

THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2023

Deconstructing Democracy as our Legacy

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As I scrolled through the topic for this iteration's St. Gallen Symposium, I was instantly reminded of Plato's famous quote. "Democracy... is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder; and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequal alike". Ahead of his time, Plato summarized democracy, a government for the people, by the people and of the people in one of its most brutal forms.

Democracy can be considered as one of the best legacies that our prior generation has gifted the current generation. In this relentless world, constantly hustling with a never-ending pandemic and economic & physical insecurities, democracy has been one constant that has helped nations recuperate by providing people with a channel to voice out their opinions. The roots of democracy started way back in the fourth century in the form of Athenian democracy, in which citizens

would assemble to debate and vote on laws and policies.

Democracy, since then, has had varied shapes and structures, but all of these structures have stayed true to its core spirit by adhering to the fundamental principles of equality, freedom and individual rights. However, with recent events such as political violence in the US, the establishment of populist and absolutist governments in India (two of the largest democracies in the world), far-rightist inclination in France and the UK, the future of democracy appears somewhat bleak.

In this article, I am going to share key highlights on why democracy is one of the best legacies that has been inherited by the current generation concerning to socio-economic and political factors and also throw some light on the key challenges that this legacy has been facing over the past few years and provide

a few actionable ideas that can help circumvent these challenges.

The Good

Imagine a scenario in which a young female cannot step outside her home without a male companion. Imagine another scenario in which you are traded like a product from one slave owner to another to do odd tasks with barely eatable food, no remuneration and dignity. This generation has been very fortunate not to have even witnessed these scenarios, let alone experienced them. A few of the key reasons that these vicious structures are almost non-existent today in major parts of the world are the revolutionary measures and the fights undertaken by the previous generations to adhere to the democratic principles of civil rights, equality, freedom of speech and the right to live with dignity.

One of the salient features of democracy is that the ruling government is not paramount, and the prime minister/ the president is not the supreme authoritarian in the country. Instead, the government has to work under the purview of the constitution/ laws designed by the founding members of the country and which have been updated over the course of time to be relevant. In case a government fails to meet the expectations of the people who voted the government in power or it violates any constitutional rights, the citizens of the country have the power to impeach the government and elect a new political party that can better meet their expectations, in the next general election.

One of the most prominent examples showcasing people power in democracy was in India, the largest democracy in the world in 1977. The then prime minister Indira Gandhi from Congress tried to

concentrate power in central systems, declared an emergency and curtailed the rights of the press and citizens alike. A couple of years later, the people of India ousted the Indira Gandhi government leading to a first-time non-Congress government being established in the country.

The importance of democracy in sustaining individual rights is often downplayed worldwide. Especially in a country like India, with a huge diversity in terms of religions, race, castes and creed, having a democratic institution is the one cohesive factor that has ensured unity among all Indians. The constitution allows for equal rights to all citizens irrespective of religion, race, caste and gender, and any citizen can hold strong electoral, judicial or even corporate positions without any such barriers withholding their rise. Many of the other forms of political structures (Autocracy, Communism in countries such as Iran and Afghanistan) suppress minority rights, with no freedom for them to practice their religion, constantly exposed to religious persecution in their own countries, discrimination against women and the list goes on. However, democracy stands tall as one of the few structures which not only allows for free will for minorities to practice their religion without any fear but also provides equal opportunities for their economic growth via means of special status and reservations.

On the other side of the coin, with such diversity, many religions in India have their religious laws embedded in the constitution, however, fundamental constitutional rights to live, freedom, and speech strongly overrule the religious laws in terms of conflicts.

With “Gen Z” known for voicing its strong views of expression, be it political, social or environmental, defending the right of

freedom of speech, expression and choice become more vital. The general public can voice their concerns against the government and freely criticize any government actions without fear of persecution or their civil rights being threatened.

Talking about the role of democracy in economic development- political stability provided by democracy, especially peaceful transfer of power across governments have been proven to be conducive for economic growth. Minimal intervention by the government, separation of powers and protection of individual rights ensure a level playing field for investors and businesses alike. This type of system encourages innovation, investments from foreign players, technological advances, in turn driving economic growth. Key investments by the governments in the public health, education and research centres also assists in the cause of economic development of the countries.

Challenges to Democracy

While democracy has been thriving in the majority of countries, in the current world, are we able to sustain democracy? Has it run its course? A few of the most critical threats are:

- **Absolutist Governments:** Political parties with an absolute majority in the government tend to impose their cultural and religious views on the citizens. This has also led to religious extremism in secular countries such as India, which has seen an increased number of anti-minority incidents over the past few years. Additionally, populist parties have increased the representativeness of certain dominant sections in multiple countries. For example, in

Sweden, the richest are overrepresented among councillors from the key political parties, 40% of the councillors versus only 20% of the population, which represents the interests of the working class in Sweden.

- **Polarization:** The trend of people blindly following their political parties even if they violate core democratic principles is one of the most existential threats to democratic accountability, as it typically gives the ruling government a free hand in running the country and even justifies abuses of democratic principles to restrain the opposition. For instance, the US suffers from malevolent polarization, with society being divided into political sectors defined by mutual fear and hatred.
- **Role of Technology in Influencing Voting Decisions:** One of the most relevant and impactful examples of technology influencing political landscapes is the Cambridge Analytica case. Political parties leveraged personal data without the users' consent to create targeted ad campaigns in order to influence political decisions in the US and other countries. Another concern in the digital age is the spread of fake information masquerading as news narratives, which is designed to seek attention and influence the political decisions of the citizens.
- **Income Inequality:** In India, the wealthiest 10% own more than 72% of total wealth, which reflects the skewed distribution of wealth and thus, concentration of power among a small group of people. This scenario typically leads to the formation of public policies that

favour the richest over the majority population, essentially undermining the core principles of equality within a democracy.

Circumventing these Challenges

While there are no fixed solutions or frameworks to mitigate these modern-day challenges faced by democracy, each and every institution in a country—the government, judiciary, media, NGOs, and the common citizen has to work in tandem to uphold the core values of democracy.

1. Political parties should be equipped and guided to create a more conducive environment that facilitates diverse opinions, constructive dialogues with opposition leaders involving people from diverse backgrounds, leading to more trust by the masses.
2. Having a strong opposition party is imperative in any democratic assembly so that there exists a credible alternative to the government in case of any adversities. Even if there is an absolute majority, the opposition party must be kept informed about key policy decisions or matters of national security.
3. To help preserve secularism values, political leaders, particularly those in government, should adopt a more moderate tone in their policy positions and avoid being biased for a specific religion or culture.
4. Media has a key role to play in the democratic structure. It should be empowered to ask the right questions to the government, monitor government policies, raise citizen concerns, and hold the government accountable for

its actions. The media can also be a fact checker that helps people identify misinformation and fake news.

5. Furthermore, civil society organizations, or NGOs, should be given more freedom to assess the government's performance in upholding civil rights and be allowed to play a larger role in shaping policies in the public interest.
6. Another critical aspect that can help ensure that the government does not abuse its power and always adheres to constitutional values is an independent and strong judiciary.
7. As people have the highest power in voting and outvoting governments, voter education is very essential in a democracy. Enlightening voters on the importance of voting for the right candidate regardless of irrelevant barriers such as caste, creed, religion, and gender is critical to ensuring that people from all strata of society are represented.

Talking about combating income inequality, a few concrete action items that democratic governments can follow are:

1. Encourage organic economic growth via policies: Frame policies that encourage organic and sustainable economic growth, contribute to job creation and thus, wealth distribution that can help reduce poverty and income inequality in the long run.
2. Concrete changes in the tax structure: While the percentage tax brackets are similar across groups with different types of net worth, it is high time that a

progressive tax structure is also introduced. The introduction of a wealth tax that imposes a levy on capital gains as well as assets will ensure that the wealthiest contribute a higher share of the country's overall tax.

3. Universal Basic Income: While not all countries have the luxury providing universal basic income to all, the countries which can do so, should provide UBI to the needy, that can help ensure a basic standard of living for all, thus, enabling the needy to focus on gaining quality education, skills for employment and reduce the inequality gap in the long run.

To combat technological interventions in democracy in this digital age, in addition to the media role described earlier, government policies regulating technology firms while taking care not to infringe on their freedom of speech rights are crucial. The government should hold tech companies such as Google, Meta, and Twitter accountable for the spread of fake information, influencing public behaviour during elections, and protecting privacy rights. Decentralized systems are also vital in promoting transparency in political donations. An independent body can help actively assess the impact of technological

intervention in democratic procedures and provide recommendations to circumvent the impact.

Concluding Thoughts

The current generation has been endowed with this extremely powerful democratic tool by previous generations. While there are thousands of examples of how democracy has helped countries thrive in rough weather, uphold civil rights, induce economic growth, democracy in the existing world is under threat from all sides. It is now the responsibility of the current generation to work in collaboration with the previous generation to uphold the core principles of democracy, starting from family discussions to the highest level of government debates.

All democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, media, and independent non-government bodies, should be empowered to hold the government accountable for its actions and safeguard the constitutional principles at all times. Finally, it is the responsibility of all citizens to ensure that the government is doing so by following a few of the aforementioned recommendations to prevent disintegration of the democratic process.

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