

The problem and promise of democracy

Democracy has to be about the power inherent in each of us

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The melodrama of the American elections has illustrated what should have become abundantly clear across the world: there is something badly broken about democracy

At the time of writing this, the grand drama of elections in the USA is still unfolding. There is a provisional winner, and a large part of the world has likely heaved a sigh of relief it is not the compulsive liar and climate-denier who ruled what continues to be an imperialist empire. And yet, even though Joe Biden famously declared that “democracy works”, the melodrama of the American elections has illustrated what should have become abundantly clear across the world: there is something badly broken about democracy.

Or at least about its currently dominant, liberal form. And I say this despite another just concluded election, in Bolivia, bringing a progressive party back into power after a period of chaotic governance engendered by a US-backed coup-like a takeover by the right-wing. There is something pathetic about the human condition, if our fate (and that of the planet) is dependent on a few individuals who rule over us with our willing consent.

Let's go back to basics. Democracy = *demos* + *cracy*, rule of (or by) the people. Political power, i.e. the power to take decisions, is inherent to each one of us, it is part of being human. And yet, the seduction of liberal democracy has been such that we are willing to give this up, ostensibly so we can go about living our lives while others take over the decision-making for us. In theory, we convince ourselves, we have the

power to change them through elections if they don't do what we want or need; but as we know, that is not necessarily the case. And even if we do manage to change them, and install another person or party in power, they too may fail to do what we want or need. The chances of this being the case if we are already on the margins of society, even if by dint of sheer numbers if we form a substantial part of the population and manage to influence the elections, is especially high. Will Biden becoming president mean that Blacks, indigenous and other marginalized people in the USA will get a substantially better deal, or that the Pentagon will significantly lower its climate-destructive activities (it is one of the biggest climate culprits on earth), or that the country's imperialist tendencies will be appreciably curbed? As many movements [fighting for justice](#) for marginalized peoples in the USA have argued, a change in the regime of the kind we've seen does not mean the struggles are over ... [far from it](#).

One could ask the same question of even more progressive parties that have taken over the reins of countries, as in the case of several Latin American nations, Greece, and others in the last 10-15 years. There is no doubt that in many such cases, or in the case of 'social democrats' and their variants in Europe, there have been more pro-public welfare policies, some curbing of the profiteering of private corporations, and some positive constitutional or legal reforms. These are not small gains, especially where they at least manage to bring in social safeguards (such as free or cheap healthcare and education) for many impoverished or marginalized people. Whatever I say below should not be taken to belittle such gains, and certainly not to argue that there is no difference between a progressive (leftist, feminist, green) party and a right-wing party being in power, all other things being equal.

What is wrong with elections?

But let's look at fundamentals again. A considerable reliance on liberal democracy is on elections, where those who get the majority (with variations on the theme) form the government.

Electoral politics reveals many faultlines, showing how elections can actually undermine democracy in its true sense. In many parts of the world (such as in India), politicians get elected even if they have only 20% of the vote, with the rest of the electorate split amongst several opponents; or even if they have no majority but, as in USA, gain enough voting blocks (as in its 2016 elections where Hilary Clinton lost though she had more individual votes than Donald Trump). Then there is the large section of population that does not exercise its vote (60% voting turnout is considered good). This means that winners do not necessarily represent the vast majority of people. Combine this with the fact that modern electoral processes are extremely costly (the 2020 USA elections are projected to [cost](#) about US\$14 billion), and that most countries do not have a public fund for this, it is mostly really rich folks, largely from the elite, who get voted in. In 2014 in India, for instance, out of the 542 members analysed, 443 (82%) have assets of ₹1 crore (10 million) or more, i.e. they were in the richest 5% of Indians. A very considerable proportion also had criminal cases or records!

Secondly, political elections bring out the most competitive aspects of our personality, that too in spiteful, divisive, often violent ways. We have seen this in virtually every single major country election in recent times. Given the prospect of successful political candidates being able to amass riches, fame and/or power over others, there are very high commercial stakes of winning, which only increases this unhealthy competitiveness. Elections have also encouraged or engendered the most blatant instances of [fraud](#), manipulation (now increasingly on 'social' media), bribery, corruption, intimidation, violence and horsetrading. This is not unlike the commercialization of sports, which has generated abysmal distortions like performance-enhancing drugging to enable staying ahead in cutthroat competition. As a number of

researchers have shown, electoral fraud and manipulation are not exceptions, but the rule, across the world. A systematic review of [Pakistan and India](#) shows how much these seep into the very nature of electoral politics.

In many countries this hostile competitiveness also runs along historically prevalent lines of hierarchy and discrimination and division; race in USA, caste in India, and gender and class everywhere. To my mind this is not a distortion of electoral politics, it is hardwired into its DNA; after all, if it's about winning at any cost, why not exploit available lines of division? Trumpism was only amongst the most blatant recent demonstrations of this, but in various forms this has been a core element of national elections across the world, including religious polarization in India's 2019 polls.

Linked to this is the fact that political debates before elections often submerge real issues of poverty, inequality, environment, conflict, and instead get focused on mudslinging, with personal lives and characteristics of candidates getting the limelight. Candidates go after each other like fowl in a cockfight, accusing each other of duping or betraying the electorate, selling out to foreigners, being corrupt etc. This is greatly abetted by mainstream media, hungry to feed its 24&7 appetite, often degenerating into shouting matches (in India, some anchors actively encouraging it!). I cannot remember a sober, inter-party discussion on matters of development, deprivation, or environment in India, for a long long time. This also means that when elections could actually be a great occasion to create public awareness and dialogue on critical issues of substance, they rarely are.

Finally, elections are based on a belief in majoritarianism. It justifies the belief that the most important criteria for being rightfully in power are simple numbers. The majority (again, calculated in various ways) wins; minorities lose. This provides a continued foundation for the belief that the majority is right, a dubious proposition at best, downright dangerous and divisive at worst. The fact that minorities may have talents, knowledge, skills, and abilities to aid in decision-making and governance, and special needs that any decent society would have to be considerate towards, are ignored or set aside. One can build in safeguards such as reservations or positive discrimination for minorities and other marginalized sections, but the ugly face of majoritarianism continues to show itself. In India, it is currently playing out in the form of imposition of one religion over others, something that has happened for long in nation-states that are explicitly religion-based.

Centralised power corrupts and alienates

Parties that 'capture' power in liberal democracies, inevitably centralize power. The notion that the public is supreme, that the electorate is the one whose bidding is done by the elected, has rarely if ever actualized. Once in power, it is relatively easy to ignore the electorate, at least until the next election draws near. And since the electorate has ceded its power, it can only await the next elections to effect a change; or be content with protesting every once in a while. A few countries have the right to recall representatives mid-term, which provides some, but still very limited, control over their exercise of power. Crucially, day to day decisions including important ones that impact a large number of people, are predominantly taken by elected politicians and the bureaucracy serving them, with little or no involvement of the electorate. Some countries have systems like referendums to provide greater public participation in crucial decisions, but these are limited, and suffer from the same problematic politics of majoritarianism.

Given that liberal democracy and the nation-state system that it supports has arisen and spread across the world at the same time as modern capitalism gained a global foothold, there is a very close relationship. Indeed, such democracy is eminently suited to exploitative economic regimes and relations, for it provides them a convenient garb of legitimacy. If a government, duly chosen by the people, deems it acceptable and even progressive to promote corporations (private or public, the latter merely a form of state capitalism in the garb of socialism) to run the economy, then who are the people to question this? And if the party running such a government then finds it ok to be funded by such corporations, openly or in a hidden manner as in the case of India's recently established [electoral bonds](#), this too would seem to be entirely acceptable. No wonder that social movements challenging the actions of corporations and their government cronies are automatically labeled anti-state, anti-national, seditious, or in some cases, 'extremists' who can be legitimately thrown in jail (or, frequently, simply eliminated). This is the case not only in right-wing governments, but in left-wing ones too; for instance, Rafael Correa's 'revolutionary' left party in Ecuador went hammer and tongs after civil society groups like Accion Ecologica and several indigenous people's organisations, for opposing destructive mining operations in their territories.

Democracy, development and environment

Liberal democracies across the world have also had a close connection with the fundamentally faulty economic growth models (capitalist or state socialist) that underlie modern 'development' and globalization, and which are largely responsible for the ecological and climate catastrophe the planet faces. The money required to fight elections, and then to prop up centralized state systems, is not possible to generate in ecologically sustainable, socially non-exploitative ways. A global economy based on nation-state competitiveness, requires ruthless exploitation of nature and of labour, and the continuation of patriarchal, racist, and casteist relations. Even a Green New Deal as is proposed by clearly more sensitive politicians like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, while heads and shoulders above the economic policies of their compatriots, is based on neo-colonial relations that will continue the exploitation of the Global South to feed the transition to '[greenness](#)' in the Global North. Finally, nation-states and the 'nationalism' they are founded on or engender, are also inherently problematic because they artificially break ecological and cultural linkages, and do not enable sensitive, sustainable governance of landscapes that are dependent on such linkages. In the South Asia region, for instance, the division of the subcontinent into several nations has severely disrupted river flows, or wildlife movements, or the nomadic patterns of pastoral communities, with negative consequences for millions of people and for future generations.

The relationship of liberal democracy with the above issues (and with the structures of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism) is complex, and not necessarily one way, but that will have to be the subject of a future essay (Pallav Das and I deal with it to some extent, in examining [power in India](#)).

Is there an alternative?

In its undoubted advantages over other forms of rule (dictatorship, monarchy, etc.), modern democracy is said by many to be the best form of organising political society. However, given all its inherent problems, we can surely do better!

Indeed, there are many alternatives, some building on ancient systems of governance such as amongst many indigenous peoples, others based on various approaches to more radical, even anarchic people-centred power. Crucial to all such forms is the recognition that each of us has decision-making power as an inherent right, and that in exercising it, we distinguish between 'power to' or 'power with', from 'power over'. In other words, we harness power to do good, to benefit all (including the non-human), rather than dominate others. Again, this is a complex subject, better dealt with in a separate piece, but a few pointers can be given here.

Several initiatives around the world have attempted to establish such grounded, responsible power. Perhaps the largest in scale are the experiments in radical, distributed autonomy and self-governance amongst the Zapatista in Mexico, and the [Kurdish people](#) in West Asia. In varying forms, neighbourhood or commune assemblies and institutions run local affairs, and are federated across larger landscapes in a manner that does not centralize power in 'higher' level representative structures. Other mechanisms like a mandatory representation of women and multiple ethnicities, as also the frequent rotation of representatives or delegates, ensure widespread participation and less likelihood of power concentration.

In India, several adivasi or indigenous communities have argued for and practiced radical democracy, asserting that 'in our village we are the government'. In central India one of the earliest to do this was Mendha-Lekha village; more recently in the same area a federation of 90 villages, the Korchi Maha Gramsabha, has moved towards [relative self-rule](#). Indigenous peoples and other local communities in many parts of the world have also struggled, and in some cases got recognition, for self-determination, including the ability to govern themselves in diverse ways that build on traditional systems. There is indeed a diversity of such governance institutions, based on a [pluriverse](#) of worldviews that respect all humans and the rest of nature, most of which have been displaced by authoritarian regimes or disempowered by liberal democracies. A number of examples for localized governance along with accountable representative institutions, are also emerging in cities, such as the [feminisation of politics](#) in some forms of municipalism.

None of these are perfect, but such [direct democracy](#) can provide far greater levels of participation in decision-making to 'ordinary' people than do predominantly representative democracies. Imperfections can sometimes be quite serious, such as where local hierarchies of gender, class, caste, race can continue to operate. Struggles for social justice therefore have to hand in hand with radical democracy. In the Korchi Maha Gramsabha process mentioned above, the recognition that men have traditionally dominated collective decision-making, has led to a self-empowerment process amongst women. Sometimes, progressive policies or global human rights and social justice instruments can help with this. Also crucial are forums of dialogue and healing, enabling non-violent pathways to eliminate stereotypes, gain better mutual understanding, understand and go past (while not erasing) histories of oppression, and so on. And the democratic control of the economy, with localization for basic needs and essential services, stress on the commons rather than on private property, and the central role of caring and sharing, also have to part of the transformation.

Direct or radical democracy works best when people can deliberate face to face. At larger scales, there is a need for delegated or representative institutions; and indeed it is at these that checks and balances against caste, gender, and other repression can come. But even such larger scale institutions can be made more responsive and accountable to the units of direct democracy on the ground, e.g. through the right to recall, nomination of delegates rather than (or additionally to) election of representatives, their frequent rotation to discourage amassing of power and wealth, complete transparency of finances and decisions. Movements in several countries have brought in policy and legal changes towards such accountability,

such as a fundamental right to information, and [social audit processes](#). But more is needed, such as the Right to Participate, and enabling local rural and urban units of decision-making to have financial and law-making powers. Some kind of elections may still fit into such a system (e.g. multi-layered system in Switzerland), but are not the absolute core.

In all of above or even in relatively better examples of liberal politics, it appears that there are at least four conditions for a successful democracy. First, everyone has to have the right to participate, in every decision affecting his/her life. Such a sweeping right does not exist almost anywhere in liberal democracies. Second, people need to have accessible forums for engaging in political decision-making; by accessible is meant physical proximate, free from fear, in a language and atmosphere that is understandable, and so on. Third, the capacity to participate meaningfully has to be facilitated in everyone; over centuries of centralized decision-making this capacity has been systematically destroyed in most of us, and especially so amongst the socially and economically marginalized. Finally, and this is the most important but most difficult, the maturity and wisdom of responsible decision-making has to be built and imbibed and passed down, which would make people sensitive to the marginalized, to minorities, to not only other humans but also other species. This would be a genuine [radical ecological democracy](#).

In an ideal sense, and in the long run perhaps, radical democracy would be about a state of statelessness. Gandhi's notion of *swaraj*, or some anarchist Marxist traditions, as also several utopian visions, have no centralized state as a governing principle. Such a future could be conceived of as millions of self-governing units, autonomous and self-reliant but also responsible for the autonomy and self-reliance of others (which necessarily means limits to consumption, and behavior oriented towards respecting the commons, the very essence of *swaraj*), inter-connected in cultural and material ways that do not undermine the self-reliance of any unit. Nation-state boundaries would dissolve, to be replaced by governance at biocultural landscape level. An elaboration of such visions will, however, have to wait another time!

Finally, and lest it appears that my critical gaze is only on governments and corporations, it is important to look within ourselves. As citizens (especially those of us who are enfranchised, and even more so, privileged in some way), we need to examine our own responsibility for the mess democracy is in. Even if it is by duplicitous manipulation that it has happened, we nevertheless must accept that every few years, we willingly give over our inherent power to someone else to rule over us. If the Zapatistas and the Kurds and the Gond adivasis of central India have claimed, and in varying degrees achieved radical democracy, why are the rest of us not trying for this, including in cities? Admittedly, such governance is difficult, it needs our time and commitment, and we will then be squarely to blame if things go wrong, as also to congratulate ourselves if the ends of justice are achieved. Covid, like all the other global crises we are going through, has shown us that self-reliance in all forms (political, economic, social), with ecological sensitivity and social justice, is the only pathway to a just and sustainable future. *Swaraj* has to be an essential part of this, if we don't want to keep deluding ourselves by lining up outside poll booths.

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Ashish Kothari

Founder-member of Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh, Ashish taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's National Biodiversity Strategy & Action Plan process, served on Greenpeace International and India Boards, helped initiate the global ICCA Consortium.

Author profile





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