

Course: BBA Part 1

Paper II

Topic: Concept of Democracy

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Concept of Democracy

Government of the People

Democracy may be a word familiar to most, but it is a concept still misunderstood and misused in a time when totalitarian regimes and military dictatorships alike have attempted to claim popular support by pinning democratic labels upon themselves. Yet the power of the democratic idea has also evoked some of history's most profound and moving expressions of human will and intellect: from Pericles in ancient Athens to Vaclav Havel in the modern Czech Republic, from Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence in 1776 to Andrei Sakharov's last speeches in 1989.

In the dictionary definition, democracy "is government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a

free electoral system." In the phrase of Abraham Lincoln, democracy is a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Freedom and democracy are often used interchangeably, but the two are not synonymous. Democracy is indeed a set of ideas and principles about freedom, but it also consists of a set of practices and procedures that have been molded through a long, often tortuous history. In short, democracy is the institutionalization of freedom. For this reason, it is possible to identify the time-tested fundamentals of constitutional government, human rights, and equality before the law that any society must possess to be properly called democratic.

Democracies fall into two basic categories, direct and representative. In a direct democracy, all citizens, without the intermediary of elected or appointed officials, can participate in making public decisions. Such a system is clearly only practical with relatively small numbers of people--in a community organization or tribal council, for example, or the local unit of a labor union, where members can meet in a single room to discuss issues and arrive at decisions by consensus or majority vote. Ancient Athens, the world's first democracy, managed to practice direct democracy with an assembly that may have numbered as many as 5,000 to 6,000 persons--perhaps the maximum number that can physically gather in one place and practice direct democracy.

Modern society, with its size and complexity, offers few opportunities for direct democracy. Even in the northeastern United States, where the New England town meeting is a hallowed tradition, most communities have grown too large for all the residents to gather in a single location and vote directly on issues that affect their lives.

Today, the most common form of democracy, whether for a town of 50,000 or nations of 50 million, is representative democracy, in which citizens elect officials to make political decisions, formulate laws, and administer programs for the public good. In the name of the people, such officials can deliberate on complex public issues in a thoughtful and systematic manner that requires an investment of time and energy that is often impractical for the vast majority of private citizens.

How such officials are elected can vary enormously. On the national level, for example, legislators can be chosen from districts that each elect a single representative. Alternatively, under a system of proportional representation, each political party is represented in the legislature according to its percentage of the total vote nationwide. Provincial and local elections can mirror these national models, or choose their representatives more informally through group consensus instead of elections. Whatever the method used, public officials in a representative democracy hold office in the name of the people and remain accountable to the people for their actions.

Majority Rule and Minority Rights

All democracies are systems in which citizens freely make political decisions by majority rule. But rule by the majority is not necessarily democratic: No one, for example, would call a system fair or just that permitted 51 percent of the population to oppress the remaining 49 percent in the name of the majority. In a democratic society, majority rule must be coupled with guarantees of individual human rights that, in turn, serve to protect the rights of minorities--whether ethnic, religious, or political, or simply the losers in the debate over a piece of controversial legislation. The rights of minorities do not depend upon the goodwill of the majority and cannot be

eliminated by majority vote. The rights of minorities are protected because democratic laws and institutions protect the rights of all citizens.

Diane Ravitch, scholar, author, and a former assistant U.S. secretary of education, wrote in a paper for an educational seminar in Poland: "When a representative democracy operates in accordance with a constitution that limits the powers of the government and guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens, this form of government is a constitutional democracy. In such a society, the majority rules, and the rights of minorities are protected by law and through the institutionalization of law."

These elements define the fundamental elements of all modern democracies, no matter how varied in history, culture, and economy. Despite their enormous differences as nations and societies, the essential elements of constitutional government--majority rule coupled with individual and minority rights, and the rule of law--can be found in Canada and Costa Rica, France and Botswana, Japan and India.

Democratic Society

Democracy is more than a set of constitutional rules and procedures that determine how a government functions. In a democracy, government is only one element coexisting in a social fabric of many and varied institutions, political parties, organizations, and associations. This diversity is called pluralism, and it assumes that the many organized groups and institutions in a democratic society do not depend upon government for their existence, legitimacy, or authority.

Thousands of private organizations operate in a democratic society, some local, some national. Many of them serve a mediating role between individuals and the complex social and

governmental institutions of which they are a part, filling roles not given to the government and offering individuals opportunities to exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.

These groups represent the interests of their members in a variety of ways--by supporting candidates for public office, debating issues, and trying to influence policy decisions. Through such groups, individuals have an avenue for meaningful participation both in government and in their own communities. The examples are many and varied: charitable organizations and churches, environmental and neighborhood groups, business associations and labor unions.

In an authoritarian society, virtually all such organizations would be controlled, licensed, watched, or otherwise accountable to the government. In a democracy, the powers of the government are, by law, clearly defined and sharply limited. As a result, private organizations are free of government control; on the contrary, many of them lobby the government and seek to hold it accountable for its actions. Other groups, concerned with the arts, the practice of religious faith, scholarly research, or other interests, may choose to have little or no contact with the government at all.

In this busy private realm of democratic society, citizens can explore the possibilities of freedom and the responsibilities of self-government--unpressured by the potentially heavy hand of the state.

THE PILLARS OF DEMOCRACY

- Sovereignty of the people.
- Government based upon consent of the governed.

- Majority rule.
- Minority rights.
- Guarantee of basic human rights.
- Free and fair elections.
- Equality before the law.
- Due process of law.
- Constitutional limits on government.
- Social, economic, and political pluralism.
- Values of tolerance, pragmatism, cooperation, and compromise.