that one person has authority over others? Force is the answer of some. You obey because others are stronger. But soldiers cannot stand behind every citizen forever, so force must eventually be replaced by something greater – a willingness to obey because authority is perceived to be legitimate. Human beings are free agents, bound only by conscience. So, political authority exists only because we consent to obey it. For most people today legitimacy is earned by a process of one person and one vote. Sooner or

later countries that rely only on force or a rigged process will have a legitimacy crisis because their citizens will choose not to obey.

Once there is a legitimate source authority, accountability is the requirement to account. Responsibility is the key requirement of accountability. To respond is to answer, therefore, to be responsible is to be answerable. Answerability requires, then, an account be tendered to those to whom an account is due.

The accountability chain typically descends from:



In the accountability chain above, citizens have the responsibility to participate, especially by voting; parties have the responsibility to recruit candidates, develop policies and offer a clear direction; the legislature has the responsibility to support or defeat policies and/or governments; the president or prime minister has the responsibility to form a government; the ministers of that government have the responsibility to use their executive power in administrating and creating policies; and the public service has the responsibility to implement efficiently, effectively and impartially the policies of the elected government.

The key to accountability is the exercise of powers delegated as above. Public servants, for example, should treat their clients or the public fairly, but they are not accountable to the public. They are accountable to the permanent secretary or director-general of the department who is accountable to the minister, who is accountable to the president or prime minister, who is ultimately accountable to the people. Matthew Flinders, in his study of the British Home Office, outlines this distinction:

“Accountability is a process where a person or group of people are required to present an account of their activities and the way in which they have or have not discharged their duties...the difference between accountability and responsibility is culpability.”<sup>3</sup>

### **The Accountability Ladder**

There are five steps up the accountability ladder:

1. *Individual accountability to conscience*: Organizations or collectives do not have moral responsibility, only the individuals within them do. Starting with the individual ethical base must be the first priority. Since the time of the sages and stoics we have known that as we develop our sense of responsibility we increase our internal freedom by fortifying our moral character. In the *Crito*, Socrates says that conscience or the sense of responsibility “is what I seem to hear them saying just as a mystic seems to hear the strains of music, and the sound of their argument sings so loudly in my head that I cannot hear the other side.”<sup>4</sup> His great contemporaries, Confucius and the Buddha, equally placed an emphasis on individual virtue and enlightenment. For Confucius, the cultivation of the person was the root of the matter – the first thing to be attended to. For the superior man “governing by the light of one’s conscience is like the pale star which dwells in its place.”<sup>5</sup> For the Buddha, by discovering the truth of dharma he had become enlightened and had experienced a profound inner transformation.<sup>6</sup>

The great awakening of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, which saw the Buddha in North India, Confucius in China and Socrates and Plato in Greece, saw humankind becoming conscious of their limitations in a cruel world, but striving to transcend their weakness.<sup>7</sup> Moral responsibility or conscience is critical to our development as human beings. Ethics are a system of moral standards to guide behaviour: we are only free if we are not a slave to evil. Responsibility is therefore a natural voluntary check on freedom: they are interdependent.

The great insight of the 6<sup>th</sup> century sages was that before morals could be lived they must first be taught. “To learn,” said Confucius, “and then to practice opportunely what has been learnt – does not this bring with it a sense of satisfaction?”<sup>8</sup> The more freedom we enjoy, the greater the responsibility we bear towards others and ourselves. The more power or authority we possess, the greater too, our responsibility to use it wisely. The first defence against the corrosive impact of life’s temptations is a personal sense of morality. And if there is no personal ethics, then the

state will descend to anarchy (Hobbes' war of all against all) or become an organized kleptocracy like Indonesia under Suharto or a mad personality cult like North Korea under Kim Jong II.

2. *Organizational accountability*: If a personal ethic of responsibility is the first rung in the ladder of accountability, then organizational or managerial accountability is the second. We live in a world of organizations or structural distributions of authority, so every organization should ask the question: who is responsible to whom for what? Accountability has taken on connotations of "who is to blame?" or "how should they be punished?" but a well designed accountability framework will prevent errors because it requires the constant adaptation of the mission to a changing environment.<sup>9</sup> A well designed accountability system answers the question: how does my superior evaluate my performance? All of us need to know our goals and how they are achieved and accountability systems are designed to do that. They are an institutional response to Socrates' desire to have an examined life. In assessing accountability frameworks, tests include: they should be based on clear and agreed upon criteria, self-audited, transparent, consistently applied, engender a culture of encouragement, identify where responsibility lies, engage participants in the process and lead to improved outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Whether we work in corporations, political parties, non-governmental organizations, or government departments we should all ask the following questions:

- Does my organization properly define accountability?
- Are systems in place to monitor?
- Is recognition practiced?
- Are there incentives for good performance?
- How is bad performance dealt with?

3. *Political accountability*: Political accountability or accountability in the public sector is broader than in the private sector. A corporation or a non-governmental organization has responsibilities to shareholders or stakeholders, but the books are not open to everyone who asks. But, transparency is expected in the public sector and there are multiple accountabilities. Ministers are accountable to the president, prime minister or legislature; the legislature holds ministers to account for the policies they promote and for the administrative actions of their departments. Ministers are responsible for some things and answerable for all things.

When individuals falter, and they always do, you need a structure of checks and balances between the executive and the legislature to preserve

the public interest. But, often there is confusion between the various demands of political accountability: ministers define their responsibility for actions very narrowly while members of the legislature call for resignations at every opportunity. Within departments, it is clear that ministers have to answer for the thousands of decisions taken by executive agencies, but are they responsible in a personal sense for actions taken in their name? Where does the responsibility of the minister end and the responsibility of the permanent secretary or other senior officials begin? Accountability codes that clearly define the respective responsibilities and command the support of the executive, legislature and the public service are a real necessity.

4. *Democratic accountability*: Democratic accountability, the main emphasis of this paper, involves the ability of citizens to hold decision-makers to account for the power that has been delegated to them. As Robert Dahl states, “if democracy is to work it would seem to require a certain level of political competence on the part of its citizens.”<sup>11</sup> Citizen competence requires political education, a major function of our education system and of political parties themselves, but it is one that we mostly fail. Elections should contribute to public education as well as government formation. But, parties are usually addicted to spin and public relations rather than policy coherence or public education. Some parties, especially those in Germany or the Nordic countries devote substantial resources to party think tanks and education foundations, but these are rare examples. In the United States, for example, political philosophers like Michael Sandel in *Democracy’s Discontent*, deplore that “our public life is rife with discontent,” with citizens losing control over the forces that govern our lives, community fabrics unraveling, and this anxiety leading to declining turnout and faith in the democratic system.<sup>12</sup>

The recent horror of hurricane Katrina which saw looters and gangs taking over New Orleans in the wake of a natural disaster demonstrates that even in world’s oldest democracy and richest nation, community values and cohesion may be in tatters. A democratic accountability framework requires major reforms to politics as usual in most democracies.

5. *Global accountability*: Legitimate authority is the centerpiece of accountability theory and legitimate authority is less well defined in international relations than for domestic jurisdictions. But slowly, inch by inch, international law has developed and there is a growing sense of global citizenship. As globalization of the world economy spreads so does the concept that we are all citizens of the world. David Held, for example,

advocates global social democracy to compliment centre-left policies in his home country of Great Britain.

“The project of global social democracy, as I call it, can be conceived as a basis for promoting the rule of law at the international level: greater transparency, accountability and democracy in global governance; a deeper commitment to social justice in the pursuit of a more equitable distribution of life chances; the protection and reinvention of community at diverse levels (from the local to the global) and the regulation of the global economy through the public management of global financial and trade laws, the provision of global public goods and the engagement of leading stakeholders in corporate governance.”<sup>13</sup>

Global accountability is the least developed rung of the ladder, but it may be the most important: whether in preventing pandemics, responding to tsunamis or responding to terrorism, the old borders of sovereign states are now sieves and new structures of innovation are desperately required. (See Appendix 1 for a diagram of the five step accountability ladder).

### **Climbing the five steps: examples from Asia**

As a region with well established democracies (India, Australia, New Zealand, Japan), consolidated democracies (Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Philippines), transitional democracies (Indonesia, Afghanistan), free societies without democracy (Hong Kong), democratic societies with an authoritarian streak (Singapore, Malaysia), back-sliding (Pakistan, Cambodia and Nepal), repressive states (China, Laos, Vietnam), brutal states (Burma), totalitarian states (North Korea), Asia offers examples for every step of the accountability ladder.<sup>14</sup> The examples described in the section below are suggestive, not definitive. Additional examples could be added to every category.

1. Individual accountability: There can be few individual examples of conscience, bravery and sacrifice greater than the life mission of the Dali Lama to preserve Tibetan culture and the campaign of Aung San Suu Kyi to free Burma. The Dali Lama was forced to flee Tibet in 1959; ever since his gentleness, humour and devotion to his people has been an inspiration. Aung San Suu Kyi is less well known in the West than the Dali Lama, but just as brave. Daughter of a hero of Burmese independence, educated and married in Britain, she left her family in England in 1988 to return to Burma to fight for democracy. Arrested, released, then arrested again, she won the 1990 election with more than 80% of the vote and while in prison received the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize.

Her husband died in 1999 with his wife refused leave to visit him. Today, like the Dali Lama in the 1960's, Andrei Sakharov in the 1970's and Nelson Mandela in the 1980's, she is one of the world's greatest symbols of individual determination not to give in to evil.

2. Organizational accountability: The contrasting careers of Mahatma Gandhi and Mao Tse-Tung and how they treated respectively the Congress and Chinese Communist parties, illustrate how habits of the heart can grow into greatness or eat away at morality like a cancer. Upon his return to India from South Africa in 1915, Gandhi helped transform the Congress Party from "an elite, moderate club into a mass national party, representing all of India's major regional and interest groups, capable of mobilizing millions in its revolutionary, non-cooperation campaigns."<sup>15</sup> But, Gandhi's method in achieving this transformation as described in his autobiography, was almost a classic implementation of accountability theory. He developed a clear mission, persuaded thousands of delegates to make it their own, and held regular congresses where delegates could evaluate performance, criticize and endorse actions.

The kind of democratic India Gandhi wanted was first exhibited by the kind of democratic party he led. Village congress committees elected representatives to subdistrict committees, which would in turn send delegates up to other regional gatherings, and finally to an all-India Central Committee where 350 members elected a 15 member working committee. In drafting the 1920 constitution, Gandhi reached out to two other leaders so that "if we could fully work out this constitution, the mere fact of working it out would bring us swaraj."<sup>16</sup> Further in 1929, though Gandhi had the votes to be Congress President if he wished, he recruited a young Jawaharlal Nehru, who had political strengths the older man lacked. The Gandhi-Nehru partnership set India on a course not only for independence, but also becoming the world's largest democracy.

In contrast, Jung Chang's biography of Mao Tse-Tung which uses new materials from Soviet archives, is a portrait of a man who turned the Communist Party into a personal vehicle, unleashing terror campaigns to remove any checks upon his whims. With Japan invading China and civil war with the nationalists never-ending, Mao busied himself to subdue or eradicate any potential opponents. Even Chou Enlai was not spared:

"Mao, however, wanted more than just slavish deference. He wanted Chou thoroughly scared and broken. The terror campaign in 1942-43 threatened to condemn Chou as the big spy chief...Chou told large party audiences that he and other leaders had been disasters and that it was

Mao who had saved the party from them. Thoroughly tamed, Chou became a self-abusing slave to Mao for more than three decades, until almost his last breath.”<sup>17</sup>

The recent Freedom House Report, “How Freedom is Won,” describes how the main change agent for democratic openings has been broad-based, nonviolent civic resistance.<sup>18</sup> Making NGO’s democratic and accountable is the best guarantee that activists will become Nehrus and not Maos.

3. Political accountability: In his article “Taiwan’s Unique Challenges,” Yun-han Chu succinctly assesses Taiwan’s history with accountability and his article demonstrates how far and fast a society can go when freedom finally beckons:

“Taiwan is a society with no prior democratic experience. Its history has been one of imperial control, a colonial administration, and one-party authoritarian rule. It had lacked the institutions – a free press, an independent judiciary, autonomous civic associations – required for liberal democracy...martial law was in effect for about four decades.”<sup>19</sup>

Starting in 1946, Taiwan gradually built up a series of counter-veiling forces and structures, which produced multiple accountabilities, which by the 1980’s coalesced into a democratic breakthrough, which has now been consolidated into a stable democracy – the first in 5,000 years of Chinese history. Local elections in 1946 served as a training ground both for the political leadership and the electorate. Taiwan’s written constitution established a series of checks and balances – overridden for a generation by a series of “temporary provisions” – but the lifting of martial law in 1987 and the 1991 abolition of the temporary provisions allowed the constitution to work.

Further amendments empowered the Legislature Yuan to act as a check on the Executive Yuan, and the democratic legitimizing of the Legislature Yuan was transformed by direct elections in 1972. Brave individuals, meanwhile, had created dissident journals, pushed the boundaries of martial law and generally worked for a free Taiwan. In September 1986, this Tangwai movement came together to create the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), contrary to the constitutional prohibition against opposition parties. This initiative created the democratic tipping point.

Equally important as the challenge of the democratic activists was the response of President Chiang Ching-kuo, son of Chiang Kai-shek and President since 1978. Chiang Ching-kuo had already begun to bring native Taiwanese into the senior ranks of the KMT. He refused to take retaliatory action against the DPP and lifted martial law instead. The direct election of the President in 1996 and the election of an opposition party leader, Chen Shui-bian in 2000, consolidated Taiwan's democracy. Starting with local government democracy, broadening into civil society, aided by a strong economy, pushed into reform by a well organized dissident group, but accepted and even promoted by the leader of the ruling party who chose democracy over blood (the exact reverse happened in Tiananmen Square in 1989), Taiwan now has a constitutional framework for real accountability.

4. Democratic accountability: Like Taiwan, Hong Kong is a free place, but unlike Taiwan, it is not a democratic place. The government of Hong Kong must precariously balance the competing pressures of a population that demands democratic accountability (with demonstrations attracting up to 500,000 people) and a regime in Beijing fearful that allowing democracy in one region of China will inevitably spread to the mainland as a whole. The result is executive instability: the Legislature, freely elected but with limited power, uses the lack of democratic legitimacy of the Chief Executive to criticize strongly the actions of the Executive. Several ministers have had to resign and the first Chief Executive appointed by Beijing resigned early in his second term. Hong Kong is no longer only a model for laissez-faire economic development: it is now a test case for peaceful political transition. On the issue of the future of Hong Kong's democracy, the whole world is watching.<sup>20</sup>

5. Global accountability: In a negative way the actions of the Communist Party of China in handling the SARS outbreak show how not to be a global citizen, while Japan's commitment to engaged internationalism is a model for other countries. Andrei Sakharov famously made the connection between democratic practices at home and international behaviour abroad when he said about the Soviet Union that "a country that does not respect the rights of its own citizens will not respect the rights of its neighbours."<sup>21</sup> Sakharov's insight was demonstrated in 2002 to 2003, when the SARS epidemic first broke out in South China only to be covered up and lied about by local officials. The best way to combat a potential pandemic is to catch it quickly and isolate the carriers. By initially underplaying the seriousness of the disease, the Chinese authorities allowed the disease to spread to Hong Kong and from there to Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam and Canada, not to mention to other parts of China, including Beijing itself. A regime that is used to lying to its own

citizens has difficulty telling the truth to the World Health Organization. China's response to SARS demonstrates that everyone's security is jeopardized when a regime is immune from democratic accountability to its own citizens.

Japan, in contrast, has made a remarkable turnaround from its pre-war legacy of militarism and imperialism. It is one of the strongest supporters of the United Nations and has one of the most generous development programs of any country in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). And Japan's contributions are not just official development assistance. In the NGO world, too, it is often a leader. Former Prime Minister Fukuda, for example, was instrumental in creating the InterAction Council, a group of former world leaders who volunteer to use their expertise to advance public policy. Supported largely by Japan, with a Japanese secretariat, the InterAction Council has taken the lead in promoting the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities, which supports one of the main conclusions of this paper – the need for accountability to the individual conscience. Building on the ethics of all the world's great religions, the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities should be adopted by the United Nations as a complement to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The five step ladder of accountability provides an agenda for every stage of democratic development. For individuals, it argues for the primacy of ethics and conscience; for liberation movements, it demands that pro-democracy organizations, in fact, operate democratically with full accountability to the membership; for transitional democracies, it recommends counter-veiling institutions between the executive, legislature and judiciary; for consolidated democracies, it calls for heightened citizen competence and structural reform in party financing and education; for international relations, it makes the basic assumption that the only real way to have true global citizenship is to ensure freedom and democratic accountability at home. This is a tall ladder, but we should never forget the sage advice of Confucius that “it is moral cowardice to leave undone what one perceives to be right to do.”<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

1. For a sample of the ongoing debate on how best to advance democracy see Natan Sharansky, *The Case for Democracy*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), which argues for free societies as opposed to fear societies and criticizes the West for a lack of moral clarity in not putting democracy first. More cautiously, Thomas Carothers, in *Aiding Democracy Abroad*, (Washington, D.C: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), reviews the record of democracy assistance and suggests at best that there has been a modest learning curve. Richard Swift, in *The No-Nonsense Guide to Democracy*, (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications, 2002), contests the prevailing orthodoxy that free markets and democracy go hand in hand. Globalization, by taking decisions away from the state, Swift argues, reduces the ability of citizens to decide their fate. The most dramatic effort at democracy is in Iraq and two recent books offer strong critiques of how the Bush Administration has approached the job. See Phebe Marr's review essay "Occupational Hazards" in *Foreign Affairs* (July and August, 2005), pp 180-186, which assesses Larry Diamond's, *Squander and Victory*, (New York: Times Books, 2005), and David Phillips, *Losing Iraq*, (Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 2005).
2. Adam Przeworski, *Sustainable Democracy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 108.
3. Matthew Flinders, *The Politics of Accountability in the Modern State*, (Burlington, United States: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2001), p. 12.
4. Plato, *Crito in the Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 39.
5. Confucius, *The Analects*, translated by Ezra Pound, (Toronto: Penguin Books Canada, 1969), p. 197.
6. For a succinct description of the Buddha's life and teachings see Karen Armstrong, *Buddha*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).
7. *Ibid.* p. 11
8. *The Wisdom of Confucius* edited by Epiph Anius Wilson, (New York: Wings Books, 1982), p.108.
9. See, for example, the appreciation of accountability concepts to health care in Bruce Harker and Ted Ball, "From the Blame Game to Accountability in Health Care," in *Policy Options*, (November, 2003), pp. 49-54. More extended discussions are found in Ole Ingstrup and Paul Crockall, *The Three Pillars of Public Management*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), Roger Martin, *The Responsibility Virus*, (New York: Basic Books, 2002), and Janice Stein, *The Cult of Efficiency*, (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2001).
10. See Flinders, *op.cit.* pp. 1-12.

11. Robert A. Dahl, "The Problem of Civic Competence," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 3, No. 4, (October, 1992), pp. 45-59.
12. Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 3.
13. David Held, "Global Social Democracy," in *The Progressive Manifesto*, edited by Anthony Giddens (Cambridge, UK: The Polity Press, 2003), p. 145.
14. For an interesting assessment of the wide diversity in Asia, see *Asia Democracy Index 2005*, The Alliance for Reform and Democracy in Asia.
15. Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.301.
16. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1983), p. 440.
17. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).
18. Freedom House, "How Freedom is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy," 2005.
19. Yun-han Chu, "Taiwan's Unique Challenges," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7.3, (1996), pp.69.
20. For a fuller account of Hong Kong's options see Thomas S. Axworthy and Hermand B. Leonard, "Accountability in Hong Kong: Transiting from Colony to Democracy," Foreign Dialogue Series, The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, January, 2005.
21. Sakarov is quoted in Natan Sharansky, *The Case for Democracy*, p. 137.
22. Wisdom of Confucius, p. 15.

## Appendix 1: The Five Step Accountability Ladder

