

9th – What is democracy?



What is democracy? The word democracy comes from the Greek word “Demokratia”. In Greek ‘demos’ means ‘people’ and ‘kratia’ means ‘rule’. According to Abraham Lincoln, ‘Democracy is government of the people, by the people, for the people’.

Democracy is a form of government in which a constitution guarantees basic personal and political rights, fair and free elections and independent courts of law.

Need of Defining Democracy: Sometimes it does not seem logical to give a perfect definition of democracy, as it is a concept which is practically felt and discussed in different parts of the world.

But, defining democracy is essential because we need to clearly understand it. Different people use it for different purposes and also different kinds of governments call themselves as democracies.

We can understand the meaning of a word like democracy only by observing some examples where it has been practised. But we need to define it more accurately so that we can use it correctly for describing other similar situations, instead of just accepting what it means to other people.

A Simple Definition of Democracy: Democracy is a form of government in which the rulers are elected by the people. From this definition, we can clearly separate non-democratic governments. For instance, army rulers of Myanmar are not elected by the people and are, thus non-democratic. Dictators like Pinochet are not elected by the people.

This is also applicable to the kings of Saudi Arabia and Nepal (earlier). They are rulers because they are born in the royal family. People have not chosen them. But simple this definition is not adequate in all respects.

If we accept this definition, it implies that almost every government is a democracy that holds an election. It would be very misleading. We need to carefully distinguish between a government that is a democracy and one that pretends to democracy.

Features of democracy: The democracy has a following features:

Rulers elected by the people take all the major decisions,

Elections offer a choice and fair opportunity to the people to change their current rulers.

This choice and opportunity is available to all the people on an equal basis.

The exercise of this choice leads to a government limited by basic rules of the Constitution and citizens’ rights.

Major Decisions by Elected Leaders: General Musharraf’s rule of Pakistan from 1999 will give us one important feature of democracy

Case of Pakistan: In Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf led a military coup in October 1999, He overthrew a democratically elected government and declared himself the Chief Executive of the country. Later, he changed his designation to President. In 2002, he held a referendum in the country that granted him a five year extension. Pakistani media, human rights organisations said that the referendum was malpractices and fraud.

In August 2002, Musharraf issued a Legal Framework Order that amended the Constitution of Pakistan. According to this order, the President can dismiss the national or provincial assemblies. The work of the civilian cabinet is supervised by a National Security Council which is dominated by military officers. However,

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elected representative had some power but the final power was in the hands of military officers and General Musharraf himself.

During his rule, although the people may have elected representatives to the national and provincial Assemblies, these representatives were not allowed to take the final decisions. The final power rests with army and General Musharraf himself. This happens in many dictatorship and monarch systems.

They formally have an elected Parliament and government but real power is with those who are not elected. This condition cannot be termed as people's rule. Thus, first feature of democracy is that in a democracy the final decision-making power must rest with those elected by the people.

Referendum: A general vote by the electorate on a single political issue which has been referred to them for a direct decision.

Cabinet: The committee of senior ministers responsible for controlling government policy.

Free and Fair Electoral Competition: The China and Mexico will give us an understanding of this feature of democracy.

Case of China: The members of China's Parliament called Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui (National People's Congress). They are elected by the people after every five years. The National People's Congress has the power to appoint the President of the country and some members elected by the army. Before contesting elections, a candidate needs the approval of the Chinese Communist Party. Only its members or members of eight parties allied to it are allowed to contest. Thus, the government is always formed by the "Communist Party".

Case of Mexico: Mexico became independent in 1930. It holds elections after every six years to elect its President. Mexico has never been under military or dictator's rule. Till 2000, all the Presidential elections were won by the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), as they employed many corrupt practices and unethical means to win the elections everytime. All the government officers had to attend party meetings. Teachers of government schools used to force parents to vote for the PRI. Sometimes polling booths were shifted from one place to another to make it difficult for the people to cast their votes.

Conclusion of Both the Cases: In both the cases of China and Mexico, it does not appear that the elections have been held properly. Holding elections of any kind is not sufficient. The elections must offer a real choice between political alternatives, People should have right to use this choice to remove the existing rulers, if they wish. So, these examples are not of true democracies. Thus, another feature of democracy is that a democracy must be based on a free and fair election where those currently in power have a fair chance of losing.

One Person, One Vote, One Value: As we have read in the previous chapter that the struggle for democracy was linked to the demand for Universal Adult Franchise. This principle has now come to be accepted almost all over the world. However, there are many instances of denial of the equal Right to vote.

- In Saudi Arabia, women do not have the Right to Vote.
- Estonia has made its citizenship rules in such a way that people belonging to Russian minority find it difficult to get the Right to Vote.
- In Fiji, the electoral system is such that the vote of an indigenous Fijian has more value than that of an Indian-Fijian.



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Democracy is based on a fundamental principle of political equality. That gives us the third feature of democracy; In a democracy, each adult citizen must have one vote and each vote must have one value.

Rule of Law and Respect for Rights: From the case of Zimbabwe, this feature of democracy can be understood in a better way. Zimbabwe attained independence from White minority rule in 1980. From then onwards, the country has been ruled by ZANU-PF. It is the party that led the freedom struggle. The party leader, Robert Mugabe, has been the President of the country since independence.

Elections are always won by this party through violence and harassment of the opposition politicians workers and journalists. Protests against the President were illegal and the government does not heed court judgements which went against it. Thus, there is no rule of law and citizen's rights are not respected. The example of Zimbabwe shows that popular approval of the rulers is necessary but not sufficient in democracy. Popular governments can be undemocratic and popular leaders can be autocratic,

Conclusion from the Case of Zimbabwe: The state should respect the basic rights of citizens, like freedom of expression, freedom to protest and freedom to take political action. Further, these rights should be protected by the judiciary whose orders should be obeyed by all. A democratic government cannot do whatever it likes, simply because it has won an election. It has to respect some basic rules. It has to respect some guarantees to the minorities. Every major decision should be taken after a series of consultations. Elected persons should be responsible to the people as well as to other independent officials. Thus, another feature of democracy is that a democratic government rules within limits set by constitutional law and citizen's rights.

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