

9th – Democracy in the Contemporary World I



More than half of the independent countries in the world today are democracies. The expansion of democracy has not been smooth and straight. It has seen several ups and downs, in different countries.

Two tales of democracy: The Republic of Chile and Poland are the two countries which became democratic during the same time period. But they both have different tales democracy. In Chile, democracy was restored with the end of military rule. In Poland, trade unions fought to bring democracy in communist state.

Democracy in the Republic of Chile: The Republic of Chile is a South American country, occupying a long, narrow strip of land between the Andes Mountains to the East and the Pacific Ocean to the west. Salvador Allende became the President of Chile in 1970. He was also the founder leader of the Socialist party of Chile and led the popular unity coalition to victory in the presidential election.

After becoming a president, he started several policies to help the poor and weaker sections of society. Allende introduced reforms in the educational system, provided free milk to poor children and redistributed land to landless farmers. He opposed the idea of foreign companies taking away natural resources like copper from the country. The landlords, the rich people and the people associated with the Church opposed his policies. His government was also opposed by some other political parties.

Military Coup of 1973: On 11th September, 1973, the democratic government of Chile was overthrown by its military. The military took over the seaport, arrested the Defence Minister of Chile and its commanders, and asked the President to resign. Allende refused to resign or to leave the country. But realising the danger to the nation and to his life, President Allende addressed the people on radio. He said, "Workers of my homeland! I have faith in Chile and its future. Chileans will overcome this dark and bitter moment when treason became dominant. You must never forget that, sooner rather than later, the grand avenues will be opened where free men will march build on to build a better society. Long live Chile! Long live the people! Long live the workers!"

These are my last words and I have certainty that my sacrifice will not be in vain; I have certainty that, at the least, it will be a moral lesson to punish felony, cowardice, and treason." On the same day, he died in the military attack or coup. This was the sacrifice what he talked about in his last speech.

Trade Unions: Associations of workers for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment.

Coalition: A government formed by two or more political parties working together.

Military Dictatorship in Chile: General Augusto Pinochet led the coup. The United States of America was unhappy with Allende's rule and is known to have supported and funded activities that led to the coup. Pinochet became the President and ruled Chile for the next 17 years. From a government that was elected by the people, the power shifted to a military dictatorship through conspiracy and violence. Pinochet's government tortured and killed those who supported democracy and the policies of Salvador Allende. These included the General of the Chilean Air Force, Alberto Bachelet, and many other officers who refused to join the coup. Even Bachelet's wife and daughter were put in prison and tortured. More than 3000 were killed and many more went missing.

Restoration of Democracy: Pinochet's military dictatorship came to an end after he decided to hold a referendum in 1988. People voted against Pinochet and then he first lost his political power and later military power. The hope Allende had expressed in his last address was realised: felony, cowardice and treason were finally punished.

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Political freedom was restored. Since then, Chile has held four presidential elections in which different political parties have participated. Gradually, the army's role in the country's government eliminated. The elected governments that came to power ordered inquiries into Pinochet's rule. These inquiries showed that his government was not only very brutal, but also very corrupt. In January 2006, General Bachelet's daughter Michelle Bachelet (first woman Defence Minister in Latin America) was elected as the president of Chile and the political scenario in Chile was changed.

Coup: it is the sudden overthrow of a government illegally. It may or may not be violent in nature. The term is French for 'a sudden blow or strike to a state'

Referendum: a direct vote in which an entire electorate is asked to either accept or reject a particular proposal. This may be adoption of a new constitution, a law or a specific governmental policy.

Strike: mass refusal by workers or employees to perform work due to certain grievances or because of demands not met. In most democratic countries, the right to strike is legal.

Political prisoners: Persons imprisoned, detained or kept under house arrest because the government considers that their ideas and activities may pose a threat to its authority.

Censorship: a condition under which the freedom of expression is taken away. It means anything that the government finds objectionable cannot be published or shown over the media.

Democracy in Poland: In 1980, Poland was ruled by the Polish United Workers' Party. It was one of the many Communist Parties that ruled in several countries of East Europe at that time. In these countries, no other political party was allowed to function. The people could not freely choose the leaders of the Communist Party or the government. Those who spoke against them were put in prison. The government in Poland was supported and controlled by the Soviet Union (USSR), which was a vast and powerful Communist State.

Strike of Lenin Shipyard Workers: On 14th August, 1980 the workers of the Lenin Shipyard in city of Gdansk went on a strike with a demand to take back a woman crane operator, who was unjustly dismissed from service. The shipyard was owned by the government. Almost, all the factories and big properties in Poland were owned by the government. The strike was illegal because independent trade unions of the ruling party were not allowed in Poland. As the strike continued, a former electrician of the shipyard, Lech Walesa, joined the strikers.

Soon he emerged as the leader of the striking workers. He was dismissed from his job in 1976 for demanding higher pay. The strike began to spread across the whole city.

Signing of 21-Point Agreement: The workers wanted the right to form independent trade unions. They also demanded the release of political prisoners and an end to censorship of the Press. The workers led by Walesa signed a 21-point agreement with the government that ended their strike. The government agreed to recognise the workers' right to form trade unions and their right to strike.

Formation of Solidarity: A new trade union called 'Solidarity' was formed and became very popular. It was the first independent trade union which was formed in any Communist State. Within a year, about 1 crore workers joined Solidarity.

Martial Law of 1981: In December 1981, the government led by General Jaruzelski imposed Martial Law. There was widespread corruption and mismanagement in Poland. Thousands of Solidarity members were put in prison. Under the Martial law, freedoms to organise, protest and express opinions were taken away.

Another wave of strikes was organised by Solidarity in 1988. This time the Polish Government was weaker, the support from Soviet Union uncertain and the economy was in



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decline. This resulted in negotiations for free elections between Walesa and the Polish Government which led to an agreement for free elections in April 1989. Solidarity contested all 100 seats for the Senate and won 99 of them. Lech Walesa became the President of Poland in October 1990. It was the first election in Poland in which more than one party took part.

Two features of democracy: The story from Chile was of a democratic government which was replaced by a non-democratic government, which was followed by restoration of democracy. In Poland, we found the transition from a non-democratic government to a democratic government. There were many differences between Pinochet's rule in Chile and the communist rule in Poland. Chile was ruled by a military dictator, while Poland was ruled by a political party. The government of Poland claimed that it was ruling on behalf of the working classes. On the other hand, Pinochet openly favoured big capitalists.

However, Poland and Chile have some common features during non-democratic rule like

- The people could not choose or change their rulers.
- There was no real freedom to express one's opinions, form political associations or organise protests and political action.

Communist State: A state governed by a Communist Party without allowing other parties to compete for power. The state controls all the big properties and industries.

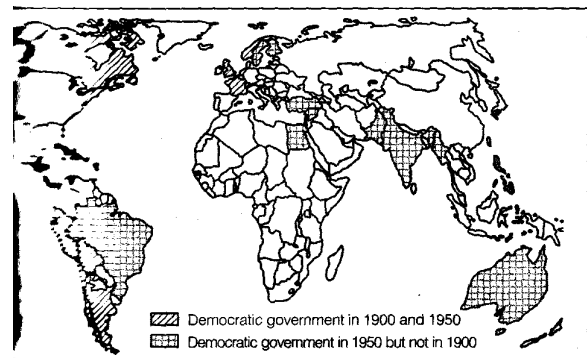
Martial Law: A system of rules that takes effect when a military authority takes control of the normal administration of justice.

Approaches of Allende, Walesa and Bachelet: So far, we have read about three democratic governments: Allende's Chile, Walesa's Poland and Bachelet's Chile. Each of them have had a different approach towards social and economic matters. Allende preferred government control on big industries and the economy. Walesa wanted the market to government interference. Bachelet stood somewhere in the middle on these issues. Though, these three governments share some basic features. It was that the power was in the hands three governments. The government was elected by the people and not by the army, unelected leaders or any external power.

Real Meaning of Democracy: From the two tales of democracy, the real meaning of democracy can be concluded. "Democracy is government that allows people to choose their rulers." In a democracy,

- only leaders elected by people should rule the country.
- people must have the freedom to express views, freedom to organise and freedom to protest.

The changing map of democracy: The 20th century was full of many kinds of events like transition and challenges to democracy, military coups, struggles of the people to bring back democracy and so on. Three maps are given below, which show a pattern in the way democracies have evolved in the 20th century. Map 1 depicts the countries that were democratic in 1950, A few years after the Second World War. It also shows countries that had already become democratic by 1900.



Map 1.1 Democratic governments in 1900-1950

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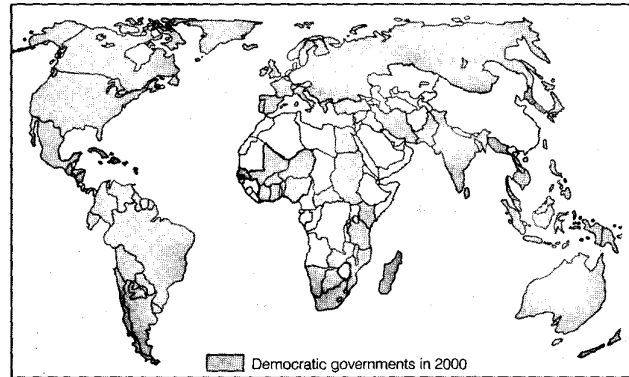
Map 2 presents a picture of democratic regimes in 1975, after most of the colonies had gained independence.

Map 3 shows the status of democratic countries at the beginning of the 21st century.

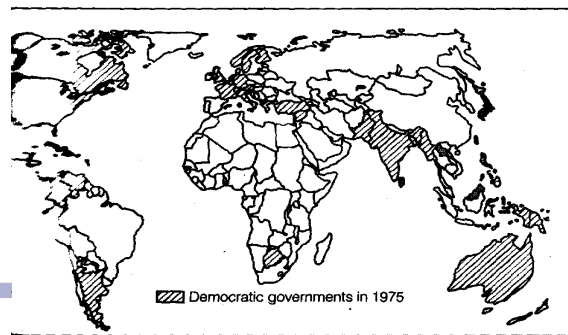
The main points that emerge out after studying these maps are:

- Democracy has expanded throughout the 20th century.
- Democracy did not spread evenly in all regions, but was first established in some regions before spreading to others.

Although a majority of nations are democratic today, there are still large parts of the world which are still not democratic.



Map. 1.3 Democratic governments in 2000



Map 1.2 Democratic government in 1975

