

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY, WHY DEMOCRACY

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY

◆ **A Simple Definition and its Critical Estimate :**

Democracy, in simple words, is described as form of government in which the rulers are elected by the people. This definition makes one thing very clear that rulers in democracy are elected by the people. Definition, we can easily say that because the rulers of countries like Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar are not elected by the people, so these countries are not democratic.

But this simple definition is not adequate. But all governments that hold elections are not democracies. In Pakistan and China, elections are held but the elected representatives in Pakistan are controlled by the military officers like General Parvez Musharraf while in China, only those candidates are allowed to stand in election which have got the approval of the Chinese Communist Party, none other are allowed to seek elections. One party rule does not establish a democracy. So this definition is not adequate.

◆ **Main features of Democracy :**

(A) Democracy must be based on a free and fair elections :

No doubt, in democracy, the rulers are to be elected by the people. But many more things have also to be kept in view. In many so called democratic countries, the final decisions do not rest with the elected people but with the army officials, as is the case in Pakistan. In some other countries, the elections are held but only one party is allowed to take part in the elections, as is the case with China where the Chinese Communist Party is allowed to take part in the elections. So such a country cannot be called a true democratic country in the true sense of the word, although elections are held there regularly.

(B) One person, one vote, one value :

In certain other countries like Mexico, the President is regularly elected after six years but due to use of many dirty tricks - such as putting pressure on the government servants to work only for the government party, shifting booths at the last moment, harassing the opposition parties and spending a lot of money in the campaign of its own candidates etc., it is always the Ruling Party (PRI) which wins the elections.

In certain other countries, like Saudi Arabia, the elections are held regularly but there women have been denied the right to vote. This denial of the right to vote does not make that country a true democratic country.

(C) Major Decisions by elected leaders :

A democratic government is one in which the people's representatives participate in decision making process. They own a collective responsibility for all the decisions taken by the government. There are example where representatives of people are chosen; but they are not allowed to participate in decision making process. This happens in many dictatorships and monarchies. e.g. currently in Pakistan under General Musharraf. In Pakistan, General Parvej Musharraf acquired power in October 1999 through an military coup. In Pakistan though they formally have an elected parliament and government but the real power is with those who are not elected. Not withstanding the existence of elected national and provincial assemblies, these countries can not be classified as a democratic country. This gives us the first feature in a democracy the final decision making power must rest with those elected by the people.

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(D) Rule of law and respect for rights :

- (i) In Zimbabwe elections are held regularly but are won by only one party i.e. ZANU-PF. The party uses unfair practices in election which are against the principles of democracy.
- (ii) Over the years President Mugabe has changed the constitution several times to increase the power of the president and make him less accountable.
- (iii) In a democracy people and opposition can criticize the government but this is not allowed in Zimbabwe.
- (iv) The government has ignored some court judgments which is also against the principles of democracy
- (v) Television, radio and press are controlled by the government

The example of Zimbabwe shows that popular approval of the rulers is necessary in a democracy but it is not sufficient. Popular governments can be undemocratic. Popular leaders can be autocratic in a democracy, the state should respect some basic rights of the citizen. They should be free to think, to have opinion, to express these in public to form associations to protest and take other political action. Everyone should be equal in the eyes of law. These rights must be protected by an independent judiciary whose orders are obeyed by everyone. A democratic government cannot do whatever it likes simply because it has won an election. It has to respect some basic rules. In particular it has to respect some guarantees to the minorities. Every major decision has to go through a series of consultations. The fourth and final feature of democracy- A democratic government rules within limits set by constitutional law and citizens rights.

Examples are many where elections are held but by one way or the other, the people are denied the right to vote freely due to lack of free and fair elections and pressure tactics. The true democracy must have the following four features :

1. In a democracy, rulers elected by the people take all the main decisions and there is none above them to direct or guide.
2. In a democracy, elections are held regularly on the basis of universal adult franchise. These elections offer a fair opportunity to the people to change their present rulers.
3. In a democracy, all the people, without any distinction of caste, creed, colour of sex, are given this choice and opportunity on an equal basis.
4. In a democracy, the exercise of their choice of electing their rulers leads to a government limited by the rules of the Constitution and citizens' rights.

◆ Some Common Features of the Democratic Countries/Governments :

Some common features of the democratic Governments are the following :

1. In democratic countries, the people enjoy the freedom of speech. They are free to criticise the government.
2. In a democratic country, there are free and fair elections and the people are allowed to vote for any candidate of their choice.
3. In democratic countries, the opposition parties are allowed to function freely before and after the elections.
4. In democratic countries, the workers are allowed to have their independent Trade Unions.
5. In democratic countries, there is no danger to people's life by the established government.
6. In democratic countries, there is freedom of the press. They can appreciate or criticise the government as they like.
7. In democratic countries, any citizen can aspire to fight elections for any post without distinction of caste, creed, colour and sex. People belonging to ordinary families (like Lal Bahadur Shastri and Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam) can become the Prime Minister or President of their country.

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◆ **Some Common Features of the Non-democratic Governments/countries :**

Some common features of the non-democratic governments are the following :

1. In non-democratic countries, the people are not allowed to criticize the government. Doing so means imprisonment, harassment and trouble one after the other.
2. In non-democratic countries, the rule of the king or the so called military rule prevails and the questions of elections does not arise.
3. In non-democratic countries, no opposition is tolerated so the questions of political parties, especially of the opposition parties, does not arise. Only those political parties can survive which toe to the line of the government.
4. In non-democratic countries, the workers are not allowed to form their independent Trade Unions. Only such Trade Unions can survive who, rightly or wrongly, support the policies of the government.
5. In non-democratic countries, all the people are at the mercy of the dictator or the military rulers. Anybody can be detained, arrested or even put to death without any trial.
6. In non-democratic countries, no body can even aspire for any big post. If he is ready to be a tool in the hands of the ruler/dictator/military leaders, he can hope to get some good post. But he will have to kill his conscience and become dumb and deaf.

WHY DEMOCRACY

◆ **Merits and Demerits of Democracy :**

Merits or Arguments in Favour of Democracy. There is no denying the fact that most of the scholars regard democracy as the best of governments. Undoubtedly, democracy has many merits which deserve our special attention.

1. Democracy is better than any other form of governments because it presents to the needs of the people. It does not depend on the whims of the ruler or the dictator. In simple words, we can say that democracy is for the people. It is an accountable form of government.
2. Democracy is based on consultation and discussion as such many mistakes are corrected in time. Thus democracy improves the quality of decision making.
3. Democracy provides peaceful solution to every problem. It provides the best method of dealing with differences and conflicts. It suits the needs of many countries like India with diversity of languages, religions, castes and creeds. Discussion leads to solution of every problem so it keeps our country united.
4. Democracy is based on political equality which ensures equal rights both for the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated. Thus in a way, democracy enhances the dignity of every citizen.
5. It is only in democracy that mistakes are admitted and all attempts are made to correct these mistakes. If mistakes are made, it is only in democracy that they are admitted and then corrected. In democracy, thus, there is a room for correction.

◆ **Debating Demerits or Arguments against Democracy :**

There are, however, certain people who find faults with democracy and point out many demerits in it.

1. In a democracy, the leaders go on changing with every new election so all this change leads to instability.
2. In order to fund their elections, the leaders once elected begin to amass wealth for the next elections. So such a practice leads to corruption.

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3. In a democracy, it takes a long time to get a law passed by the legislature. All this leads to delays.
4. Some people argue that democracy is the rule of the majority which means the rule of the ignorant people.
5. In order to win elections, the different political leaders make false promises and cheat the people. Thus there is no scope for morality in democracy. They would rather prefer religious leaders to run the government.
6. There are others who say that there is lack of discipline in democracy and hence the government should be run by the army.

All the above arguments against democracy are true to some extent but they are not all true. A true democracy is far from the above defects and the different arguments given against democracy do not stand the test of reality. Let us take these arguments against democracy one by one.

1. The fear of change does not allow the leaders to become autocratic. New leaders, some of whom may be trained leaders, can check the forces of instability.
2. A corrupt leader, how much clever he may be, cannot blind the voters for ever. He is bound to taste the dust sooner or later.
3. Delayed decisions are not always wrong.
4. Those who say that the rule of the majority means the rule of the ignorant people, what we need is the rule of the wise, even if they are in small numbers, are not fully justified in saying so. Such a thing would be against the principle of the Universal Adult Franchise which gives the right to vote to every person above the age of 18 years in our country without distinction of caste, creed and colour. If all people are not equal partners in the formation of government, they will hesitate in obeying the laws of the country as such a good government cannot be formed in a country. If all sections of the people have fought equally for the freedom of their country, they should get the equal rewards. Ignoring some sections of the society would be quite wrong. Moreover, wise men are not always the best administrators. Rulers like Akbar and Ranjit Singh, though not so literate, have proved best administrators.
5. Likewise, religious leaders should also not be allowed to control the helm of affairs of their country to ensure morality. In a multi-religious country, they can bring doom to their country by their infighting. No government run by the religious leaders has proved successful so far in the history of the world. They should run their own religious institutions and needs not meddle in the political affairs of the country.
6. Those who say that army is the most disciplined and corruption-free organisation in the country and so army should rule the country are not fully justified in saying so. Under such a rule all the fundamental rights of the citizens would have no meaning. Who knows that the army may not become dictator and the life of the people may not become hell.

From the above discussion, it becomes quite clear that though democracy may not be the ideal form of government, it is certainly better than other forms of governments from which we have to choose.

REASON OUT WHY?

(i) Why is Myanmar not a democratic country ?

1. In place of the elected government, there is military rule in Myanmar.
2. Anybody caught expressing views against the military rule can be imprisoned upto 2 years.
3. Political activists were jailed for seven to fifteen years on very trivial grounds.

(ii) Why is Nepal not a democratic country ?

1. There is no elected government in Nepal.
2. The king of Nepal rules not because people have chosen him but because he happens to be born in the royal family.

(iii) Why is Pakistan not a democratic country ?

1. The real rulers in Pakistan are not elected by the people in Pakistan.
2. The people may have elected their representatives to the provincial and the national assemblies. But these representatives cannot take the final decisions. The real power lies in the hands of the army officials and with General Musharraf.

(iv) Why is China not a democratic country in the true sense of the word ?

China is also not a democratic country in the true spirit of the word :

1. Elections are no double help in China after five years for electing members to the Parliament but no candidate can stand for elections if he has not taken the approval of the Communist Party.
2. There is one party rule in China which is not the indication of a true democracy. Multi-party system is the true spirit of a democracy which is not there in China. So China cannot be said to be a true democracy.

(v) Why is Saudi Arabia not a democratic country ?

Saudi Arabia is not a democratic country in the true spirit of the word :

1. In Saudi Arabia women do not have the right to vote which is a violation of the democratic principle of universal adult franchise.
2. The king is all in all in Saudi Arabia. He is not elected by the people, so Saudi Arabia can not be called a democratic country.

(vi) Why the present government in Iraq is not a democratic government ?

The present government in Iraq is not a democratic government because even if the representatives have been elected by the people but they are not free to act as they like.

1. The elected representatives have to get every thing endorsed by U.S.A., a foreign power which is a negation of the true spirit of democracy.

GLOSSARY

1. **Dictatorship** : In it all the powers are in the hands of a single individual or a small group of individual and the dictator is not answerable to any body.
2. **Democracy** : It is a form of government in which the ruling power is vested in the hands of the people and the government is answerable to the people who can change it through constitutional means.
3. **Communist State** : A state run by the communist Party without allowing other parties to fight elections.
4. **Coalition** : A combination of parties to share power in the government.
5. **Political Prisoners** : Prisoners held in prison or detained for opposing the government.
6. **Dictator** : Head of the state who arbitrarily rules the country.
7. **Constitution** : Rules of laws according to which the government of the state runs.