

Democracy and what it means.

Written by W.J.Pais

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Chester E. Finn, Jr., professor of education and public policy at Vanderbilt University and director of the Educational Excellence Network says "The idea of democracy is durable, but its practice is precarious." Democracy can legitimately claim to address universal human aspirations for freedom and self-government

Democratic values may be resurgent today, but viewed over the long course of human history, from the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century to the rise of one-party regimes in the mid-20th century, most democracies have been few and short-lived. While the desire for freedom may be innate, the *practice of* democracy must be learned. freedom and opportunity depends on the dedication and collective wisdom of the people, not on the benevolence of self-appointed leaders.

A healthy democratic society is not the one in which individuals pursue their own personal goals. Democratic Societies flourish when they are tended by citizens willing to use their freedom to participate in the life of their society--adding their voices to the public debate, electing representatives who are held accountable for their actions, and accepting the need for tolerance and compromise in public life.

The citizens of a democracy enjoy the right of individual freedom, but they also share the responsibility of joining with others to shape a future that will continue to embrace the fundamental values of freedom and self-government.

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.

Democracy is a system in which citizens make political decisions by majority rule which is not necessarily democratic: A system can not be said to be fair or just if it permits 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 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

Thus when a democratic system operates in accordance with a constitution that limits the powers of the government and guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens, it is called 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 Constitutional rules and procedures determine how a government functions

A society in which institutions, political parties, organizations, and associations work for

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individual goals within the parameters of the Constitution, it 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.

Through such groups, individuals have an avenue for meaningful participation both in government and in their own communities. In an authoritarian society such organizations would be controlled by the government.

In a democratic system, the powers of the government are, by law, defined and limited. As a result, private organizations are free of government control; on the contrary, many of them seek to hold the government accountable for its actions.

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 democratic society, citizens can explore the possibilities of freedom and the responsibilities of self-government--un-pressured by the potentially heavy hand of the state.

THE PILLARS OF DEMOCRACY

Sovereignty of the people.

.....Democracies rest upon the principle that government exists to serve the people; the people do not exist to serve the government.....

Government based upon consent of the governed.

Majority rule.

In order to function within the desired framework of a democratic system, decisions have to be worked out in such a way, that they will be willingly carried out. As it is not possible to please everyone, the way out of the situation is by accepting the rule of the majority. A simple majority in some cases and a 2/3 majority in more important situations.

Minority rights.

In order to safeguard the interests of those who disagree due to their status, cultural differences, etc., because they form a minority component of the Society, one has to take into consideration their interests if a stable democratic system is to be the objective. If this is not done, it will turn into a dictatorship of the interests of the majority block. This will leave a chance to fifth columnists and sabotage of the Society and its institutions.

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Guarantee of basic human rights.

.....inalienable rights are God-given natural rights. These rights are not destroyed when civil society is created, and neither society nor government can remove or "alienate" them.....Inalienable rights include freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion and conscience, freedom of assembly, and the right to equal protection before the law.....protection of basic human rights is accepted widely: It is embodied in written constitutions throughout the world as well as in the Charter of the United Nations and in such international agreements as the Helsinki Final Act (the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe--CSCE).....

Free and fair elections.

.....When citizens in a democracy vote, for example, they are exercising their right and responsibility to determine who shall rule in their name.....

Democracies fall into two basic categories, direct and representative. In a direct democracy, all citizens can participate in making public decisions. Such a system is clearly only practical in a community organization or tribal council, Ancient Athens, the world's first democracy, managed to practice direct democracy.

Representative democracy, is that 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 public issues in a systematic manner that requires time and energy.

How such officials are elected can vary. It is important that these elections are fair and transparent and do not leave to doubts, which will feed disgruntled losers and non co-operation in the management of the society as a whole.

Equality before the law.

The democratic system has to run by specific laws, and a Constitution has to guide it in this functioning. The officials should follow it to the letter and without any gain for themselves, which leads to bribery and corruption.

Due process of law.

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Institutions of Courts and Judiciary is implied. It also implies that it is manned by experience staff, and that infrastructure to educate them is created if it does not already exist. In developing Countries, where once asks they introduce democracy, this could be a crucial problem, as mature democracies evolved their institutions over a long period of time, and we now want these overnight, to suit the 'national interests' of the promoters.

Constitutional limits on government.

.....It is certainly true that individuals exercise basic, or inalienable, rights--such as freedom of speech, assembly, and religion--which thereby constitute limits on any democratically based government. In this sense, individual rights are a bulwark against abuses of power by the government or a momentary political majority.....Broadly speaking, these responsibilities entail participating in the democratic process

to ensure its functioning. At a minimum, citizens should educate themselves about the critical issues confronting their society.....

Social, economic, and political pluralism.

..Citizens in a democracy enjoy the right to join organizations of their choosing that are independent of government and to participate freely in the public life of their society. At the same time, citizens must accept the responsibility that such participation entails: educating themselves about the issues, demonstrating tolerance in dealing with those holding opposing views, and compromising when necessary to reach

agreement...rights and responsibilities, are opposite sides of the same coin. Exercise of ones rights also puts an obligation to protect and enhance those rights--for himself and for others.....Benjamin Barber notes, "Democracy is often understood as the rule of the majority, and rights are understood more and more as the private possessions of individuals and thus as necessarily antagonistic to majoritarian democracy. But this is to misunderstand both rights and democracy."

Values of tolerance, pragmatism, cooperation, and compromise

.....Democracy, Diane Ravitch writes, "is a process, a way of living and working together. It is evolutionary, not static. It requires cooperation, compromise, and tolerance among all citizens. Making it work is hard, not easy. Freedom means responsibility, not freedom from responsibility.".....Human beings possess a variety of sometimes contradictory desires. People want safety yet relish adventure; they aspire to individual freedom yet demand social equality.....It is important to recognize that many conflicts in a democratic society are not

between clear-cut "right" and "wrong" but between differing interpretations of democratic rights and social priorities.....Individuals and groups must be willing, at a minimum, to tolerate each other's differences, recognizing that the other side has valid rights and a legitimate point of view.....

CONCLUSION

A healthy democracy depends in large part on the development of a democratic civic culture. "A totalitarian political system," Diane Ravitch writes, "encourages a culture of passivity and apathy. The regime seeks to mold an obedient and docile citizenry. By contrast, the civic culture of a democratic society is shaped by the freely chosen activities of individuals and groups. Citizens in a free society pursue their interests, exercise their rights, and take responsibility for their own lives. They make their own decisions about where they will work, what kind of work they will do, where they will live, whether to join a political party, what to read, and so on. These are personal decisions, not political decisions."

"Education plays a singular role in free societies," Finn states. "While the education systems of other regimes are tools of those regimes, in a democracy the regime is the servant of the people, people whose capacity to create, sustain, and improve that regime depends in large measure on the quality and effectiveness of the educational arrangements through which they pass. In a democracy, it can fairly be said, education enables freedom itself to flourish over time."

"Coalition-building," Diane Ravitch observes, "is the essence of democratic action. It teaches interest groups to negotiate with others, to compromise and to work within the constitutional system. By working to establish coalition, groups with differences learn how to argue peaceably, how to pursue their goals in a democratic manner, and ultimately how to live in a world of diversity."

<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/whatsdem/whatdm6.htm>

Difficulties

While Democracy is the Ideal, and seems to have flourished in some countries, others have faced difficulties. England matured over centuries of trials starting in the 12th century. In 1920 women were not allowed to vote either in England or in the United States which went to war with Iraq with the purported aim of establishing democracy. Since it served them well, they believed that others would too. So what was the difficulty?

First of all, one has to see the geographic and ethnic distribution of people. In the United States, the first immigrants were Anglo Saxons who were disgruntled with the monarchic system in England. So, in their adopted homeland they wanted to do something else. They wanted the power to decide their future and so adopted a scheme. It was a confederation, and with individual rights for the States and a common Federal Structure for the management of the whole territory. It was a voluntary adjustment by the people who owned property and had land rights given to them by the Monarchic government that preceded it. It was a voluntary transition to the better. In spite of it they had their differences which landed them into a bitter Civil War, and the vanquished had to yield to the Victors and the ill feeling has not completely ebbed away. Universal franchise came only in the twenties when women were allowed to vote, and the Black Americans got their rights in the 60s. Even now they have complaints that the votes are fudged and the Blacks have not been registered in the Voting Lists. There is a back lash against people of Hispanic origin, for form 15 % of the population. As the powerful media presents the interests and views of the powerful and wealthy sections of the Society, or panders to the vulnerable classes whom the wealthy consider their "market" to prey upon, we find these undercurrents, in tragedies like the Katrina Hurricane and its after math where the interests of the wealthy are given preference over the interests of the poor. Then what is so great about this Democracy? India adopted a Democratic system of Government after Independence, when the Founding Fathers, saw the havoc caused in Europe through despotic rulers. They chose the best from the US, Britain and the Soviet Union, and made a unique system for themselves. Thanks to Queen Victoria, after 1857, Indians used their opportunity and mastered Law and Jurisprudence, by pursuing higher education in England and thus could manage the Constituent Assembly with great finesse, once the British left our land by giving us Independence. Unfortunately, the West thinks that all that is good can only come from them, and they have the sole monopoly to demand others to obey their dictats. Their survival as Capitalist Societies, depends on the dependence of weaker sections of the world on their capital. As this inter-dependence does not take into account the psychological aspects of the weaker people, it leaves loop holes through which corruption and inefficiency creeps in, and undermines the whole project and leads to violence and ultimately toppling of the apple cart.

We see the first examples of the democratic governments after the First World War, which replaced the monarchies of Europe. Money has always been needed to run the Governments. If this can not be raised by taxes then it has to be borrowed from Banks, Financial Institutions or other wealthy countries. So these latter turn out to be powerful brokers in the government machinery. In the past, they would lend to the Monarchs and their descendants. In a Democratic System, the Government and the people's representatives borrow it from them, and eventually are obligated to pass laws which favor them, more than their Constituents. The latter are passive and do not educate themselves in their own rights and political participation, so the way is open for those who take advantage of the loop holes. Thus Nations, who profess democracy at home, will trample on the democratic aspirations of others, in the name of National Interests. Thus National Interests and Democratic Interests do

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not always go hand in hand. Democratic Interests of the whole world should take precedence over the interests of individual nations, and a modus vivendi should be reached, for which the United Nations was formed, but today, more and more it is evident, that the UN has been taken for a ride by the powerful nations, to safeguard their national interests. It is this dichotomy in the minds of Leaders that leads to resistance to democracy according to the definition of the powerful who want to impose their will on the weaker ones, so that the power in their hands will not be whittled away. One clearly sees the clash of ideas of the Idealist Intellectuals and the Capitalist Business Class and the Politicians fight for their survival as they find themselves jammed between these two.

However, the irony of all this, is the lesson from History. All great empires which came before perished trying to fulfill that same purpose. To hold on to their National Interests, they went to wars, and bankrupted themselves, and the weaker ones filled the vacuum and started building their own empires.

Cultural Differences.

Democracy has not been the only alternative for governments. In the past there were tribal, patriarchal and matriarchal societies. They gave way to monarchies with a feudal property structure. In this structure, peasants did not need education as such which was the privilege of the priestly classes and who worked as clerks of the Monarchs. Romans had Senatorial system which preceded their Emperors. Their agricultural system depended on the plebeians and to maintain their lands and their vineyards, they needed slaves, and to obtain them they had to expand their empire. British and Ottoman empires were the result of trade and market requirements for their produce. To create markets, they colonized weaker areas of the world, and used subterfuge to fulfill their goals. Education was doled out sparingly, whether at home or in the colonies. Charles Dickens portrays graphically in his stories life in England in spite of the wealth created by the Empire.

The curious outcome of this Colonial Venture was the spread of Education. In order to maintain their railways, ports and other civic amenities, they needed local staff, and they employed them with a preference to their own co-religionists. The Missionaries, established schools and colleges, but what they could teach was determined by the British Government. So we had schools up to matriculation and colleges teaching only Arts and Humanities. For Engineering and Medicine, they were basic and one had to go to Metropolitan Cities for the same.

After the 1857 Mutiny in the Armed Services, the British Parliament transferred the ruling

power from the British East India Company to the Crown. Queen Victoria introduced changes which required local self government and induction of local man power in the Civil Service. To train local Civil Servants Indian Civil Service was established and to get a certificate one had to pass an examination in England, and that gave an opportunity for Indians to see England and its Universities and style of Government. This is how our first political leaders, like Gandhi, and Nehru got their insight into Politics and educated themselves in Law and Governance.

The two World Wars, bankrupted the British and the Ottoman Empires.. However, during their sojourn in Mesopotamia and the Middle East, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire they found a new source of wealth. Oil. It has been said that Zionists, a group of the Jewish people with a political ideology, who had founded their movement in 1897 in Vienna had set their goal to get back their Homeland from where they were evicted by the Romans in 70 AD. The possession of this land had moved from the Roman Empire to the Ottoman Empire who were equally not ready to accept the Jews back in Palestine on the scale the Zionists wanted. The only power at that time who could achieve this goal of Regime Change was the British Empire and the funds came from the German Bankers (who were Jewish) and that was the reason the Kaiser had to abdicate and an Armistice was signed by the German Army which obligated the Reich to pay reparations to England and France, which in turn bankrupted Germany and led them to financial misery, which gave an opening to the Nazi Party to take over. Jews got their homeland, and British got their Oil. But Regime Change was not easy. The British divided this region according to the areas where Oil was discovered to have a control over the wealth which they could not obviously hold on to for long, and partitioned Mesopotamia into Iraq and Jordan, West of the Jordan River was to be the Homeland of the Jews, Kuwait was carved and its oil was flowing by 1947. Iraq's access to the Gulf was buffered on either side by Kuwait and Iran, both were the Protectorates of Britain.

In the 1920s American economy boomed, but in Germany there were winds of change and fear of Hitler's anti Jewish Nazi party taking over. Again the only empire who could defeat Hitler was British Empire and the funds had to be taken out of America and thus the banks of the US went into a tail spin, and there was the Great Depression, for which no credible explanation has been given. In the Second World War, European powers got their weaponry made in the US and the Military Industrial Complex was born. Many of the ex-German industrialists and bankers moved to US and invested in their industries and became rich. Those who are interested could know who they were and how they got their clout. It is but natural that they have an interest in the preservation of their wealth and will go to any length to preserve it. It does not follow that Jews as a whole are like this. There are many who do not agree with these affairs and try to change the equation by a just solution. You just have to hear the website: <http://www.democracynow.org> to hear the view of this side of spectrum whose voice has been drowned by the mainstream media. This is truly a struggle for the survival of democratic values and of our Society as we know it.

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The result of the War is known. Germany and Japan were defeated but also the British Empire was dead. India got its independence and so too others quickly followed. In 1967 Margaret Thatcher introduced the East of Suez policy, and they were left with the fig leaves of Gibraltar and Falkland Islands. The Oil kept them afloat till 1973 when OPEC was born.

This geo-political cataclysm is not well understood. Boundaries were drawn for the convenience of the Western Powers, and did not take into consideration the local demographic realities. They were all peasants and were not important at that time, but eventually with the spread of education, and understanding to the manipulations they banded themselves to rid the Western influence.

Today when the US speaks of national interests, you should understand what they mean. If they do not bully the weak now, they will lose what they have and soon will be subservient to the latter at a future time. This compulsion leads them to undertake wars, but war is a double edged sword, and the victim at the receiving end is fighting an asymmetric battle with new ideology of attack. This is unacceptable to the West as it does not fit into their Conventions and Treaties. But who said History obeyed these parameters in the past. Did the Anglo Saxons follow conventions when in their quest for land they decimated the Native Americans? Unfortunately, history has the nagging habit of repeating itself, and those who are too busy to have a look at it, become its victims. If not themselves, their children and grand children will surely pay. But today they talk of Gay Marriages, and the children are adopted from Vietnam, Bangkok or Cambodia ! Right at the borders are jobless Mexicans, waiting - so what is the future, if people do not want to take matters in their own hands?

You hear of Darfur, but did you know that in 1500 it was an independent kingdom? Did you know that Sudan and Egypt vastly influenced by the Arab civilization during the Ottoman heyday, were partitioned by the British after the first world war? The UN did the finishing job on the boundaries, and if you look at the maps, they all have straight lines. If you see Hugo Chavez fighting adamantly for a seat in the United Nations Security council, just keep this part of history at the back of your mind. Did the various ethnic groups who live within these boundaries fit into these maps dividing their families on either side of the fence, or did the Political Masters consult them before creating them? Today's problems are the left-overs of the Colonial Times and the Western Powers are trying to make amends with more blunders. It is because education was imparted with specific goals of managing their territories, that only a certain set of tribes got the lead and are now reluctant to give up their monopoly. This is the story behind Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, or Sudan. It was the policy of divide-and-rule that led to it, and today people are trying to mend the torn fabric of Society. Imposition of Democracy is one such "Tailor's Pattern" whether it is in Iraq, Palestine, or Africa. If the local people are allowed to choose, and their choice does not fit into the national interests of the Powerful Nations, they will just starve them to death, and then the Media will send their

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cameras and troops to create sob stories , and people will shed tears and others will collect funds through Celebrities and their glamorous shows or through NGOs like Oxfam. and others to help the hapless victims.