

Political Accountability: a retrospective approach

Radmir A. Gusev,

School of Governance and Politics,

MGIMO University

Abstract

The author examines the phenomenon of political accountability using a retrospective approach. The first part of the article offers an analysis of theories from Ancient times and the Middle ages that somehow affected this phenomenon in fictional States. The second part provides real historical examples of undemocratic states where the phenomenon of political accountability took place. The main issue of this work is to identify the existence of accountability of authorities in various political regimes.

Keywords: political accountability, principal-agent problem, undemocratic regimes, repressive bodies, Thai-style democracy.

Theory

The work of state bodies in a modern democratic society is not autonomous. The fact is the authorities that have certain powers do not make decisions on their own, that is, they do not act without the consent of the public. This is explained by the principal-agent theory, which was put forward in 1976 by Michael Jensen and William Meckling. Although this theory is more relevant to the economic sector, it is quite applicable to the public sector since this theory is an explanation of the accountability phenomenon. When we talk about the public sector, we understand political accountability. Today, this phenomenon is inseparable from democratic realities. In the work "Democracy, Accountability, and Representation", political accountability is represented as a management mechanism — a game in which the public (a principal) delegates on an agent (the policy-maker) a given set of instruments to execute certain goals. (Przeworski, Stokes, Manin, 1999) Philipp Schmitter from IUE (Italy) suggests using this term to understand the relationship between two groups of subjects, in which the former agrees to inform the other of their actions, explain or justify their actions and submit to pre-determined sanctions that the latter may impose. (Schmitter, 2007) This definition is more general and is not tied to a democratic regime. Indeed, in this case, it is possible to apply this phenomenon not only to modern states, but also to try to find the origins of the phenomenon using a retrospective approach. Let's look at whether there was a political accountability mechanism before and how it worked.

To present a logical retrospective view, it is worth starting with earlier theories, namely, listing the mechanisms of governance in autocracies, because if today the tool of political accountability is most represented in democratic regimes, it is necessary discussing whether this phenomenon occurs in non-democratic ones. Golosov G. V. in his work "Autocracy, or the loneliness of power" writes that one of the main skeptics of democracy was Plato, who refused to grant the popular majority the right of political governance. The author considers Plato's state as an "expertocracy" where power is vested in trained, competent people and focuses on the thesis that management decisions are based on a universal understanding of the good and the desired goals that members of the polity strive to achieve. (Golosov, 2019) It is vital that there is no discussion about common goals, i.e. national interests converge among all experts and each of them uses all the tools to achieve them. It turns out that the thesis of the indisputability of the national interest is a kind of verification, an accountability mechanism; in other words, the Council of experts is accountable to itself: if no one doubts the management decisions taken, then they are correct. Of course, this is an ephemeral idea and can only be implemented in a monolithic society where the question of the common good is not discussed. However, certainly not all thinkers have such a philosophical view of the accountability tool. The author of another meritocratic theory, the French sociologist Henri Saint-Simon, in his work "Letters to the inhabitants of Geneva" talks about pedantocracy, praising scientists and suggesting the creation of the Newton Council as a power body headed by 21 elected representatives. (Selected works of Saint-Simon, 1948) This work proposes an instrument of accountability as a sacred territory with a temple (since religion, led by a scientist, occupies a key position in theory), headed by the most worthy person, who is subordinate to the police and Treasury and who has the right to attend Council meetings (it is worth noting that for all the features of pedantocracy, Saint Simon writes that the Council observes the border separating spiritual power from secular power). So, no matter how undemocratic the regime of government is, even in theory there is a phenomenon of accountability, and if there is no specific body that performs this function, then there will be "self-accountability", since management decisions affect large masses of people.

Historical practices

Turning to practical historical examples, it is worth mentioning different nondemocratic regimes. Even in dictatorships, you can consider a certain hierarchy in the bodies and the accountability of some to others. The idea that the decisions made by dictatorial authorities were ever chaotic and spontaneous cannot be true. This refutes the regime of the Soviet state. Most of the sanction decisions did not

come directly from the authorities, as this function was performed by special repressive bodies. Of course, we should not forget about the cult of personality of Soviet rulers, but the scale of personal decisions of Soviet leaders could not be compared with the activities of repressive bodies. Researcher Gurnitskaya writes that these bodies occupied key positions in the Soviet state apparatus, whose role was to implement the interests of the ruling party. (Gurnitskaya, 2004) They were the guarantor of keeping power in the hands of the ruling party and permeated all spheres of public life. According to the Chairman of the Board of the international non-profit society "Memorial" Arseniy Roginsky, for the period from 1918 to 1987, according to preserved documents (in fact, the number may be bigger), the security authorities arrested 7 million 100 thousand people for political crimes, as well as for banditry, smuggling and counterfeiting. [1] However, we are interested in the fact that among all those repressed in the history of the state, there is also a period when the employees of the People's Commissariat of internal Affairs themselves were punished. The historian Junge has studied this issue in detail and suggests that the first stage of repression against employees of repressive bodies began in late 1938. (Junge, 2011) Dismissed NKVD officers were interrogated on cases that they fabricated and brought to trial. In 1939 alone, 1,364 NKVD employees were arrested. (Petrov, Jansen, 2008) This has become a backlash of authority overstatement — "reverse accountability", when the existing various public authorities and police agencies are accountable to each other and monitor each other's actions, so that serious abuse of authority and incorrect political decisions on a large scale can lead to consequences due to responsibility.

As for military dictatorships, it is important to note that the transition to a military regime cannot be considered an end in itself, but rather to try to find out and recognize various economic and social problems in the country and the inefficiency of existing state bodies. History shows that the military intervenes in state politics only in extreme cases, and a military coup can be viewed as the last stage of discontent with the current government, so even the military can be an instrument of accountability, which can be used to determine the level of discontent among the population, the number of opposition forces, and understand that fundamental changes are needed. A striking example of the above is the "Thai-style democracy". Professor of political and social Sciences H. Linz, in the work "Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes", concludes that the Thai coups were not the natural result of military regimes, since the majority of the Thai military did not monopolize political power after the coups, but instead they "observed" the democratic government and were removed from governing the country shortly after the elections and approval of the results of the next constitutional reform.

(Linz, 2000) Is this form of accountability a powerful tool for monitoring existing policies in the state? Definitely food for thought.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that accountability of the authorities has always existed, regardless of whether it was effective or not. The existence of accountability is a vital component for the state to be social. States that have coped with slavery have become more humane and fair, and when the authorities get rid of the ability to make managerial decisions without taking into account the interests of the population or at least elite groups, political accountability appears, which can be presented in an open form, as in democracies, or be implicit. And this phenomenon will always be present as long as there is such a form of organization of life and mutual communication of people as the state.

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