

# IS DEMOCRACY THE PANACEA FOR THE ILLS OF BAD GOVERNANCE OR MERELY THE FREEDOM TO EXPRESS OPINION?



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AS we brace ourselves to celebrate our 58<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our independence, it is high time we reflect on democracy in general and, the very fabric of our internal democracy, which have sparked quite a number of debates, thoughts and hopes over all those years. For centuries, democracy has been associated with human liberation. It emerged as a promise to free society from ignorance, divine right, rigid traditions, and authoritarian rule. Rooted in reason, economic progress, and popular sovereignty, democracy appeared to offer not only political participation but also cultural tolerance, technical efficiency, and personal happiness. Yet history has shown that democracy is neither a magical cure for all the ills of bad governance nor simply a system that allows citizens to voice their opinions. Rather, it is a complex and evolving political culture grounded in liberty, diversity, ethical responsibility and ins-

titutional safeguards.

The great revolutionary hopes that accompanied the birth of modern democracy often produced unexpected results. Instead of leading directly to freedom, revolutions sometimes gave rise to totalitarian regimes or rigid state bureaucracies. Revolution and democracy proved to be distinct and even opposing forces. On the European continent, where modern democracy first took shape, the twentieth century's greatest tragedy was not poverty but totalitarianism. The experiences of fascism and communism revealed how popular mobilization could degenerate into repression. As a result, democracy came to be understood more modestly, as a system of guarantees designed to prevent leaders from seizing or retaining power against the will of the majority. Revolutions, often intended to save democracy from its enemies, have instead given birth to anti-revolutionary regimes due to their concentration of power, evocation of national unity and unanimity, and denunciation of adversaries, who are deemed traitors with whom it is impossible to coexist, rather than spokesmen for different ideas or interests.

The revival of the human rights discourse, first articulated during the late eighteenth century in the United States and France, reflects this modest yet crucial conception of democracy. The appeal to human rights re-emerged as

a protest against states that claimed to embody a truth higher than the sovereignty of the people. Democracy, in this sense, is not simply the majority rule, but it is the limitation of power through legal and ethical principles. It seeks to protect citizens from authoritarianism and arbitrary rule rather than to impose an absolute ideology. However, reducing democracy merely to a set of procedural rules or institutional mechanisms is insufficient. Political theorist Norberto Bobbio described democracy as a set of rules determining who is authorized to make collective decisions and how those decisions are made. While this definition captures democracy's institutional core, namely free elections, political pluralism and regular renewal of authority, it does not exhaust its meaning. A society cannot be considered democratic if citizens are offered only a narrow choice between factions of the same elite, or if political institutions are mani-

pulated by oligarchic interests. Nor can democracy survive where violence and chaos undermine legitimate authority.

Democracy must therefore go beyond institutional guarantees and must reconcile majority rule with minority rights, integrate immigrants, ensure women's participation, and bridge social and economic divides. It must confront the fragmentation of modern society, between global markets and local identities, technological rationality and cultural diversity. Democracy risks becoming either an ideology serving the powerful or a term exploited by repressive regimes. To avoid these dangers, it must be rooted in a vibrant political culture that recognizes diversity of beliefs, origins, and aspirations. The struggles of those who resisted totalitarian and authoritarian regimes illustrate this deeper meaning of democracy. From the workers of Gdańsk to the protesters of Tiananmen Square, from civil



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of the diversity of beliefs, origins, opinions, and agendas. The defining characteristic of democracy is therefore not simply a set of institutional guarantees or majority rule but above all a respect for individual or collective projects that can reconcile the assertion of personal liberty with the right to identify with a particular social, national or religious collectivity. Democracy is not based solely on laws but above all on a political culture. If anything is to be democratic, equality must mean that everyone has the right to choose and govern their own existence.

Democracy is neither a panacea for all governance problems nor merely the freedom to express opinions. It is not a magical solution that automatically eliminates corruption, inequality, or conflict. Nor is democracy reducible to periodic elections or public debate but rather it is a dynamic and fragile system that combines institutional rules with a culture of rights, diversity, and ethical responsibility. It limits power, protects minorities, and empowers individuals to resist domination and its survival depends not only on procedures but on a continuous commitment to liberty and justice. Only in this broader and deeper sense can democracy respond to the enduring challenges of governance in the modern world.



rights activists in the United States to opponents of apartheid in South Africa, democracy has been defined by resistance to absolute power. The peaceful negotiations between F. W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela during South Africa's transition demonstrated that democracy cannot mean the tyranny of the majority over minorities. Rather, it requires recognition of plural identities and a commitment to coexistence. Democracy, therefore, is not merely ne-

gative liberty, that is freedom from external interference, coercion, or restraint by other people or the state. Popularized by Isaiah Berlin, it defines a “private sphere” where individuals act without obstacles, emphasizing personal autonomy and limited government intervention. Democracy is not simply participatory or deliberative procedure but it is what some thinkers call the “politics of the subject”, the struggle of individuals and groups to as-

sert their freedom against the domination of economic, political, or cultural systems. Modern societies often subject individuals to the pressures of industrial normalization, consumerist conformity, and political mobilization. Democracy, in its richer sense, enables individuals to choose and govern their own existence while belonging to larger communities.

Equality within democracy does not imply uniformity but that everyone has the right to shape their own life. The majority must recognize the rights of minorities and be aware that today's majority may become tomorrow's minority. The sovereignty of the people leads to democracy only when it is restrained by ethical principles of liberty and justice. Without such moral pressure, democracy easily degenerates into oligarchy, as political power merges with economic and social domination. Democracy cannot exist without a recognition