

# The Suicidal Democracy

November 27, 2021



The Freedom in the World 2021 report, released by Freedom House, has unveiled 2020 to be the 15<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of decline in democracy across the world. Despite occasional breakthroughs and regional variations in experiences of democratic erosion, the glaring loss of democratic assurances can no longer be pushed under the rug by civil society. Is democracy edging towards its built-in ending? The answer is no, and that makes this a topic of utmost priority. Democracy is not ending but is being hollowed out of its principles to serve as a powerful ideological weapon legitimizing violence and domination.

In a vulnerable world wrecked by the pandemic and divided by populist forces, the future of democracy rests on its ability to confront these challenges and emerge successful without altering its core principles. The following session is devoted to an analysis of the three fundamental challenges that threaten democracies. Much akin to prison with locks inside, these challenges are a product of democracy too- fruits of ideological fallacies inherent in democracies that were overlooked in the pursuit of glorifying a mediocre solution.

## **Political Ignorance and Erroneous Judgements**

Democracy is understood to be the government of the people, by the people, and for the people. But the pertinent question is, are the 'people' presented with meaningful choices and equipped to make informed decisions in a democracy? The death of democracies shall be the ordinary people, manipulated by the power-hungry political parties, handing over the reign to divisive forces and self-serving interests which are legitimized under the pretense of democratic decision making. Thus, democracy is reduced to majoritarianism, which given time, takes a turn for authoritarianism in the guise of democracy. Ignorance and conforming to the majoritarian ideals can even be bliss for voters, since adopting a critical attitude comes with the moral responsibility of swimming against the tide which can be quite exhausting and at worst, deadly. This is highlighted by Bryan Caplan in his work *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, (2007) when he states, "What happens if fully rational politicians compete for the support of irrational voters — specifically, voters with irrational beliefs about the effects of various policies? It is a recipe for mendacity."

This is the major reservation against democracy expressed by several political philosophers, from Plato of ancient Greece to Jason Brennan of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Plato equated democracies with demagogues, and hence trusted only educated and specially trained philosopher kings and queens with ruling his *kallipolis*. A less utopian suggestion came from J. S. Mill, who gave extra votes to educated citizens. Despite arguments for epistocracy gaining momentum, this was eventually rejected due to its denial of the right to participation for all. However, the debate is revived by Jason Brennan in his work, 'Against Democracy' (2016), which pointed out that the right to participation in today's democracy is translating to the right to impose one's will on others. "Democracy does not empower individuals. It disempowers individuals and instead empowers the majority of the moment," he states. Herein lies the first challenge of democracy- How to set a criterion that defines ideal voters, taking into consideration the historical and sociological conditionalities?

### **Rise of Populism and Majoritarianism**

The current upsurge of right-wing populist forces is a reality cemented by Trumpism in the United States and the chain reaction set off. The relation between democracy and extremism is not a recent phenomenon. Democracy can be self-destructive by enabling the voting out of democracy, and the rise of fascist forces of Hitler and Mussolini out of democracies stand testament to this. Today, several established democracies, despite the varying cultural and physical contexts, are characterized by one thing in common- power relations forged by mobilizations on the line of majority-minority distinctions, often marked by an arrogant and hurt majority and a volatile and disposable minority. While the political leaders and parties reap dividends from this divisive agenda, it is democracy and rights that pay the price.

Established democracies that have recently come under the scanner for the erosion of democratic ethos is a long list, containing celebrated names like the United States, the world's longest democracy, and India, the world's largest democracy. The regime of Donald Trump in the US was the lived depiction of Plato's nightmare. The xenophobia, white supremacism, mistreatment of minorities, and pathological egotism that marked the Trump regime, and the public support he enjoyed proved by the highest vote share to be garnered by an incumbent president despite being voted out, resonated in the rest of the world. Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, Erdogan's Turkey, Modi's India, Viktor Orban's Hungary, Mnangagwa's Zimbabwe, are some popular 'democratic' regimes across the world that have inculcated the spirit of authoritarianism. With the battle lines drawn on the lines of ethnic and religious identities, the "clash of civilizations" predicted by Samuel Huntington (1996) has already commenced, as shown by the susceptibility of democracy to terrorism, riots, and pogroms. The majoritarian support they enjoy and silencing the voice of the minority presents the second challenge to democracy. In an era where authoritarianism is masquerading as democracies, how to revive its true nature and fulfil promises of liberty and equality for all?

### **Paradox of Democracy and Capitalism**

Democracy and capitalism have often been portrayed as the proverbial twins of modernity. Their concomitant conquests of the world contributed to the claim that neither can flourish without the other. But the glaring theoretical and practical fallibilities in this argument are very evident today. The juxtaposition of capitalism with democracy reveals them to be antagonistic forces, with democracy on the losing side. While democracy exudes principles of equality through the provision of political rights, capitalism heralds widening inequalities that undermine these rights. Capitalism is profit-oriented while democracy aims to serve the common good. Capitalism concentrates power in the hands of a few who possess the majority of resources while democracy attempts to disperse power among a wide spectrum of citizens. While the simultaneous rise of democracy and capitalism can be attributed to historical contingencies, countries like China and Russia are contemporary examples of thriving capitalist economies which are miles away from being democracies.

The ever-widening chasm between the rich few and the poor many results in the undermining of democracies to oligarchies as the state becomes puppets in the hands of large corporations that pour money into their wallets. The poor and the middle class are presented with Hobson's choice since the interests of the wealthy continue to be served even after regime changes. Political theorist Karl Polanyi, in his magnum opus, *The Great Transformation* (1944) had pointed out how this conundrum leads voters to shift allegiance to fascism, which was reflected in Hitler's Germany. The current rise of far-right forces and the popular support garnered by them can be traced to the skewed and iniquitous distribution of wealth in liberal democracies and the disillusionment of the majority of voters with the economic progress promised.

### **Trajectories for Redemption of Democracy**

The decline in democracy, or rather the dilution of democracy, is no longer a threat looming in the future. It's the reality of the day which demands acknowledgement and adoption of redressal mechanisms.

The advent of democracy was given the required propulsion by the promise of economic progress by capitalism and socio-political progress by the human rights agenda. Both have fallen short of providing the necessary impetus to boost democracy today.

The growing awareness regarding widespread and deepening inequalities in the capitalist world is no longer limited to the academic circle. Capitalist economic order is highly unstable and has built-in suicide points of its own, from which it is dragged away by state intervention. The first and foremost nostrum to heal the ills of democracy shall be to retain democratic control over the economy. This requires a revival of welfarist measures and distributive mechanisms. COVID-19 pandemic has reasserted the necessity of the state retaining its control over the provision of essentials and social security blankets. An active state that is held accountable should replace the nightwatchman state and social democracy must be secured.

The human rights promised by democracies are turning to vacant statements due to their selective application. The Human Rights agenda of democracy is a double-edged sword. Despite having the best interests in mind, behind the façade of its rosy picture lies the sanction granted to the state for pursuing violence in the name of democracy. Akin to 'white man's burden,' powerful democracies often take it upon themselves to impose their conception of democracy over others, using it as a shield to render themselves impervious to any censure. The misadventure of the US in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and countless other countries is the product of arrogance that arises out of democracy. The power granted to the state and the majority population it represents can easily be misused, and blind acceptance of the measures taken by a democratically elected government can only be the doom of true democracy.

Hence, there is an immediate need to understand the fallibility of governments formed through democracy and emphasize substantive rather than procedural democracy. This requires a strong civil society constituted by educated and informed citizens. This constitutes the second panacea to the evil of populism. Modern technology has constrained citizens to various echo-chambers where one only hears what one agrees with. Critical thinkers are dwindling species and intolerance to differences is on the rise, with both government and people becoming more thin-skinned than ever. 'We' constitute the heart of democracy, and to defend our liberties and rights, 'we' have to break out of filter bubbles, expose ourselves to differences of opinions, confront erosion of democratic institutions and reform ourselves to informed citizens.

To conclude, democracy is very fragile today. While we have 167 democracies in the world at present, how many of them are democratic in the true sense of the word? Not many. Erosion of

substantive democracy within established democracies is an unfortunate reality that makes one question whether democracy has reached its built-in end after all. Democracy is always theoretically defensible, but in practice, it is only a fine line that distinguishes democracies from lesser desirable authoritarian regimes. True, one can still argue democracy is better than the rest since folly in the jungle is always better than peace in the zoo. The survival of the suicidal 'true democracy' in these tumultuous times comes down to the question of human nature. Are we noble enough to meet and maintain the standards of democracy or too flawed to be cursed to live with a repressive regime in a dog-eat-dog world?