

Only extremism wins when politicians behave badly

By Sholto Byrnes



Legislator Oleg Barna removes prime minister Arseny Yatsenyuk from the tribune, after presenting him a bouquet of roses, during the parliament session in Kiev. Valenty Ogiренко / Reuters

Dialogue. Debate. Voting. The power of example. These are some of the critical tools we have in persuading others of the virtues of the rule of law and of governance based on consent, and why we think that extremists who violently impose their will on others are wrong, however they justify their coercion.

But on occasions we fail very badly to meet the standards we urge others to adopt. Last Friday, the Ukrainian prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk was addressing parliament when an MP picked him up and tried to remove him from the podium (Mr Yatsenyuk clung on with one hand while being hoisted in the air), causing a full blown fistfight to erupt.

It is not the first brawl to take place in the Kiev assembly, nor is it the only one whose proceedings have been marred by pugilism: legislatures in Nigeria, South Korea, Taiwan, Mexico and several Indian states, amongst others, have all witnessed outbreaks of violence among members.

It has to be conceded that at first mention, the incongruity of a schoolyard-type scuffle taking place in such a serious setting may seem humorous. But then consider this: also in the last week, Rodrigo Duterte, the frontrunner in the Philippines' presidential race, has admitted shooting dead at least three suspected criminals.

He has boasted before that there would be plenty more extra-judicial killings if he were elected. Human rights groups are dismayed, but it only seems to boost the city mayor's "tough guy" image.

Filipinos are not alone in apparently regarding the rule of law as having get-out clauses. According to a survey conducted by the US political scientist Nathan Kalmoe, between 5 and 14 per cent of Americans agree with statements such as "when politicians are damaging the country, citizens should send threats to scare them straight", and, "some of the problems citizens have with government could be fixed with a few well-aimed bullets".

On top of that, "10 to 18 per cent expressed indifference about violence in politics." Add those figures together, says Kalmoe, and "this implies that millions of ordinary Americans endorse the general idea of violence in politics". All these instances are nothing to do with struggles for freedom, or against oppressive minority rule or tyranny. They are in properly constituted states with legitimate, functioning institutions.

It should, one would have thought, be assumed that there is universal agreement with the words US attorney general Loretta Lynch used to condemn the recent San Bernadino killings: "Violence like this has no place in this country. This is not what we stand for, this is not what we do."

But some violence apparently is acceptable: even though, from fisticuffs in the Ukrainian parliament, to shooting suspects in the Philippines, to drone strikes on US and UK citizens such as Anwar Al Awlaki and Reyaad Khan – who were both linked to terrorist activities but were never tried and convicted of anything – it is nearly always illegal.

This is yet another example of the West preaching that international laws must apply equally and to all – and then giving or allowing itself exemptions. This not only fatally undermines its claims to universality, but also makes it look hypocritical and self-interested.

As Rami Khoury of the American University of Beirut puts it: "If the rule of law exempts powerful states or individuals that commit criminal deeds, we should not expect many people to respond to discussions about peace and justice. That is especially true when these are initiated by democracies whose policies continue to trample on the rule of law in their own lands and abroad."

All of this matters because the fight against extremism concerns us all and has been universalised by new media.

When researching their book *Southeast Asia and the Road to Global Peace with Islam*, the veteran journalist Lewis Simmons and former US senator Kit Bond found that after televisions – and thus rolling news channels – were introduced in villages in the southern Philippines, local Muslims identified far more strongly with the struggle of the Palestinians, but were also more likely to perceive Islam in general as being threatened or persecuted by the United States and its allies.

Similarly, in the internet age, both those same people and others all around the world can be persuaded that talk of the rule of law is empty when a presidential contender can boast of killing people and not be instantly arrested.

The merits of electing representatives to debate and vote on a country's future look equally slim when they are filmed beating each other up – especially when they happen with such regularity that one magazine headlined the latest incident "Brawls in Ukraine's Parliament are Almost as Good as Hockey Fights".

And this is why these instances, and all the other occasions when double standards appear to apply, cannot be brushed off. If we wish to argue that a rules-bound, orderly politics with space for debate and in which all are treated the same is superior to the cruel certainties of those who behead, enslave and deny personal choice, then the way politicians behave and the standards they are held to matter very much indeed.

A Donald Trump displaying a cavalier disregard for the facts, celebrating his ignorance and insulting almost everyone he can, is bad enough. Politicians slugging one another in the parliamentary chamber is worse. And as for possible leaders getting away with murder, well, that couldn't happen in a western-allied democracy, could it? In the Philippines, it would seem, it just has. What a gift for extremists the world over.

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