

EVOLUTION OF DEMOCRACY

Concept of Democratic - Government by People

About two thousand and five hundred years before Christ (2500 BCE) on an island, in the small city of Athens, southeast fringes of Europe, a new thought and invention prevailed that ranks in historical innovation with the invention of wheel. At that time, nobody predicted its universal appeal. But, later it attracted millions of people who, at times, were aroused with passion on scale which had never been witnessed in history. The Greeks called it Democratia - Government by People.

Athenian democracy was the first-ever human form of government. In fact, all governments are, of course, human. The exceptional thing about the type of government called democratia is that "although people were not angels or gods or goddesses, they were at least good enough to prevent some humans from thinking they were." (The Life and Death of Democracy by John Keane, 2008)

Athens had confined democracy to its citizens which excluded slaves, females (women) and resident aliens. All the adult citizens so defined constituted the assembly which was the bedrock of the whole polity of Athens. The assembly normally met for a day, forty times a year. All assembly business was done face to face and depended on the spoken words. "The city is full of freedom and unrestrained speech." But there were constant reminders by speakers that 'to be a citizen meant being the equal and peer of others' and that their democracy was a special type of government that enabled each citizen to enjoy equality before the law, the equal entitlement to speak and the freedom to rule and be ruled in turn.

Athenian democracy was genuinely a form of government not only of the people and for the people but also by the people and was praised as direct democracy or pure democracy, where all that the people had to do, they did themselves (Jean Jacques Rousseau). To avoid any unfairness or corruption, half of the citizens would take over the administration and public offices whereas the other half could be the people to be ruled. After six months, they would replace the other half in administration.

first-past-the-post elections with the bottom candidate eliminated each time until one person gets majority of votes. Some countries have utilized the principle of proportional representation which means that a political party could nominate delegates to the legislative body in proportion to the vote cast in favour of the party, a system favoured in some of the European countries. Even this system is criticized because members nominated by the party could or may not have any contact with the electorate.

I am in agreement with the sane voice that "it always was naive to expect a perfect form of representation, and a "perfect system of voting to achieve it" (Political Theory Today by Iain Melean, a consultant to the Commission on voting system for the UK House of Commons). This will remain an ongoing intellectual struggle and different forms of democracies will be recommended, because the things that seem timeless are never so.

Chief Executive (where the buck stops)

With the growth of representative democracy, the choice of Chief Executive to run the affairs of a state and be accountable for it also went through evolution and the two known forms of government that emerged are the parliamentary and the presidential.

The evolution of democratic principles and pattern of democracy are unabated. The modern debate is about the pattern of democracy, i.e. how to reach a decision in the parliament, namely by majority or by consensus. The former means that the majority decides while minority exercises the right to criticize and oppose. The later trend is to give a share in the governance not only to the majority but also to the opposition (Patterns of Democracy by Arend Lijphart).

changing their meaning in profound ways. One such term is *demokratia* which gripped the imagination of Athenians and at last radically altered the course of history. The term carried a big thought of people being equal who could organize themselves in forums to consider things and decide on a common course of action.

The word election from the old Latin meaning 'to choose; to pick out' entered the family of terms of democracy and was followed by a more comprehensive term electorate to represent group of people who would choose or pick out a representative to an assembly now referred to as electoral college'. The general entitlement to vote is called 'right to franchise'. The familiar word to vote is a term from Latin *votum* which meant to wish or to vow, and finally as it means today the 'act of expressing a choice in election'. The word poll which is used to describe the act of casting a vote' originally meant 'head' and during the elections, it refers to the process of conducting an actual headcount of the supporters. The one who sought the votes or support was a 'candidate'.

Lastly, the word 'ballot' comes to us from the Italian *ballota*, the little black ball that is secretly placed in an urn or box with the object to vote against something or somebody but now expresses the much larger concept through which people know and express their democratic right to choose.

French writer and politician Alexis de Tocqueville referred to the concept of representative democracy as a great 'democratic revolution' because it favoured political and social equality but it took decades for different countries where representative democracy was practised to accept the right to vote for representatives as a universal entitlement.

Earlier in the context of representative democracy "the people meant a group of elitists" as they had no time or patience for the vast majority of the population, women, slaves and those without property and who did not pay the taxes. Even the American constitution, which claims to be framed and represent 'We the People,' excluded slaves and women from voting. The chain of change was from entitlement for elite to the principle of 'one man, one vote' and finally to adult franchise which accepted the basis that all human beings are equal in their political and legal rights. [Baker vs. Carr, 360, US 186(1962)]

In case of plurality, contest principle known as the "first past the post," which is prevalent in a number of countries like UK, India and Pakistan, to decide who is the winner, was debated as unsatisfactory, because it is possible for the winner in case of more than two contestants that the winner may be in minority as compared to the total votes cast, that another system of exhaustive ballot voting was adopted, a process which means a succession of Representative Democracy

Direct democracy of Athens was workable on account of its being a city-state consisting of a few thousand people only. While democracy in Athens, undefended by its democrats, started fading and was unable to resist an authoritarian government of Macedonia, it finally came to an end. In its place, monarchs and empire-builders ruled vast territories of administration and governance. Direct rule by the people was no longer possible. Time was ripe for another institution to be born.

In the 8th century, Islam produced a civilization and a vibrant culture of proto democratic instinct. Quran rejected the idea of a chosen people. It emphasized instead on a strong sense of common human destiny. The universalism of Islam implied the need of equality of human beings. At the heart of the Muslim society that stretched from the Atlantic to the Indian ocean was mosque, a place for communal prayers. The mosque was a powerful carrier of the spirit of democracy. Excess was universal. Young and old, rich and poor, men and women; all were equally welcomed. People from different cultures and backgrounds and speaking different languages, including Christians and Jews, were frequently invited to the mosques during the discussion.

To summarize, the mosque to the empire of Islam represented what the assembly was to the world of Greek democracy (The Life and Death of Democracy by John Keane, 2008).

Mushavarat (Consultation)

Quranic injunction contained in surah 2, verses 153-159 and surah 42, verses 36-38, mandated Muslims to decide their affairs through consultation which was practised by and large in the Muslim society. Another institution which was familiar to the Muslims, though related to business practice, was to engage a legal representative (wakeel) to supervise the warehousing and sale of the mercantile and to represent the business house in law suits.

It seems that representative democracy was an offshoot or was influenced by the principles of universalism, consultation (mushavarat) and delegation (wakalat), with which the Christian world became familiar by its contact with Hispanic Muslim Empire which lasted for six centuries in Iberian Peninsula of Europe.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, a political philosopher of France who is reported to have been deeply influenced by the liberal thoughts and egalitarian practices of Hispanic Muslim Empire, carried the concept of equality across Europe. The slogan that inspired the French Revolution of 1789 was "liberty, equality and fraternity" and it had prefaced Rousseau's theory of "social contract". In August 1789, Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen' was passed in the first year of French Revolution, leading to abolition of feudalism.

The new idea and innovation of representative democracy spread faster and political philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Voltaire, Baron de Montesquieu and Thomas Paine wrote about and laid down the foundations of parliamentary democracy.

Briefly, solution was to 'graft representation upon democracy' which means to empower one person for another as a lawyer (wakeel) representing a client or an ambassador representing a country. In political terms, it meant one legal person acting on behalf, and in the interest, of group of the people (Political Theory Today by David Held)

From this concept grew the right of being represented by a 'credited deputy or substitute, for a group of people in a legislative or deliberative assembly generally known as the parliament.

Step by step, with many twists and turns, slowly but hesitatingly, a miracle nevertheless happened. Democracy came to be defined as representative democracy. (The Life and Death of Democracy by John Keane, 2008)

From around the 10th century, democracy entered a second historical phase: representative democracy. This was shaped by forces as varied as the rebirth of towns, religious struggle with the Church and the revolutions. Non-representative democracy was called false democracy as the history has shown that it soon collapsed into anarchy. Whereas in true democracy, which was later called a representative democracy, the government acts through deputies, elected by the people which constitute the public power. The emphasis during the second phase of democracy was a belief that good government was a government by representatives of the people. It provided an effective new method of apportioning blame for poor political performance - a new way of encouraging the rotation by holding periodical elections.

Such a representative (democratic) government was an unusual political system. It had to respect upon written constitutions, independent judiciaries and laws that guarantee vital roles of voting by secret ballot defining electoral college and immunity for the dissenting voices. The difference between the direct and representative democracy is in the participation of all citizens in the decisions that affect their lives or representative democracy, a method of governing in which people choose through voting their representatives who then decide their affairs by mutual consultation, on their behalf.

The evaluation of language and terms of democracy

The slow yet positive growth of democracy as briefly explained above familiarized certain terms and words which constitute the language of democracy and are easily understood within that context. These tiny terms have their grand effect and they keep But, generally, the philosophers of Athens were sceptical or opposed to democracy. When a jury comprising the entire population of Athens found Socrates, the greatest philosopher of the time who would question the status quo, guilty of charges of poisoning the young minds of Athens and gave him the choice to drink hemlock (poison) which he did and slowly went to eternal sleep. Athens' democracy faded away, leaving the burden on the conscience of time as well as the generations to come.

One of his ablest disciples, the Athenian philosopher Plato considered democracy a gimcrack invention that corroded government by pandering to the ignorant and called it theatreocracy. Plato further predicted that mob rule would ultimately produce despots who would oppress the people (Republic of Plato).

Plato's attack on democratia was so pervasive and convincing that democratia as a political theory was no longer attractive and the pro-democrats of Athens could not produce any written or philosophical rebuttal. Friends of Athenian democracy either mistrusted or never used writing as an instrument of public administration, the field of

recorded history was, therefore, left wide open to its opponents. That is why Athens produced more great theorists opposing democracy. It is also why virtually all the written commentaries on Athenian democracy were hostile to its novelty. The attacks on democracy sprang from the minds of intellectuals (aristocrats) who found the demos (citizen) disgusting.

The democrats' hubris (excessive pride) towards the criticism, though explainable in terms of lack of time due to involvement in political life, had to pay heavily for their unwritten opposition (The Life and Death of Democracy by John Keane, 2008)

Towards the end of the 5th BC, two coups briefly interrupted democratic government. Both interludes were named after the number of conspirators that had grabbed the reins of power. Both these interventions-411 BCE and 404 BCE were for reducing the size of electorate by linking citizenship to property qualifications. The conspirator attempted to overturn rule by the people to reduce rogue governments. Even Plato conceded that the Government of the Thirty was such a disgrace that it made the democracy that came before it look rather appealing (Seventh Epistle by Plato)

After two and a half centuries, the direct democracy of Athens fatally suffered when its neighbouring state of Macedonia, ruled by Philip II and backed by a gigantic army of 32000 men, attacked Athens in which thousands of Athenians fell and at least two thousand were taken prisoners.