

State of Democracy in the World Today

KP Fabian¹

Let us start with an attempt at definition of democracy. There is no definition that has been universally accepted. This is because in social sciences it is not always possible to get definitions as precisely as, say, in mathematics.

Given below are some attempts either at a definition of democracy *per se*, or to recall to attention one or two important characteristics thereof:

Mahatma Gandhi: “My notion of democracy is that under it the weakest shall have the same opportunities as the strongest... no country in the world today shows any but patronizing regard for the weak... Western democracy, as it functions today, is diluted fascism... true democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the center. It has to be worked from below, by the people of every village”.ⁱ

Henry Ford: “The democracy that I favor is one that gives everyone the same chance of success, depending on the capacity of each. The one that I reject is that which claims to provide the number the authority which belongs to merit.”

Spinoza: “Democracy is the union of men in a unit that has a sovereign right group on everything in its power”

Rousseau: “If there were a nation of Gods, it would govern itself democratically. A government so perfect is not suited to men”.

Churchill: “Many forms of Government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”.ⁱⁱ

Abraham Lincoln: “The government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

Obviously, the Lincoln definition is the most famous. Let us look at the context. In his famous 1863 Gettysburg address, Lincoln said, paying tribute to the fallen soldiers, that they sacrificed

¹ Ambassador Fabian served in the Indian Foreign Service from 1964 to 2000. His last posting was in Rome, as Ambassador to Italy and Permanent Representative to UN Organizations including FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), WFP (World Food Programme), and IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development).

their lives in order “*that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

The short point is that democracy needs to be defended, not necessarily by bullet. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. The key question is whether such vigilance is being exercised by citizens when democratically elected leaders choose to diminish or even destroy democracy.

Essentially, there are at least three ways of defining democracy. First by defining what it means ideally as Lincoln did. Obviously, the people as a whole cannot govern. Hence Lincoln’s definition is deficient.

Second, we can also try to define democracy as it is. Joseph Alois Schumpeter (1883-1950) has held that democracy is a system of governance where the elites compete through elections for the right to rule the populace. This definition has been amended by cynics to say that the voters get a chance to replace one set of ‘thugs’ by another once in four or five years.

Let us attempt a third definition based on the dictum that handsome is as handsome does. A state can have the best constitution in the sublunary world, but that is no guarantee that the said constitution is adhered to by those in office.

Hence, to take this attempt at definition further, let us list the more important conditions a polity must satisfy for qualifying to be a democracy:

1) *Regular elections, free, fair, peaceful, and overseen by an independent election commission, not intimidated or influenced by the executive or by anyone else, resulting in a peaceful, orderly transfer of power.*

What happened in United States recently when Trump refused to accept his defeat and encouraged, and even exhorted his followers, to prevent the Congress from declaring the winner by resorting to violence diminished the democracy in that country, the oldest and richest democracy in the world. Earlier in July 2020, keeping in mind the approaching November election, Trump wanted to have his name on the individual checks the citizens got as relief from the government.

In a similar vein, the Election Commission of India, responding to complaints, have ordered the Union Ministry of Health and Family Planning to remove Prime Minister Modi’s photograph from the Covid-19 vaccination certificates being issued in poll-bound states.

2) *Political leaders and parties should engage in honest, open debates while seeking vote in an election or referendum.*

Let us look at what happened in the United Kingdom. At the time of the Brexit referendum in 2016, some of the pro-Brexit leaders resorted to outright disinformation about the benefits, especially financial, derivable from Brexit. The same leaders chose to conceal the harm to Britain arising from Brexit. An open, honest debate is the hallmark of a good vibrant democracy.

3) *The media should be the watch dog and not the lap dog of the ruling establishment. The media have become huge corporate operations primarily meant to make money for the owners, namely, the corporate houses that own them.*

The elementary duty of the journalist- the very word comes from French meaning someone out throughout the day seeking out news- is to keep the public informed of events of interest and importance to it. It is for the media to bring to light the good deeds and bad deeds of the executive and other arms of the state.

To figure out the state of health of democracy in a country we need to take note of the level of media freedom.

4) *The freedom for the media is a part of freedom to dissent and the right to express that dissent in a peaceful manner. A polity that cannot face dissent and tries to suppress it by abusing the law's provisions to thwart it, cannot claim to be a democracy.*

5) *While nobody is advocating absolute equality of income, it is beyond doubt that increasing concentration of wealth in the top 1%, or rather in the top 0.1%, while the bottom 20% struggles to eke out a living is unacceptable. A tree should be judged by its fruits. A polity that produces billionaires at a rate faster than the growth of GDP, and fails to abide by Mahatma Gandhi's famous talisman cannot claim to be a democracy.*

Since Gandhi's talisman is not finding acceptance the world over, where a monomaniac search after profit prevails, almost unchallenged, we give below the text:

"I will give you a Talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test.

Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him.

Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to control over his own life and destiny?

In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?

Then you will find your doubts and your self-melts away.”

6) Amartya Sen has argued that democracy and famine do not go together. "No famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy," Sen wrote. This, he explained, is because democratic governments "have to win elections and face public criticism and have strong incentive to undertake measures to avert famines and other catastrophes."^{iv}

Let us take the Amartya Sen logic further and raise the question of utmost topical importance: Have the governments dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic responsibly? The answer is clear. The pandemic could have been prevented if the Mayor of Wuhan, President Xi Jinping, the W.H.O., President Trump, and others in positions of high responsibility had acted responsibly.

Against the background of the six conditions mentioned above let us look at the governance of the world. Our title "the state of democracy in the world" also covers the countries that are not democracies.

Let us start in the descending order of demography. We cannot deal with all countries and it will be wrong to conclude that the omitted countries are less important.

China

China has a population of 1,444 million. The People's Republic of China (PRC) established in 1949 by Mao Zedong, has registered astonishing GDP growth. The ruling party, Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has never wanted to take the country in the direction of democracy. However, any impression that the China never had democracy or that the Chinese do not seek democracy and the freedoms associated with it will be wrong.

The 1911 Revolution did bring in a short-lived, erratic democracy under Sun Yat-sen. The 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre of unknown number of young Chinese who demanded democracy, the courageous campaign for democracy in Hong Kong, and the solidly established

democracy in Taiwan show that there is no incompatibility between the Chinese as a people and democracy.

China under Xi Jinping who has concentrated more power in himself than any leader after Mao Zedong has done his utmost to take China as far away from democracy as possible. He has plans to remain in power for a long time. He is only 67.

As of now prospects for democracy in China are bleak. However, it will be foolhardy to predict that China will never move towards a democratic destination in the near future. The rather naïve notion entertained by some in the West that by opening its economy to investment from the West China will be compelled to accept Western notions of political democracy has been decisively disproved.

We do not know whether President Biden's announced plans to work with democracies to spread democracy will work or not and what impact such a plan, if implemented, will have on China. Will the Uighurs see their situation improve?

India

In recent times several instances of attempted suppression of dissent have diminished India's democratic credentials in the eyes of the West and the rest of the world.

In political theory, the state has theoretically the monopoly for violence. However, such monopoly does not justify 'encounter killings.'

The police have often abused its powers by resorting to treat legitimate protests as 'sedition'. Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code seeks to prosecute persons for sedition if their "words, either spoken or written, or by any signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards the Government established by law".

A brief look at the evolution of the judiciary's approach to the law on sedition will help us figure out the direction India is moving. In 1959, the Allahabad High Court, *Ram Nandan v. State* held 124 A as 'void' and lacking validity after the Constitution came into force.^v However, this judgment was overruled by the Supreme Court in 1962 in *Kedar Nath Singh v. State of Bihar*. The Supreme Court did however clarify that the Section has been carefully worded to "indicate clearly that strong words used to express disapprobation of the measures of Government with a view to their improvement or alteration by lawful means would not come within the section.

The clarification had no impact on the behavior of the police. The invocation of Section 124A to suppress legitimate criticism of the executive continues. In fact, in many cases the police misunderstand the meaning of the words “Government established by law” by conflating it with the cabinet of the day.

It will be wrong to blame the police alone in this matter. On July 03, 2019, the Ministry of Home Affairs through a written statement informed the Rajya Sabha that the present Government has no plans on amending the laws on sedition in the country so as to ensure that the Government has effective means to combat anti-national, secessionist and terrorist elements.^{vi}

By taking to court Disha Ravi and Nikita Jacob, the police has shown its understanding of Section 124A. It is heartening that a district court judge in Delhi did uphold the Constitution.

There are other matters involving suppression of dissent that are too well known to be specifically mentioned. One sad example is the Bhima Koregaon case.^{vii}

In politics perception, whether right or wrong, counts. The Washington-based Freedom House has in its latest 2021 report has rated India as ‘partly free’ with a score of 67 out of 100. The score was 77 in 2018, 75 in 2019, and 71 in 2020.

It has been argued by some that the Freedom House might be prejudiced against India. Such an argument might not hold water as in the past the same Freedom House had rated India high. For example, from 2000 to 2009, India had a score of 2 on a scale of 1 to 7, 1 being the highest.

It is not the Freedom House alone that has seen a democratic decline in India. The Paris-based RSF (Reporters without Borders) gave India a rank of 80 in 2002 for World Press Freedom Index. It fell to 122 in 2010, 131 in 2012, 140 in 2019, and 142 in 2020.^{viii}

United States of America

Under President Trump, the United States, it is well known, moved away from its foundational values and democratic norms. What is shocking is that Trump continues to radiate threat to the Republican lawmakers who fearing for their re-election have continued to support him in violation of their oath to protect and defend the Constitution. However, that Trump was likely to prove a bull in the china shop was foreseen by a few observers.^{ix}

The lawmakers are supporting Trump because he continues to have a wide-ranging grassroots level support. The short point is that democracy implies an intelligent electorate wedded to

democratic values. The damage done by Trump cannot be undone immediately. Shakespeare's Marc Antony was right:

“The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones”.

President Trump did encourage a few leaders outside his country to imitate his ways and he had a sort of admiration for the ‘strong men’ in Europe and elsewhere. Such ‘strong men’ are anxiously watching Biden. We may note the release of human rights activists in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to mention only two countries.

President Biden could have taken strong action against Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS.) and a flawed interpretation of Richelieu's ‘raison d'état’ seems to have come in the way. If Biden had acted, there might have been a peaceful regime change in Riyadh with hardly any damage to Washington's interests.

Till now we have gone by demography. We need to deal with a few countries as we do not have the space to deal with all.

Russia

Russia under Putin is moving away from democracy. Western sanctions are unlikely to help. A section of the Russian people is struggling for democratic liberties. Putin has supported non-democratic leaders in Europe.

Myanmar

Some commentators have referred to the military coup as having put an end to the ‘fledgling democracy’ in Myanmar. This is wrong. There was no real democracy. It was only a charade with Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK), the Nobel laureate dancing to the tune of the military in the case of the ongoing genocide against the Rohingyas, lamentably defended by her in the International Court of Justice.

Whatever be the reasons for the military's coup, the moot question is what is in store for the people. They have courageously stood up for their rights. The support from the international community has been sadly weak. The West should take the lead in suspending diplomatic relations and the Burmese embassies should be shut down. Economic sanctions would be the wrong action for two reasons. One, the people and not the military leadership will suffer. Two, China will step in and supply what is needed.

We cannot expect the ASEAN with its doubtful democratic credentials to work for the restoration of ASSK into office, free from the military's oversight.

Did the Arab Spring promote democracy?

The Arab Spring that broke out in Tunisia in December 2010, felled Ben Ali in January 2011; Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in February 2011; Mahmoud Ghaddafi in August 2011; and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen in February 2012.

Only Tunisia has transitioned to democracy. Egypt under El Sisi has been moving away from democracy. Libya after a civil war between two governments fueled by external powers might see democracy established if the U.N.-sponsored process works out. Syria is far from any political settlement that can bring up a democratic transition. Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen continues. Algeria and Sudan are still witnessing strong resistance to democracy on the part of the entrenched establishment. In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia used force to put down the demand for freedom.

Overall, the Arab Spring marking the beginning of a democratic wave in the Arab world has been hijacked by other forces.

However, any argument that there is incompatibility between Islam on the one hand, and modernity and democracy on the other, is flawed. Such arguments have been advanced by eminent thinkers such as Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, and Bernard Lewis. Indonesia, the largest Muslim country by population, has been a democracy for decades. Similar is the case with Malaysia.

Are we witnessing a decline of democracy across the globe?

Yes. To get a quantitative idea of such decline we need to depend on research bodies with resources. According to Freedom House, democracy has been declining for years. In its latest report, it says:

The share of countries designated Not Free has reached its highest level since the deterioration of democracy began in 2006, and that countries with declines in political rights and civil liberties outnumbered those with gains by the largest margin recorded during the 15-year period. The report downgraded the freedom scores of 73 countries, representing 75 percent of the global population. Those affected include not just authoritarian states like China, Belarus, and Venezuela, but also troubled democracies like the United States and India^x.

What might be the reasons for this decline?

First, democracy requires an electorate, intelligent and alert, that refuses to be brain-washed.

Second, the amount of money spent on advertisements or to hack into the social media has risen exponentially.

In some countries, including India, the educated middle class has started taking less and less interest in politics.

Third, leaders with a high level of thespian skills can mislead the electorate.

Fourth, there is a growing disenchantment with the democratic political process among a section of the educated young who do not even read the newspapers or listen to the televised news.

Fifth, charismatic leaders dedicated to democracy are in short supply.

Sixth, some political leaders, charismatic or not, have used the pandemic to arrogate to themselves more authority than necessary.

Is it possible to reverse the declining trend?

It is possible. President Biden might have some success. But till now he has not demonstrated the leadership necessary for such success. He could have acted more effectively in the case of the atrocious murder of journalist Khashoggi and the military coup in Myanmar.

Human history has registered progress, consistent progress over a long period of time. Hegel was not wrong when he summed up history by saying that, *the East knew and to the present day knows only that One is Free; the Greek and the Roman world, that some are free; the German World knows that All are free*^{xi}. Ergo, there is no good reason to give up hope.

Since it is not possible to suggest measures applicable to the whole world as conditions differ from country to country, we propose to confine ourselves to India, the largest democracy. Though legislation per se cannot accomplish the goal unless the human beings adhere to it, it is necessary to have good legislation. There is need for changing the laws. We propose:

- a) The first- past- the- post system should be replaced by a proportional system prevailing in many European countries.
- b) A legislator who wants to change his party must resign and contest again.
- c) Taking legislators to resorts or permitting them to be absent from the House without sufficient reason should be outlawed.
- d) The system of corporate bonds enabling corporate houses to contribute to political parties in an opaque manner should be abolished.

Essentially, the *homo sapiens* must act with sapienza or wisdom. Let it not be said of our generation what the poet Ovid, a contemporary of Christ, said of his:

“I see and approve of the **better**, **but** I follow the **worse**.”

References

- ⁱ https://www.azquotes.com/author/5308-Mahatma_Gandhi/tag/democracy#:~:text=true%20democracy%20cannot%20be%20worked,t he%20people%20of%20every%20village.&text=Democracy%20is%20not%20a%20state%2 0in%20which%20people%20act%20like%20sheep.&text=The%20only%20devils%20in%20 the,the%20battle%20should%20be%20fought.
- ⁱⁱ <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/the-worst-form-of-government/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ https://ap.gilderlehrman.org/resources/gettysburg-address-1863?gclid=CjwKCAiAhbeCBhBcEiwAkV2cYyPVfhBGSHdAh1k5J4xqUC9XKOHmp_Ixcxnv1e-Um66VqF5sWrOUMBoCRMMQAvD_BwE
- ^{iv} New York Times, 1st March 2003, Does democracy avert famine? <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/01/arts/does-democracy-avert-famine.html>
- ^v AIR 1959 All 101
- ^{vi} Oban, Ashima, and Patanjali, Shivam, <https://www.mondaq.com/india/constitutional-administrative-law/833078/tracing-the-history-of-sedition-in-india>
- ^{vii} <https://www.business-standard.com/about/what-is-bhima-koregaon-case>
- ^{viii} Niti Aayog, <https://niti.gov.in/deciphering-world-press-freedom-index>
- ^{ix} Fabian K.P., <https://countercurrents.org/2017/01/president-trump-a-bull-in-a-china-shop/>, 30th January 2017.
- ^x <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-global-decline-democracy-has-accelerated>
- ^{xi} Russel Bertrand, History of Western Philosophy