



Onwards! Reinforcing Democracy for the 21st Century*

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Abstract

Universal suffrage has been the primary goal of democratic evolution. Despite elections and other measures taken to ensure democratic rights, some desired outcomes such as equality and transparency are not being met. The current mode of our democratic systems is archaic in addressing the world's multifaceted global crises. So, there's a dire need to incorporate new elements of democratic governance to address the issue. Humanity now lives in a transition period, so the path may not be easy. But the scientific and technological revolution underway is rapidly changing the mindsets of people and helping them exercise their rights. The article thus focuses on how democracy serves as the best system to ensure human rights and provide for a better society and also, how current models of democratic governance which matured in the last century can be improved in the 21st century, which is instrumental for meeting the challenges humanity confronts today. – Editor

1. Understanding what Democracy Means...

Humanity has ranged far and wide on a journey of exploration and discovery on the complex issue of what democracy is all about.

Many have looked at the evolution of systems of governance in the West and in the East.

Major milestones of that evolution have been identified thus far by historians.

The key stages of democracy in terms of content, as far as I can document, are the following:

- Limiting absolute rights of the monarch
- Guaranteeing some fundamental rights to subjects
- Creating a social contract between the government and the governed
- Limiting the power of government—separation of powers
- Legitimacy of the government comes from the consent of the governed
- The voice of the sovereign people is represented by an elected government
- The right to participate in electing that government was the privilege of the few
- Universal suffrage for all

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In general, democracy is seen as the best means to protect individual freedom and to prevent the emergence of dictatorship by holding the legitimacy of the government hostage to the consent of the governed. Elections are deemed the key tool for that, and thus the search for achieving universal suffrage has been the primary goal of democratic evolution.

But democracy as a system of government—so eloquently and succinctly described by Lincoln as “Government of the people, for the people, by the people”—is intended to achieve certain desired outcomes, including:

- Freedom
- Justice
- Equality
- Social choice
- Participation
- Due process
- Rule of Law
- Protection of minorities
- Transparency
- Accountability

And it has become apparent that in many countries, despite regular elections and other trappings of the modern democratic state, these desiderata are not being fulfilled, or at least not sufficiently, to meet the expectations of the public.

Some argue that we have in the last century focused on expanding the base of those who have the right to vote, automatically accepting the elected governments that became the representative of the people. But experience towards the end of the century shows that despite broadening the base of participation to universal suffrage, corruption, special interest groups and lobbies, perpetuation in office due to the advantages of incumbency, and other problems have emerged. The presence of a vigorous free press and an active civil society are a few of the bulwarks beyond elections that seem to be required for a healthy democratic system which has better chances of responding to the needs and wishes of the people.

Since we are conscious of the fact that many of the ideas that govern our democratic systems are almost 200 years old, could we not improve and add to them in the light of the changing world in which we live? Given the amazing transformations taking place in the world, driven by globalization and an unprecedented revolution in science and technology, especially in ICT and the enormous penetration of connectivity through the internet, mobile telephony and such media as Facebook, our world is different from that of Montesquieu, Jefferson and Madison.

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Three important questions need to be answered:

- Are the current modes of operation of democratic systems delivering the desired outcomes? No, or at least not enough!
- Are we confusing means (elections) with results (desired outcomes)? Too frequently observers make this mistake...
- Are there new instruments that we could incorporate into our democratic models that would bring us closer to these desired outcomes?

First I would like to record that I am not in any way a pessimist, that I remain profoundly optimistic about democracy and its promise for the 21st century, and that whatever the shortcomings of democracy are, the treatment is to provide more democracy...

Let us just look back at the last century: the 20th century. We could rightly call it “the century of democratic expansion”. Indeed, despite the turbulences and wars, democracy surged forward during the last century, both in terms of reaching more countries, and in terms of expanding suffrage in the countries where it was already accepted as a form of government.

The world was transformed in the 20th century. At the start of the 20th century the Western World was dominant and its values were far from benign. Colonization, racism, gender discrimination were the order of the day. European empires ruled or dominated the earth, with the US emerging as a major power. Women, youth and many European men did not get to vote. Then came World War I, the Great Depression, and the rise of totalitarian systems: communism, fascism, Nazism, with all the horrors that they would commit... Finally came the bloodbath of WWII and the civil war that accompanied the Chinese Communist Revolution.

Then the second half of the century saw the foundation of the UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the world saw the emergence of the Cold War and the conflicts in Vietnam, Cambodia and other places, but murders and mayhems were permanently left behind after WWII. Nazism and Fascism were largely defeated, and Communism’s turn was to come. Decolonization was spreading everywhere by the 1960s, the democratic transformation of most of Latin America took place in the 1980s, and upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, and of Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the march of democracy seemed unstoppable. In Europe the EU emerged as the greatest democratic transformation of all, and with it came peace. In one generation the youth of Germany and France could no longer envisage that their countries would ever go to war, an unimaginable dream for their parents and grandparents. Internationally, we built on the legacy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and we had CEDAW (Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women), and by the end of the century we even had the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

And so, on the journey of exploration that has seen the surge of democracy, and with the emergence of so many examples and models, with criticism and response, with scandals, crises and revivals, we need to acquire a much more realistic appreciation of the complexities of democratic governance in this increasingly complex world.

In the words of T.S. Eliot,

*“We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring,
Will be to arrive where we started,
And know the place for the first time.”*

But if we see the destination with renewed clarity, we recognize that transitions from dictatorship to democracy are particularly arduous and challenging.

2. Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy

At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the world of the 20th century is no more, thanks to the advent of the internet, globalization, local identities...

A new scientific revolution has been underway, from ICT to biology. Profound economic transformations appeared with the rise of China and the emerging markets, and the widespread penetration of new technologies, especially the internet and mobile telephony with more lines than the planet’s human population. Social connectivity touches almost everyone on the planet, and all that is new is instantly shared across the world.

Such transitions are difficult. Our region is awash with broken dreams and human blood. In many of our countries, corruption runs from the lowest bureaucrats to some of the custodians of the highest offices. Oligarchs are emerging between the cracks of the breaking old system, as the new system is still not fully formed... There is anxiety among those who know that the old system is vanishing, while the youth drift between uncertainty and aimlessness... With violence in the streets, and rampant profiteering and black markets, with a virtual despair among the many who seek a life of dignity amidst the ruins of bygone systems and the incompleteness of the successor systems, the general outlook for a system rooted in revolutionary change can indeed be bleak...

The economic underpinning for transition democracies is essential—people expect improving living conditions—but transitions provide a very poor climate for economic development.

In addition, periods of transition witness an explosion of many local identities asserting themselves and many hitherto suppressed tensions and conflicts coming to the fore. Indeed, authoritarian regimes do not resolve society’s profound problems, they keep them suppressed, “under the lid” so to speak, and therefore when democracy arrives all these old issues come out again and provide fodder for demagogues and allow the emergence of oligarchies...

So the role of leaders in transitional times is important. Who can underestimate the contributions of leaders such as Mandela and Tutu in South Africa? And as we saw in the

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case studies of Latin America and Eastern Europe, how to prevent the emergence of oligarchies is very important in crucial times when new institutions of governance are taking root in the fragile periods of transition from dictatorship to democracy.

3. Today: New Instruments, Innovations

But beyond the issues in transitions towards democracy, even in mature democracies, as in Europe and the US, there are a number of danger signals of trends that could undermine the good functioning of these democracies, such as declining party membership, declining participation and generally low opinion of elected representatives and lack of trust in the institutions of government, that sometimes go as far as making people consider the government incompetent at best, an enemy at worst. But instead of just criticizing, we will move to look at possible improvements that we can make, new instruments that we can use... Thus we will explore possible answers to the third question I posed at the outset:

Are there new instruments that we can incorporate into our democratic models that would bring us closer to the desired outcomes?

Institutional developments must also encourage the emergence of the civil society which has a crucial role to play in any democratic society. It is only by practicing democracy that people will learn to establish trust in the government system.

4. So, Where Are We Now in the Arab World?

We are in a transition period, and we cannot expect smooth sailing...

But as Shakespeare said,

*“There is tide in the affairs of men
Which taken at the flood leads on to fortune
Omitted, all the voyage of their lives is bound in shallows and in miseries
On such a full sea are we now afloat
And we must take the current when it serves
Or lose our ventures...”*

We shall not lose our ventures!

Our young people will create the future which past generations have not been able to achieve...

But what about those of us who are not so young anymore?

I believe that we are young at heart...

For indeed, the years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up our ideals wrinkles the soul. The years may mark our face, diminish our physical vigor, whiten our hair and limit our eyesight, but we can remain young at heart... for You are:

*“The years
may wrinkle
the skin,
but to give
up our ideals
wrinkles the
soul.”*

*“As young as your faith, as old as your doubt;
As young as your dreams, as old as your cynicism;
As young as your self-confidence, as old as your fear;
As young as your hope, as old as your despair.”**

—————
*“If not now,
when? If not
us, who?”*
—————

You will remain young as long as you believe in the beauty of your dreams, as long as you believe in hope, cheerfulness and courage...

Only if you give in to pessimism, and lose your heart to cynicism, then, and then only, are you growing old.

And then, indeed it is as Douglas MacArthur said: “you just fade away”.

But the dreams will not fade away... The dreams are there for they inspire us all to aspire for new levels of effort...

To look at democracy as Amartya Sen was quoted saying:

“Democracy is equal authorship of collective life”.

To look at our legislative tasks and think of them as:

Fashioning the wise constraints that make people free.

To look at the dawn of a new era and live by the immortal words:

There are those who look at things as they are and ask why.

But we are among those who look at the world as it could be and ask why not...

To confront these turbulent times in our world and take up the challenge of the future... for...

If not now, when?

If not us, who?

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* From a poem by Samuel Ullman (1840-1924) which was a favorite of General Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964) who quoted it frequently and kept a copy of it on his desk.