

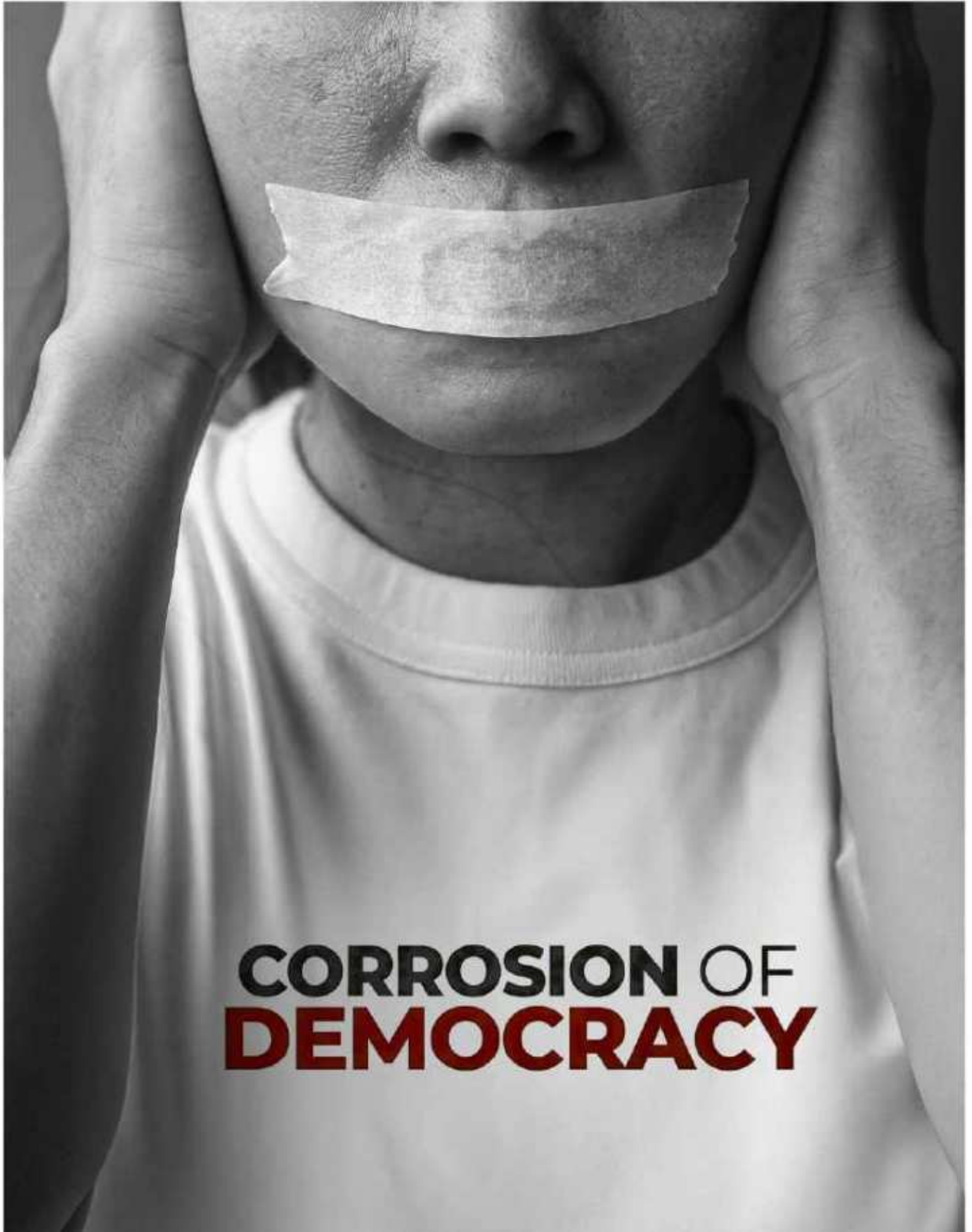
Bimonthly

# Pax Lumina



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A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation



**CORROSION OF  
DEMOCRACY**

# Pax Lumina

A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation

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**The best way to enhance  
freedom in other lands is to  
demonstrate here that  
our democratic system is  
worthy of emulation.**

- Jimmy Carter

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A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation

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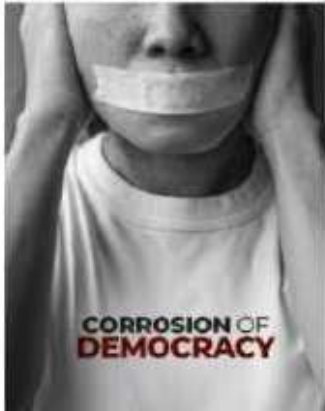
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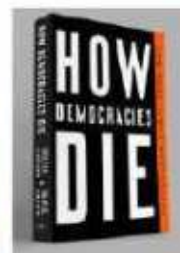
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# Challenges to Democracy

## Editorial

A democratic form of government is considered the most representative of the will of the people constituting the country concerned. Here, the exact form and nature of governance can vary, even to the extent that some brutal dictatorships tend to call themselves truly democratic, reflecting the true will of the constituent citizens.

It is clear that recognizing true democracy in a country or any of its constituent parts is, indeed, a difficult task. Moreover, the subjective and experiential aspects of governance can vary widely with the state of empowerment and entitlement of the subjects concerned with respect to the system.

In this issue, we look at the possible corrosive structures and forces that can hamper the flourishing of democracy in any country or region. Some of these factors may be open and visible, but others are indirect and less apparent but more insidious. We hear reports from across the globe detailing the threats to democracy faced by different countries and societies.

While evaluating the possible dangers to democracy, it is tempting to assume the existence of an ideal or a model for democratic functioning. For historical reasons, this model often happens to be the Western model of democracy, which at least some historians trace back to ancient Greece.

At this juncture, it is fair to remember that other cultures of the East as well as Africa and other regions of the world have had democratic systems of living and governance. An article from Kenya emphasises this point, highlighting the collective system of 'Ubuntu' prevailing in many parts of the African continent. However, the real threat to democracy does not emanate from the cultural or religious practices prevalent in a region or country but from the lack of true democracy itself.

Let me explain. In the initial stages of democracy, such as that of the city of Greece or the panchayats in different parts of India, the operation of democracy was much more direct and less complex. On every issue, a referendum used to be conducted and decisions taken. Though these decisions were meant to be endorsed by universal participation, some sections of the population, like for example slaves and women, used to be excluded from participation in this decision-making.

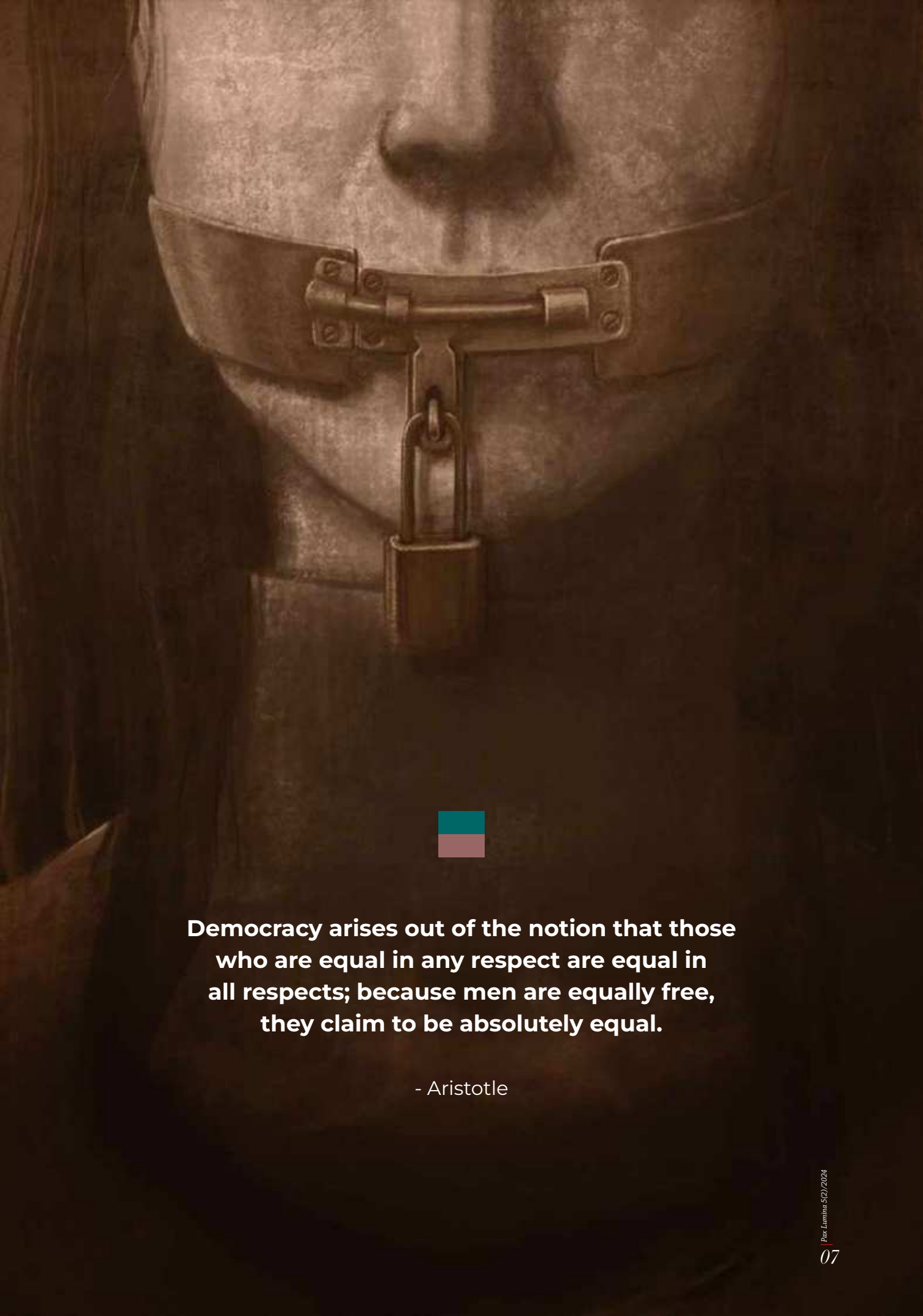
As the units of governance became larger and more complex, direct referendum-based democracy was replaced by direct or indirect elections for the appointment of different levels of rulers. Institutions like the executive, legislative, and judiciary came into being along with the free press. It may be mentioned here that the latest version of the press, viz. social media, tries to make democracy online and direct, but with its characteristic distortions.

Therefore, it becomes clear that making democracy accessible and meaningful to each citizen of a relatively large country poses many challenges. No country is a monolith. There are structural faults and striations vis-à-vis economic, social, cultural, ethnic, and many other dimensions which have to be resolved and harmonised in a non-violent manner to ensure the peaceful flourishing of democracy.

It is hoped that the reports and analysis contained in this issue may motivate our readers and collaborators all over the world to move forward on the peace-building path of strengthening democracy.

*Jacob Thomas*





**Democracy arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal.**

- Aristotle

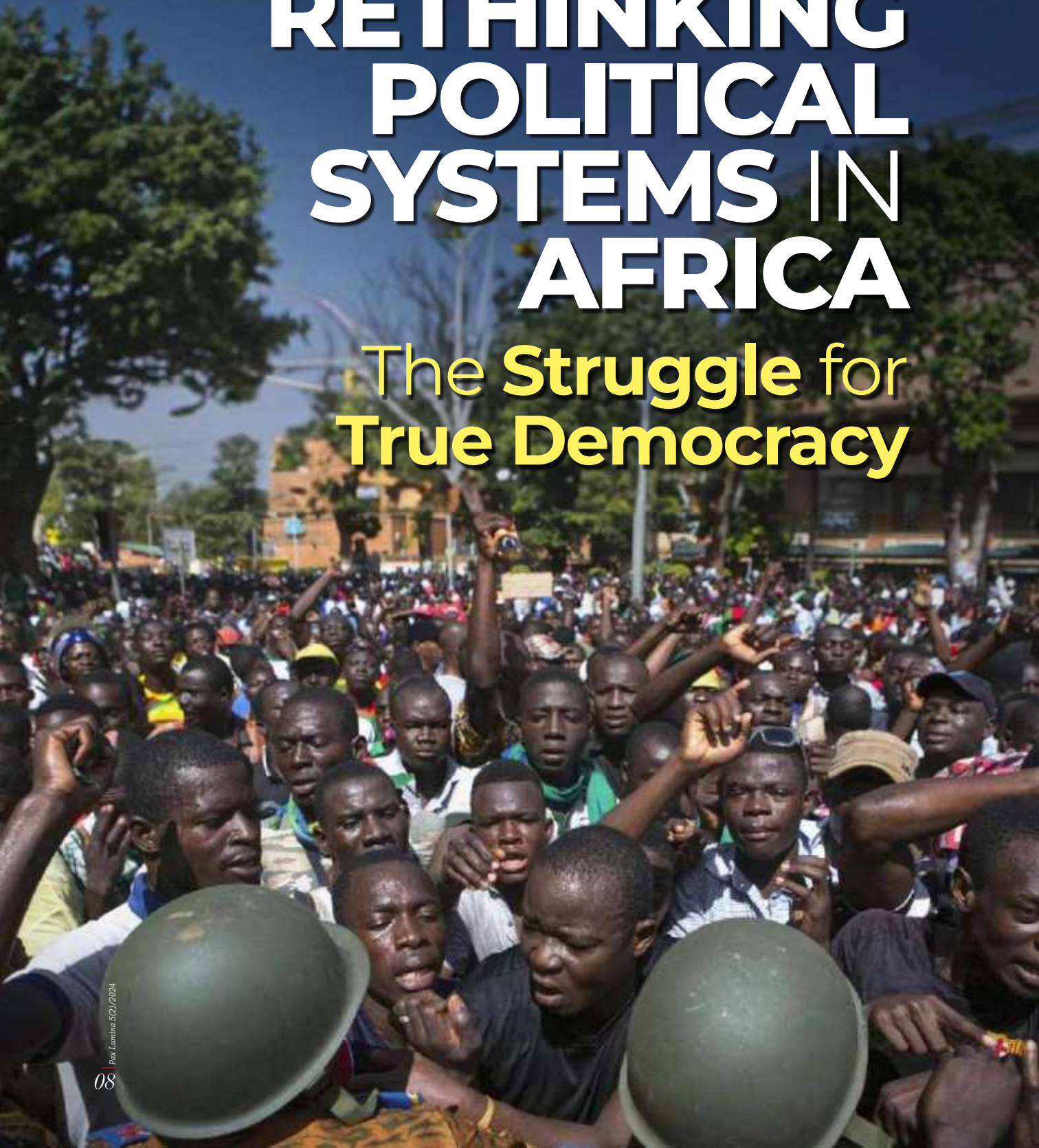


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# RETHINKING POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN AFRICA

## The **Struggle** for **True Democracy**





**T**he situation in many African countries is that those who are democratically elected into power take everything for individual gains and are not ready to share with others. The people, who voted them to power, are often forgotten. The things they were promised during political campaigns, were not realised. **The rights of people, especially those in opposition or having different views from those of the ruling party, are not respected. There are many inhuman ways in which these people are silenced. This is the reality of most politics.**



**H**ow helpful has the democratically imported praxis from Western and North American regions been to the people of the African continent?

During the post-independence period, many African countries grappled with the challenge of establishing new political systems, often influenced by Western democratic models.

In the 1990s, the continent saw a swift shift towards democratisation. Many nations transitioned from one-party to multiparty democracies. The aim was potentially and simply put: to improve the lives of people. However, today, decades after, the Western or North American type of democracy has so far proved to be a failure on the African continent.

In a February 2024 research by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, this year is labelled 'Ultimate Election Year' globally. More than 70 countries are expected to go to the ballot boxes including presidential and general elections. In Africa, 17 out of 54 countries are expected to hold multiparty democratic elections, equivalent to almost 1/3 of African countries, hosting 1/5 (21.1 percent) of the continent's population.

Among other issues, the report shows how Africa is a continent with the youngest population yet with the oldest leaders. In a Pastoral Letter by the Episcopal Conference of Malawi dated February 25, 2024, titled 'The Sad Story of Malawi', the Bishops highlight cases of inequality in the distribution of material goods and political power, rampant corruption, increased poverty levels, nepotism, dubious





government deals, control of media, lack of integrity in the judiciary, victimisation of the elderly on witchcraft accusations, lack of respect and care for creation, and many others. These are not lamentations for Malawians only but a shared concern across various countries such as Nigeria, DR Congo and Burundi.

I seek to agree with Alexis Bueno Guinamard, Professor at the Sant Ignasi-Sarrià College in Barcelona, who states that ‘certainly in the current problems, part of the responsibility lies with the Africans themselves (especially their leaders)’ (2001:4).

The situation in many African countries is that those who are democratically elected into power take everything for individual gains and are not ready to share with others. The people, who voted them to power, are often forgotten. The things they were promised during political campaigns, were not realised. The rights of people, especially those in opposition or having different views from those of the ruling party, are not respected. There are many inhuman ways in which these people are silenced. This is the reality of most politics.

In his book ‘An Introduction to Political Philosophy’ (2006:1), British philosopher and academic Jonathan Wolff stresses the commonly stated view that there are only two questions in political philosophy: ‘Who gets what?’ and ‘Who says.’ This may not be arguably true but it serves as a starting point here.

Many countries claim to uphold democratic values. However, in the current socio-political situations of these countries, only a few individuals govern, often without paying heed to the voice of the people. As a result, the politicians rule by power which they pass among themselves.

Their main interest is not to serve the people but to enrich themselves. Therefore, the question ‘Who gets what?’ is unsatisfactory in many African socio-political situations.

This discrepancy does not reflect the values of true democracy. It causes pain and suffering to the majority of the population and opposition political parties.

This point is not to suggest that democracy is a wrong political system. Rather, in as much as many countries, especially from Europe and North America, go to the extent of obliging all the countries of the world to be democratic, we must pause and ask, ‘Is there only one type of democracy which all nations must follow or are there different forms of democracies? Is democracy to be realised in the same way all over the world or the cultural and socio-political aspects should be considered before employing this type of democracy?’

As a social order marked by the existence of freedom and rights for individuals, an effective democracy must contribute to the things that concern people’s daily lives. If such is not the case, that democracy should be considered a facade.

Hearing this, one might get discouraged thinking there is no hope of having an effective democracy fit for Africa, given the reality. Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Malawi in 1989 said, “I put before you today a challenge ...to reject a way of living which does not correspond to the best of your local traditions and Christian faith ... look inside yourselves.” This calls for a retrospection that should result in a political paradigm shift.

Before Africans came in contact with Western or North American political views, they had their systems which helped the people to live together harmoniously and to share the goods of their territory. Countries like South Africa, Ghana, Malawi, and Tanzania shared values rooted in philosophies like Ubuntu, Umunthu, or Ujamaa, depending on the specific region and historical context.

The philosophy of Umunthu or Ubuntu treats human beings as social beings that are in constant communion with one another, where a human being is a human being only through

**A**s a social order marked by the existence of freedom and rights for individuals, an effective democracy must contribute to the things that concern people's daily lives. If such is not the case, that democracy should be considered a facade.



their relationships with other human beings and the world.

I agree with African thinkers like Desmond Tutu and Kwasi Wiredu that after failing to live the liberal democracy to the full, Africa can return to using Ubuntu principles to form a democratic rule that fits well with the mentality of the people.

This type of democracy encourages a high standard of collaboration of all the members of the community, through debate and delegation of responsibility only to those who have the concerns of the people at heart.



In this system, there is a clearly defined process that helps all the people to contribute to decisions regarding their communities and their daily lives as well as the distribution of resources and responsibilities.

Over 60 years, post-independence, Africa finds itself without a true democracy that reflects the ideals of 'rule of the people, by the people, and for the people.' It is a collective responsibility, especially for political leaders, to reassess and realign the political landscape with the genuine needs and aspirations of the people.

The challenge is not to reject democracy but to redefine and implement it in a manner that resonates with Africa's cultural identity and addresses the pressing concerns of its diverse populations.

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# DEMOCRACY WHOSE VISION?

**F**rom 2020–2022, Malaysia has been weighed down by a political crisis never seen before. Members of Parliament who had been legitimately elected by voters in the general elections changed party support leading to the fall of the government elected by the people. **Till today, political instability has continued to plague the government. There was also a time when a state of emergency was declared to protect the government formed through a trading allegiance.**



**D**emocracy means ‘rule by the people’. In Greek, ‘demos’ is defined as ‘people’, and ‘Kratos’, ‘rule’. Yet in the world that we live in, it is a far cry from the root meaning of the word itself. Many of the countries that are constitutionally considered democratic have a selective version of democracy that best suits those in power.

John Dewey (1859–1952), an American philosopher, associated with pragmatism, in his political philosophy, speaks about democracy as a means to help citizens to the ‘full realisation

of their potentialities’; yet it would seem that in many democracies in Asia, these potentialities seem to benefit only a few.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World states, ‘It is in full accord with human nature that juridical political structures should, with ever better success and without any discrimination, afford all their citizens the chance to participate freely and actively in establishing the constitutional bases of a political community, governing the state, determining the scope and purpose of various institutions, and choosing leaders’ (‘Gaudium et spes’, 73). Yet we know that in the real world, the political structures that we have are far from this ideal. When speaking of democracy, it is never unqualified.

Like all other forms of government, democracy is but a ‘form’ of government. It is a means and not an end in itself. Attached to the understanding of democracy is the right and duty to vote, which attaches to every citizen in a participative political society such that, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, it is ‘morally obligatory’ to exercise the right to vote as an expression of our ‘co-responsibility for the common good...’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2240). However, it also seems to depend on the government of the day and how democracy is defined and more importantly, lived out.





**I**n the past 30 years, we have seen an increase in the concentration of power through money politics, including using cash, gifts, and contracts to ‘buy’ supporters or voters, usually during elections. This has led to a new form of legitimised corruption.



From 2020–2022, Malaysia has been weighed down by a political crisis never seen before. Members of Parliament who had been legitimately elected by voters in the general elections changed party support leading to the fall of the government elected by the people. Till today, political instability has continued to plague the government. There was also a time when a state of emergency was declared to protect the government formed through a trading allegiance.

Since 2028, general elections in Malaysia have been followed by power-sharing deals and deference to ethnic and religious sensitivities that make decisive reforms nearly impossible. In its negative sense, compromise is all too evident.

In an article in the ‘East Asia Forum’, Dan Slater, James Orin Murfin Professor of Political Science of the University of Michigan alludes to the fact of being a democratic compromise. ‘Malaysia is quickly becoming a compromised democracy,’ he wrote. ‘Because of this compromise, moral values are no longer objective and therefore give rise to selective prosecution and persecution in the name of ‘justice’.

In the past 30 years, we have seen an increase in the concentration of power through money politics, including using cash, gifts, and contracts to ‘buy’ supporters or voters, usually during elections. This has led to a new form of legitimised corruption.

The election of governments and members of parliament is driven by money and not by the freedom of choice that every citizen should enjoy. It is evident that since democracy is the right to participate in political governance, the rise in money politics has hampered the rights of the citizens.

Like many other countries, Malaysia practises parliamentary democracy with constitutional







monarchy. The parliament is the most important institution in a country which practises the principles of democracy. However, when such institutions are tainted by people who legitimise corruption, democracy takes on another meaning.

According to the 2023 Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, Malaysia is still considered a 'flawed democracy' based on electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.

One could say that with the change of every government, attitudes connected to a democratic nation also keep changing. While laws may be in place, the enforcement of some laws is selective. For example, the laws concerning freedom of speech and media, sedition, fundamental human rights, and others.

There is a saying, 'All things to all men'. Democracy in Malaysia is certainly beholden to the government of the day. Fairness, equity, and democracy seem to be interpreted in a way that would bring electoral support and not in a way that promotes the participation of its citizens:

"The Church values the democratic system since it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate' ('Centesimus annus' – an encyclical written by Pope John Paul II in 1991, 46).

An article in 'The Economist', (August 31, 2023) states that South-East Asian democracies are declining. Malaysia is no exception. Some will argue that Malaysia's democracy is in a period of transition.

However, if issues like corruption, cronyism, race and religion-based politics are not tackled, then those in positions of political power will continue to define democracy to their benefit and that is to stay in power and not be ruled by the people.

Having said that, we do see some progress but these are not only hampered by the issues mentioned above but often used to hold hostage those who would like to see progress in the areas of fairness, equity, and democracy.

'Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and based on a correct conception of the human person. It requires that the necessary conditions be present for the advancement of both the individual through education and formation in true ideals and of the 'subjectivity' of society through the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility.' ('Centesimus annus', 46).

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# IMPLICATIONS OF ‘SOCIALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS’ ON MEDIA, CULTURE, AND RELIGIONS



**The dynamics of governance in China are profoundly influenced by the government's approach to media management and the recent emphasis on the Sinicization of religions. These strategies play a central role in shaping the information environment and promoting cultural cohesion within the country, reflecting the CCP's priorities in maintaining social stability and unity.**



**'S**ocialism with Chinese Characteristics' is a governance and economic model that embodies China's adaptation of socialist principles to its specific historical, cultural, and social context.

It represents an effort to pursue economic development, social harmony, and an improved standard of living within the framework of socialist ideology that acknowledges and incorporates China's unique attributes.

This model underscores the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) commitment to maintaining a single-party system while also engaging in economic reforms and opening up to global markets, with emphasis on the central role of the CCP in guiding the nation's development.



This centralisation is seen as a means to efficiently mobilise resources, maintain social stability, and implement long-term development strategies. The CCP leadership justifies that this approach is suited to China's current stage of development and societal needs, aiming to create a harmonious society that reduces poverty and improves the quality of life for its citizens.

The cultural implications of socialism with Chinese characteristics are profound and multifaceted. This model has led to significant investment in cultural preservation and the promotion of national heritage, recognising the importance of culture in national identity and social cohesion. But it also involves efforts to align cultural expression with socialist values, which has led to policies aimed at guiding cultural development along certain paths.

These policies have fostered a vibrant cultural scene in some respects, supporting the arts and promoting cultural industries that reflect both traditional Chinese values and the principles of socialism with Chinese characteristics. However, they have also led to debates about the balance between cultural preservation and the promotion of a unified national culture, as well as discussions about the space for artistic and cultural diversity within this framework.

The dynamics of governance in China are profoundly influenced by the government's approach to media management and the recent emphasis on the Sinicization of religions. These strategies play a central role in shaping the information environment and promoting cultural cohesion within the country, reflecting the CCP's priorities in maintaining social stability and unity.



**A**t the heart of the Sinicization efforts lies the tension between preserving traditional cultural values and accommodating modern ideologies. Chinese authorities have emphasized the importance of integrating religious beliefs with socialist principles and Chinese cultural traditions. This approach aims to foster a sense of national identity and promote social cohesion.



## Media Management in China

The management of media and information in mainland China is characterised by a comprehensive regulatory framework that oversees both traditional and digital media platforms. This framework ensures that the content available to the public aligns with national laws, regulations, and societal values as defined by the CCP.

The ‘Great Firewall’, an Internet regulation mechanism, selectively filters access to foreign websites and information, aiming to protect the informational environment from content deemed harmful or disruptive to social harmony.

This approach to media management supports the government's goal of fostering a positive and harmonious societal atmosphere. By curating the flow of information, the authorities seek to promote narratives that reinforce social cohesion and national identity while also safeguarding against misinformation and divisive content.

At the same time, the approach is viewed by many as a system of censorship, surveillance, and propaganda to manage public opinion and suppress dissent. Social media platforms and messaging apps within China, notably WeChat are closely monitored. WeChat is considered to be the single app that all citizens have to use to survive because of its ties to payment and virtually all aspects of life.

Content that deviates from the party line is swiftly censored. The government has also implemented advanced surveillance technologies, such as facial recognition and big data analysis, to monitor public spaces and online activities, further tightening its grip on the flow of information.

## On Culture and Religions

‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ has led to significant investment in cultural preservation and the promotion of national heritage, recognising the importance of culture in national identity and social cohesion. But it also involves efforts to align cultural expression with socialist values, which has led to policies aimed at guiding cultural development along certain paths.

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However, they have also led to debates about the balance between cultural preservation and the promotion of a unified national culture, as well as discussions about the space for artistic and cultural diversity within this framework.



The approach to religion under the framework is characterised by the principle of religious freedom, with the stipulation that religious practices must align with state laws and regulations.

The State recognises five major religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism) and seeks to integrate religious communities into the broader project of national development, encouraging religions to support social harmony and contribute to the realisation of socialist values.

This policy framework has enabled religious communities to practise their faiths and contribute to social and charitable activities. Nonetheless, it has also led to tensions where religious practices are perceived to conflict with State policies or social objectives. The government's oversight of religious affairs reflects the broader governance model's emphasis on stability and unity, leading to discussions about the balance between religious freedom and the interests of the state and society.

This has led to the recent focus on the Sinicization of religions, where they are required to adopt Chinese cultural elements and ideologies. While this has allowed religions to coexist with socialism, it may have also restricted religious freedom and autonomy in a conventional sense.

Despite these challenges, religious communities have adapted to finding ways to practise their faith within the confines of State control. Some religious groups have even collaborated with the government on social welfare projects, demonstrating a pragmatic approach to coexistence.

At the heart of the Sinicization efforts lies the tension between preserving traditional cultural values and accommodating modern ideologies. Chinese authorities have emphasized the importance of integrating religious beliefs with socialist principles and Chinese cultural traditions. This approach aims to foster a sense of national identity and promote social cohesion.

However, the Sinicization of religion has also raised concerns about the erosion of democracy and the concentration of power in China. As the government exerts greater control over religious institutions, there are fears that dissenting voices may be silenced, and religious freedoms in a conventional sense may be curtailed.

Finding a balance between preserving Chinese cultural traditions and upholding religious freedoms from the universal church's perspective remains a formidable challenge for Chinese society.

Amidst these challenges, cultural and academic work has emerged as a bridge between China and the rest of the world. Scholars and religious leaders are encouraged to engage in conversations and collaboration to promote mutual understanding and reconciliation. By fostering activities on intercultural exchange and interfaith dialogue, their work seeks to transcend political barriers and promote mutual understanding and unity in plurality.

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# THE CONCERNING TREND OF US BACKSLIDING AGGRAVATES GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC DECLINE





The currently prevailing perception of democratic retreat on a global scale contrasts starkly with the optimism surrounding democratising waves. **There is growing concern about a resurgence of authoritarianism, nationalism, and geopolitical tensions, leading to a reassessment of the principles and institutions that have underpinned global stability for decades.**



With its origins tracing back to ancient Greece, democracy has undergone centuries of evolution, becoming the bedrock of modern governance, embodying principles of equal representation, accountability, and individual freedoms. But the global spread of democracy has not been a linear progression.

Instead, it has been characterised by waves of democratisation followed by periods of reversal. In the aftermath of World War II, there was a remarkable proliferation of democratic governance, notably in Western Europe, Asia and Africa.

This era fostered a common belief in the appeal of democracy, human rights, and international cooperation, leading to the establishment of institutions such as the United Nations and NATO.

The third wave of democratisation (1974-1990) witnessed a near doubling of democracies worldwide, spurred by movements toward democratic governance across diverse regions. Key milestones of the era include the collapse of Communism, transitions from military dictatorships or authoritarian regimes to democratic rule in Latin America, and the end of apartheid in South Africa.

The currently prevailing perception of democratic retreat on a global scale contrasts starkly with the optimism surrounding democratising waves. There is growing concern about a resurgence of authoritarianism, nationalism, and geopolitical tensions, leading to a reassessment of the principles and institutions that have underpinned global stability for decades. Indeed, recent trends of democratic erosion raise doubts about the durability of the post-war liberal international order.

To illustrate the decay of American democracy, let us consider a combination of institutional factors. **Trump's term in office was a watershed moment in American politics. It fundamentally reshaped the political landscape and challenged established norms and conventions.**



The Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) reports since 2016 depict a troubling trend of global democratic backsliding. The EIU's Global Democracy Index shows a pattern of 'regression and stagnation'.

While 45.4 percent of the world's population resides in some form of democracy, only 7.8 percent live in what the EIU deems a 'full democracy' – a 1.1 percent decrease since 2015.

The downgrade of the United States to a 'flawed democracy' in 2016 highlights broader challenges facing democracies globally, emphasising the vulnerability of even established democracies to the erosion of democratic norms and practices.

This, in turn, underscores the interconnectedness of democratic health across nations, as evidenced by the influence of Donald Trump's presidency on the actions of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

To be fair, Trump did not single-handedly initiate the decline of American democracy. Many unaddressed problems had long plagued

U.S. politics such as systemic racism, the outsize influence of special interests, legislative dysfunction, the unchecked growth of executive power, party polarisation, a deeply entrenched culture war fuelled by identity politics, declining trust in government, and media echo chambers.

To illustrate the decay of American democracy, let us consider a combination of institutional factors. Trump's term in office was a watershed moment in American politics. It fundamentally reshaped the political landscape and challenged established norms and conventions. The former president peddled wild conspiracy theories; normalised a polarising and uncouth political rhetoric; eroded trust in US governing institutions; widened societal faultlines along race, class, and political affiliation; and permanently damaged America's credibility and leadership on the world stage.

His corrosive influence on US constitutional democracy culminated in the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, as the losing candidate



for the White House mounted a campaign to prevent the peaceful transition of power.

On the other hand, as Republicans veered sharply to the right over the past two decades, Congress has become a hotbed of partisanship and obstructionism. For example, the Republican House minority refused to investigate Trump's involvement in the January 6 attack, abdicating its responsibility as a check and balance on a coordinated branch.

The current Republican House majority has not been able to pass a federal budget, the first since 2022, causing the US credit rating to be downgraded amid investor concerns. In the meantime, urgent political issues remain unaddressed, from mass shootings, the treatment of migrants along the Southern border, and the polarising effect of social media, to the guaranteeing of the rights of women, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities.

If Trump returns to power in November, despite the 14th Amendment's disqualification clause, America's democratic institutions will be tested once more. As Protect Democracy's 'Authoritarian Playbook' describes, Trump's second-term plan would seek to politicise independent institutions, aggrandise the power of the executive, spread disinformation, quash dissent, target marginalised communities, corrupt elections, and stoke violence.

Indeed, Trump has promised regulatory retaliation (staffing bureaucratic agencies with loyalists), law enforcement overreach (massive deportations, shutting down protests), the weaponisation of the justice system against

critics and rivals, the pardoning of lawbreakers (the January 6 rioters), and the domestic deployment of the military.

Why should the rest of the world care? America's democratic backsliding would inevitably aggravate the disintegration of the liberal world order. First, The United States would no longer stand as an example of a functional constitutional government based on the rule of law and the protection of civil rights.

This, in turn, would legitimise China and Russia as alternative governing models. The rise of illiberal systems around the world (Hungary, Turkey, Italy) indicates that this is a threat and that such movements would be emboldened to push their political agendas in a post-American world.

During his presidency, Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organisation and walked away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The return to this kind of isolationism would inevitably create a power vacuum that Russia and China would quickly fill.

The liberal international order would come under crushing pressure as authoritarian superpowers would push to rewrite the existing rules in their favour. Lastly, America would become a victim of its isolationism. Disillusioned with an unreliable US, other states would seek to find stable partners, allowing China and Russia to build political and economic ties in places abandoned by the waning North American superpower.

American leadership has upheld the liberal world order since the end of World War II. Whether the system will survive depends on the voters in November. Should we fail to protect the integrity of our constitutional system, the world will lose a guarantor of the rules-based international order and a promoter of liberal democracy.

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# RE-DEMOCRATISING SRI LANKA



What we witness is a dynamic, evolving and maturing democracy. It is a democracy re-democratising itself through the agency of the people. **While balloting was the predominant form of agency that was seen in the past, today the narrative is gradually changing.**



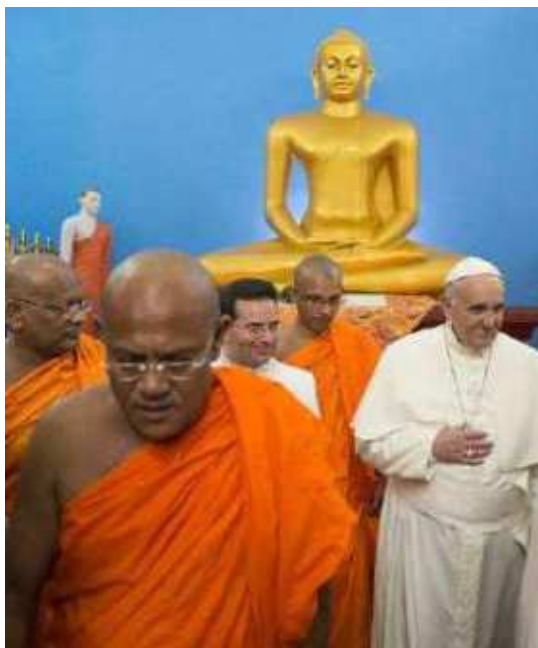
## **I**ntroduction

Sri Lanka has been a constitutional democracy ever since its independence in 1948 from the British. There have been eight presidential elections since 1982 and sixteen parliamentary elections since 1947. Moreover, Sri Lankans gained a universal franchise in 1931, and the country is known as Asia's oldest democracy (DeVotta, 2021, p. 96). So, democracy is not new for Sri Lankans. We cannot pretend that liberal democracy is not somehow being indigenised and localised.

What we witness is a dynamic, evolving and maturing democracy. It is a democracy re-democratising itself through the agency of the people. While balloting was the predominant form of agency that was seen in the past, today the narrative is gradually changing.

The people, more than at any point in history, have been pushed to ask for a just place on the island. The passion for re-creating a socio-political and economic system that upholds and values life is becoming more pronounced and evident. However, the road ahead is not self-evident and already earmarked.

At the heart of the crisis lie signs of God's reign for the Church, as people of God, inviting us to preach boldly and practice authentically the prophetic message of the Gospel. Although



a minority, the Church could transform its reluctant and inhibited witness into a prophetic leadership by providing the much-needed impetus for the struggle.

## **From Democratic Backsliding to Re-democratising**

It is often overlooked that 'well-run elections with high turnout, however, do not guarantee good governance or liberal democracy.' Often different political groups have effectively used the ballot box to promote ethno-majoritarian, undemocratic and religiously divisive practices (Venugopal, 2024).

Sri Lankan elections for the past two decades (probably except the Presidential election in 2015) 'signify a transformation similar to the one that followed the 1956 parliamentary elections and catapulted the country toward an ethnocentric regime and, eventually, civil war'. (DeVotta, 2021, p. 97)



I often think of the 1956 elections as the watershed moment of democracy backsliding. In 1956 we witnessed a 'revolution' brought about by democratic means. 'Sinhalese forces, mainly rural and deeply rooted in Sinhalese culture, used linguistic nationalism to rally the island's Sinhala-speaking majority behind the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).'

When brought to power SLFP were quick to make Sinhala the sole official language and many other drastic reversals of longstanding democratic practice. Those in power have always 'manipulated ethno-nationalist sentiment to marginalise minorities...' (DeVotta, 2021, p. 97). When we look at the trajectory of the political landscape 'Sri Lanka's governance system has vacillated between autocracy and democracy' (Nadaradjane, 2022, p. 2).

The fragile practice of democracy was further weakened by a dual factor: the three-decade-long war and the 'Rajapaksa's commitment to a centralised and authoritarian rule [that] led to the curtailment of civil liberties, a culture of cronyism, widespread corruption, and democratic backsliding' (Nadaradjane, 2022, p. 3)

With the end of the war, in 2009, there were clear signs of a move towards authoritarianism. The people at large were either clueless of the political undercurrents or were convinced by

the Sinhala-Buddhist and majoritarian ideology the Rajapaksa regime was propagating with the tacit support of the State machinery.

The only exception was in 2015 when the voters reversed the prevailing trend (DeVotta, 2021, p. 96). Although soon the battered illiberal democracy once again found itself in a quandary. The 2015 experience was not at all in vain and would re-emerge with more clarity and force in 2022.

The year 2019 brought the real possibility of intensifying a 'hard authoritarian system replacing a weak and battered democratic order.' The political elites who have ruled Sri Lanka managed to weaken the liberal democratic framework so much that the people themselves were on a path of backsliding democracy.

While the political elites consolidated power among a close-knit group of people including their families, the majority of the people were left to feel disempowered and nominal figures in the democratic system. However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the power game so drastically.

A backsliding democracy which 'appeared almost like the last stage of democracy' managed to show that it 'had some magical capacity for surprises.' It was a re-emerging and a re-democratising Sri





**W**ith the end of the war, in 2009, there were clear signs of a move towards authoritarianism. **The people at large were either clueless of the political undercurrents or were convinced by the Sinhala-Buddhist and majoritarian ideology the Rajapaksa regime was propagating with the tacit support of the State machinery.**



Lanka that we witnessed in 2022: ‘The citizens suddenly woke up demanding more democracy than what the political elites were willing to concede’ (Uyangoda, 2023).

This ongoing crisis provides a ‘Kairos’ moment for the Catholic Church, as people of God, towards recalibrating its spirituality and faith rooted and inspired by the Gospels and the struggles of people today. This response which is informed by the Gospels, immersed in the existential context, and imbibed with compassion would better dispose of all people of goodwill to receive the grace of God’s reign.

As witnessed in apartheid South Africa, ‘the type of faith and spirituality that has dominated Church life for centuries’ is one that ‘tended to be an other-worldly affair that has very little, if anything at all, to do with the affairs of this world.’ A dimension of this dichotomy is also subtly engraved into the faith and spirituality of the Sri Lankan church.

Although it might be hard for some to reconcile with, the Church does not bring the Gospel

into a space of a political vacuum. We should not pretend as if the Gospel somehow provides us with ‘a non-political solution to political problems.’ Inspired by the Gospel, the Church needs to find ‘a Christian way of approaching the political solutions, a Christian spirit and motivation and attitude. But there is no way of bypassing politics and political strategies.’ (KAIROS Theologians, 1986, pp. 15-16) .

An authentic Christian response today can never circumvent the truth of the Gospels speaking boldly through the socio-political and economic crisis demanding for political solutions, economic stability and justice.

## Conclusion

A ‘system change’ is the demand of Sri Lankans. Further, people seek a fundamental transformation of the socio-political, and economic structures by re-creating constitutional safeguards, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, autonomy for self-determination and maintaining a clear distinction between the legislature and the executive.

This is a helpful strategy forward. But can a 'system change' alone bring lasting solutions and pave the way towards an empowered Sri Lanka? This is where more serious reflection and inquiry is required.

Otherwise, we shall be tempted to create short-term solutions for long-standing crises embedded in the very fabric of the island. The Church's prophetic leadership and witness could provide a rich spiritual foundation and source for the Sri Lankans to navigate through the current crisis.

A sense of triumphalism that had characterised the pre-Vatican II Church is somehow preserved among sections of the Christian community today. Such an attitude directly emerges from the identification of the Church with the reign of God.

In contrast, Vatican II 'insisted on a pilgrim church that is not the reign of God but at best the sacrament and witness to the reign of God.' It is this synodal witness that the Church can provide in Sri Lanka at this crucial juncture. This journey the Church undertakes with the depth of its perception that 'the pilgrim church is also a sinful church which is always in need of reform and renovation' (Curran, 1999, pp. 116-117).



The gift of God's reign is revealed in a context of repentance/conversion and faith in the prophetic message of the Gospel (Mark 1:14-15). It is a call for conversion from personal and social evil, sin, which has corrupted the moral core of the human person and alienated people from themselves, others and God. This sin 'adopts simplistically Darwin's perception that only the fittest survive. It overlooks Darwin's other discovery that only those species survive which learn to cooperate' (Gula, 1989, pp. 96-97).

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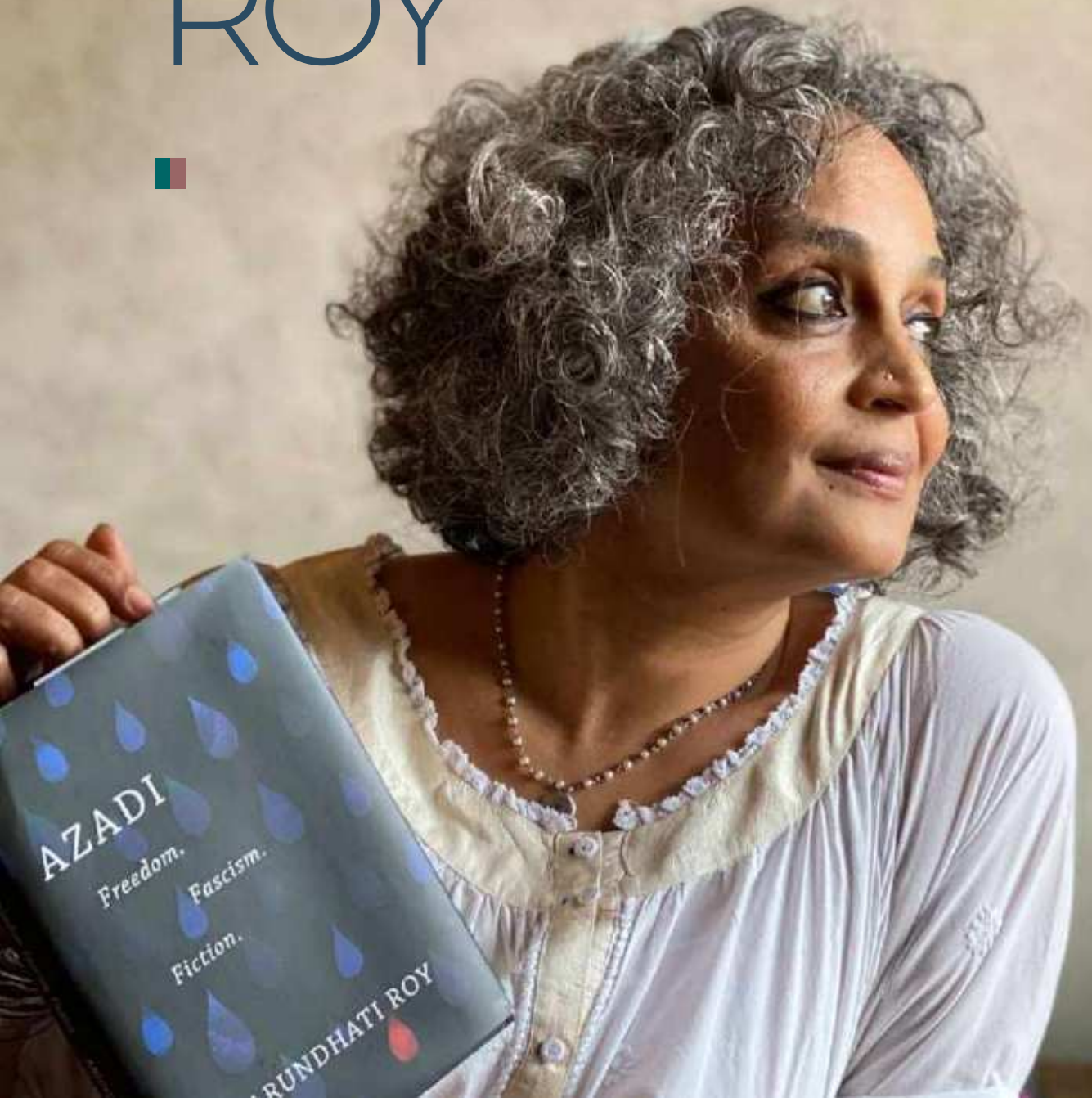
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■ INTERVIEW

**Arundhati Roy/Cedric Prakash**

*Pax Lumina 5(2)/2024/29-36*

# CONVERSATION WITH ARUNDHATI ROY







## 1 What's happening with global democracy, right-wing movements, and the state of democracy worldwide?

We find ourselves at a critical juncture where the course of events could swing in either direction. This emerging conflict in the Middle East, slowly gaining momentum, has the potential to usher in profound global changes. However, there is hope for positive transformation. It hinges on people realising that they must not dehumanise those who differ from them, treating them as objects or, in essence, an insult to the very essence of their humanity.

In the context of India, we stand at a pivotal moment. We face Reflecting on the past 15 years, it's astonishing to contemplate the levels of fear and the incarceration of numerous friends, including the unfortunate passing of Fr. Stan Swamy, who was dedicated to doing good.

It is our collective responsibility to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of our country. We must recognise that we are not the sole custodians of truth, and others too have their perspectives and rights. We must discover ways to coexist harmoniously, for India is inherently a nation of minorities, spanning diverse aspects such as ethnicity, class, caste, race, language, and religion.

The current surge of violence appears to stem from attempts to artificially create a majority where none naturally exists. This unleashes a catastrophic and volatile force, akin to nuclear fusion. Consequently, we must earnestly consider the most prudent approach to coexist and preserve one another.

## 2 As the author of 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness', could you please delineate the disparities between democracy and pseudo-democracy?

This is, indeed, a pivotal question, as it is imperative to recognise that democracy is not solely defined by the mere occurrence of elections. Rather, the essence of democracy lies within the framework of a constitution, serving as the fundamental moral and legal underpinning of society. Moreover, it encompasses various institutions intended to function as checks and balances, including the judiciary, the media, and the elected branches of government.

*Arundhati Roy and Cedric Prakash*





We face the choice between safeguarding our democracy or descending into the

abyss of terrorism, rendering our nation unrecognisable. **Reflecting on the past 15 years, it's astonishing to contemplate the levels of fear and the incarceration of numerous friends, including the unfortunate passing of Fr. Stan Swamy, who was dedicated to doing good.**



Presently, these institutions have experienced a diminishment in their effectiveness.

Consequently, it is arguable whether our current state truly qualifies as a democracy. Even the electoral process itself has been compromised, exemplified by the introduction of electoral bonds [now declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court], which allows corporate entities to financially support political parties while maintaining anonymity. This discrepancy in financial resources between the ruling party and others raises concerns.

Furthermore, challenges with our electoral lists and compromised national security and intelligence agencies. They have been penetrated by the Hindutva ideology and have contributed to the fragile state of affairs. In essence, we find ourselves in a precarious situation, operating as a pseudo-performative democracy rather than a genuine one.

### 3 What are your thoughts on the potential policy for women's reservation and its potential implementation in 2029, considering its significance for gender equality and representation in India?

Presently, we find ourselves confronted with a deeply disconcerting situation. For instance, consider the distressing events in Manipur, where women were subjected to humiliation, paraded naked, sexually assaulted, and shockingly, there were women who supported the perpetrators.

Regrettably, in Gujarat, similar support for acts of violence by women is not uncommon. I do not wish to trivialise these matters, but I think that women are individuals who, in many cases, have not been granted the opportunity to realise their concrete capabilities, unleash their imagination, and showcase their skills.

It is a situation akin to a volcano on the verge of eruption, brimming with immense possibilities that we have demonstrated ourselves to be capable of. I do not anticipate this being a subject that can be easily dismissed from global discourse.

We inhabit a society where millions of female fetuses are terminated before birth. Female suicides occur, not solely due to economic hardships, but it appears that they may be more prevalent among the affluent and capitalists who prioritise their property and wealth while seeking male heirs.

Therefore, the issue of women's reservation is, as we are aware, often labelled as a form of 'jumla' by other political parties. This signifies that true reform cannot be achieved unless we grasp the functioning of the caste system and the importance of addressing caste-related issues.

Without prioritising caste sensitivities and similar considerations, our actions are reduced to mere rhetoric and posturing, devoid of substance. The responsibility for effecting change does not rest with external forces; we must undertake this endeavour ourselves. Consequently, we must understand that we will not receive anything; we must assertively seize what is rightfully ours. This, in essence, is my standpoint.

## 4 What is your perspective on the state of minorities for peaceful coexistence?

In our society, it is noteworthy that those who exert influence and hold significant authority constitute a minority of substantial consequence, despite their numerical insignificance. As evidenced by the caste census data, a notable proportion, ranging from 85 to 90 percent, of individuals at the helm of corporations and those responsible for reporting belong to a select 10 percent of the population.

This phenomenon prompts us to reconsider our conventional understanding of the term 'minority'. It is imperative to introduce an unmentioned aspect into this discourse. Specifically, we must not only reconsider our definition of the term 'minority' but also explore a suitable replacement for the word 'media'.

## 5 What kind of media reform do you recommend?

The essence of our concern lies in the absence of a comprehensive reform within mainstream media. What we currently observe is a ministry for propagandistic purposes. This has resulted in the displacement of competent and professional journalists, who find themselves without



employment opportunities. Consequently, prominent journalists have resorted to publishing content online or producing video material and YouTube programmes.

We are now witnessing the emergence of a new paradigm where the government assumes the authority to distinguish between misinformation and factual information concerning matters of government. In this context, it is evident that numerous communication channels are being subjected to restrictions and closures.

Notably, this issue primarily pertains to the national media and is most prominent in North India. Without their influence, this problem would likely not persist for an extended period. The efficiency of the Ministry of Propaganda is evident in this country, but the challenge lies not within the media itself, but rather within the ministry's operations.

## 6 How do you assess yourself as a woman writer?

I am a writer, proficient in the creation of novels and literary works. It is a known fact that writers often possess intricate and peculiar qualities. Consequently, I lack any ostentatious billboards to display, nor do I possess a concise handbook or manifesto that I can distribute. I am not one who feels compelled to simplify matters. I am not one who...

Regardless, I will leave this point for your consideration at a later juncture. So, I am capable of posing the question, but I do not identify as such an individual.

Interestingly, there exists a notable degree of animosity, even from those who might share some alignment with my political perspectives. One must ask, "Who are you?" It is worth noting that, being a woman, I have encountered numerous instances of upper-caste men imposing upon me their stipulations regarding what I should or should not write, and how I ought to write.

It seems that my being a woman who has authored a book granted them the authority to prescribe to me their preferences. Yes, they did not shy away from delivering lectures on the appropriate tone, themes, and subjects I should employ in my writing.





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Hence, when I received this award, (which one?) it represented a validation of my chosen genre of writing, a genre that certain factions did not want writers to explore. In essence, it exemplifies the current trend, similar to what you are presently doing, of referring to me as an activist. I persistently question, "Why label me thus?"

In days of yore, writers documented the societies in which they resided, and they remained writers, plain and simple. The term 'activist' is an attempt to dictate what literature should encompass. Therefore, in my view, this accolade signifies that this is, indeed, literature, encompassing what literature should and can represent. It is not limited to the paradigm of conforming to literature festivals initiated by corporate entities, which confines writers to a specific milieu. Rather, it is a testament to the idea that writers can engage directly with the contemporary world in their works.

For me, the idea of writers being coerced into conforming to corporate publishers and being

subjected to a litany of demands is a far cry from my conception of the responsibilities and aspirations associated with my craft and art. I am not an individual content with mere comfort; I am unequivocally a writer.

## **7** What is your perspective on the ongoing survey of caste dynamics in India? Any comments on your book 'Annihilation of caste'?

Certainly, I am well aware of the subject matter at hand. Nevertheless, allow me to

articulate my motivation for authoring this book. I undertook the endeavour to compose a book that pertains to Dr Ambedkar's work, and I intended to address the statement I previously made regarding caste.

I firmly believe the practice of caste pervades the entirety of Indian society, thereby shaping our collective mindset in a predominantly uniform manner. Consequently, each one of us must engage with the issue of caste, introspect upon it, and collectively endeavour to challenge its influence.

It is my contention that the transformation of the caste system necessitates a collective effort, as no single caste, tribe, or category alone possesses the capacity to effect comprehensive change in this regard.

## **8** Is the Manipur violence a consequence of actions resembling the eviction of Christian communities, reminiscent of the historical British administration? If so, what factors might be contributing to this situation?

Regarding the current circumstances in Manipur, it is evident that there exists a considerable lack of comprehension among a significant portion of the populace, including myself, regarding the intricate dynamics at play in the region. It would be a misjudgement to reduce the situation solely to a matter of religious denominations, such as Christians and Hindus, though this does constitute a part of the complexity.



The prevailing condition in Manipur has been exacerbated by a pronounced bias exhibited by the State government, with the complicity of the Central government.

Moreover, the security apparatus finds itself fragmented, with a distinct division between the police and the army, resulting in a lack of a coherent chain of command. In this context, the absence of a substantive response from the Prime Minister has raised concerns.

While public attention is readily drawn to international issues, such as Israel and Gaza, it is disheartening that the pressing matters in Manipur have not received due attention on the global stage.

This situation underscores a tragic reality in our country, wherein only select regions and demographics are acknowledged as integral parts of India. All too often, certain castes and religions are deemed to be representative of the nation, while others are either disregarded or stigmatised. It is imperative that we recognise our collective participation in the national fabric, and we must take on this responsibility with due diligence.

## 9 How can the public effectively address the concerns of the people and engage our Prime Minister, who has remained silent amid public suffering, to seek answers to their questions?

is a matter of concern that our current situation finds us with a Prime Minister who has yet to address a single press conference. Notably, we observe the President of the United States, Joe Biden being compelled to travel to Hanoi to engage in a press conference with his citizens. This situation inevitably gives rise to a disconcerting deficiency in accountability. In light of these circumstances, it becomes increasingly evident that a new Prime Minister is not only a matter of preference but an imperative need. What more can be said in response to this pressing issue?

## 10 Do you hold any optimism or expectations for the year 2024?

Certainly, I maintain a sense of optimism. It is unequivocal that hope persists. This sentiment is not mere rhetoric; it is grounded in a detailed assessment of the situation, examining it on a State-by-State basis. I have exercised my civic duty by participating in the electoral process. It is imperative to bear in mind that despite the substantial numerical advantage enjoyed by a certain faction, it is essential to recognise that this majority is, in fact, a minority, constituting a mere 7 percent of the population. Their influence is magnified by media coverage, yet they do not represent the majority of our nation's populace.

The collaboration of opposition parties is a noteworthy development. I am confident that, should elections transpire, a shift in the prevailing dynamics is likely. While we must remain prepared for potential fluctuations in the political landscape, including changes in the incumbent leadership's stance, we must also acknowledge the dire circumstances faced by many citizens born in this country, despite our nation's positioning as a Superpower.

It is imperative to recognise that the idea of the country transcends the government, the



We are now witnessing the emergence of a new paradigm where the government assumes the authority to distinguish between misinformation and factual information concerning matters of government. **In this context, it is evident that numerous communication channels are being subjected to restrictions and closures.**



State, and the ruling party, with all constituents being equally vital. Instead of a system where every citizen has a voice, we find ourselves in a scenario where a single entity wields significant authority. This necessitates a collective optimism for change.

It is undeniable that we harbour hope for a brighter future. The current state of affairs cannot persist indefinitely. Our collective intelligence and determination prevent us from being relegated to this constricting corner. We are resolute in our commitment to effecting a positive change and ensuring a more equitable and just society.

## 11 Your views on the Israel-Palestine conflict?

It is easy for individuals to take sides on any matter, describing terrible atrocities, and becoming consumed by anger. Regardless of one's affiliation, horrific acts are occurring. However, the central issue lies in understanding the root cause of this conflict.

The origin of this conflict can be traced back to the occupation of Palestine, which is deemed a crime against humanity. Millions of people are confined without control over their own lives, and this is the catalyst for the ongoing war. This situation has created a nightmarish reality for both sides involved. The truth is, that all the atrocities, whether committed by Hamas or the IDF, stem from this situation.

To resolve this, the world must focus its attention. International law must be invoked to address the occupation issue, as mere commentary on the war will not solve the problem; it will only exacerbate and deepen it.

Prolonged oppression of a people inevitably leads to unrest and conflict. There is no justification for any form of cruelty or violence. Diplomacy alone is insufficient; understanding is the key to resolution. The world must pay attention and refrain from reacting in the same old ways, distinguishing between one side and the other. This is the underlying message in the passage.

Today, I came across something highly intriguing, and I wish to share it with you. It was written by an Israeli soldier who is also a writer and is preparing to return to the war. The book in question is titled 'Love, Israel, Support, Palestine', authored by Nir Avishai Cohen.

The author presents a striking perspective, as he highlights that for 56 years, Israel has imposed oppressive military control on the Palestinian population. He emphasises the critical need for Israeli society to contemplate







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**It is not limited to the paradigm of conforming to literature festivals initiated by corporate entities, which confines writers to a specific milieu. Rather, it is a testament to the idea that writers can engage directly with the contemporary world in their works.**



profound questions regarding the sacrifice of its sons and daughters, pondering the motives and consequences.

The author critically addresses the influence of a messianic religious minority that has led Israel into a quagmire. His commitment to serving his country is evident, yet his conscience compels him to question the direction they are headed.

In our nation, too, there is a similar call for conscientious individuals with noble objectives. The concern is not limited to a minority religion, but rather the dangers of fanaticism that can affect any group.

The central message here is that we cannot indefinitely oppress people who are not of our



kind or with whom we do not share a sense of fraternity without generating conflict. In both our countries, there are voices of reason and radical thought, emphasising the urgency of ending the occupation and establishing dignity and justice for all in the region.

Amid the current turmoil, it is imperative for external actors, such as the United States, to reflect on their roles in arming, financing, and supporting the ongoing operations, as the situation could potentially escalate into a global catastrophe. It underscores the need for a broader perspective beyond political and ethnic divisions, focusing on the collective voices of cultural and civil discourse. The common goal is clear: the occupation must cease, and dignity and justice must prevail for everyone in the region. This is a message that resonates across boundaries, and it is vital that we pay heed, as failure to do so could result in a conflagration with worldwide implications.

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*Cedric Prakash SJ is a human rights, reconciliation and peace activist/writer. Earlier he worked with the Jesuit Refugee Service in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Jordan in advocacy and communications.*





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# THE ROAD AHEAD TO STRENGTHEN INDIA'S DEMOCRACY





of 59 percent in 24 countries say they are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in their country, with half or more in 17 countries holding this view.

While the enthusiasm for representative democracy might have dipped, autocratic regimes continue to remain unpopular. In all but five of the countries surveyed, the majority reject it. Nevertheless, support for a strong leadership model of government has increased in eight of 22 nations (including India) surveyed since 2017.

The report says, 'Support for this system is especially common among respondents with less education and those with lower incomes. Additionally, people on the ideological right are often more likely than those on the left to support rule by a strong leader.'

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democratic index of 2023 states that the global average index score fell to 5.23 from 5.29 in 2022. In all 50 countries came under the category of 'flawed democracies' and 59 countries were classified as authoritarian regimes.

Out of 108 countries, India ranked 41 with a score of 7.18/10 (up 5 points) from 2022 when its score was 7.04. India fell in the category of flawed democracies with the following score in the 5 categories: Electoral processes: 8.67/10, government functioning 7.86/10, political participation 7.22/10, political culture 6.25/10 and civil liberties 5.88/10. From the above score, it's clear that India needs to improve in the last two categories.

**T**here are several definitions of democracy given by various people and organisations. Be that as it may, there is universal acceptance that democracy (despite some flaws), is still the best form of government in the present-day world.

One of the most important ingredients of democracy is free and fair elections. When citizens elect a government, they expect it to deliver based on the founding principles of their country's constitution. They expect good governance, which as per the UN's definition, should be participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follow the rule of law.

There are many agencies which analyse and assess various factors to ascertain the health of democracy at a global level. The Pew Research Centre, in its recent study, found that a median

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India's rank in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index is 161 out of 180 countries. This reflects a significant decline in press freedom in India. India's ranking has fallen 11 places since last year when it was ranked 150th in the Index

Transparency International's 'Corruption Perception Index' of 2023 analyses 180 countries with a ranking of 0 (very corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Two-thirds of the country's score is less than 50/100.

In 2023 India ranked 93/180, a drop from the rank 85/180 in 2022. India's score decreased from 40 in 2022 to 39 in 2023.

India suffers from tremendous economic inequality. As per the World Inequality Report 2022, the top 10 percent of the population and the top 1 percent hold 5 percent and 22 percent of the total national income, respectively, whereas the share of the bottom 50 percent population is 13 percent of the national income. 64 percent of the GST collection comes from the bottom 50 percent population and 4 percent from the top 10 percent.

Having seen where India stands on various parameters that help us gauge the health of a democracy, it is important to ponder on the way forward. Undoubtedly since independence, India has made progress in the economic sphere. Today, it ranks as the fifth largest economy in the world (\$ 3.7 trillion) and is projected to reach \$7.3 trillion by 2030 and \$10 trillion by 2035.



It is important to accept that to realise the vision of India becoming an economically developed country by 2047, democracy has to be strengthened, the standard of living of the common man has to improve, and inequalities of income and corruption have to be removed on a war footing.

For this to happen the political system needs urgent reform. Political funding is the fountainhead of corruption. Political parties have to be transparent and accountable to the public. Unlike the current law which requires disclosures of political donations exceeding Rs 20,000, all political parties should be mandatorily subjected to disclosing for public scrutiny complete details about their income, expenditure, donations and funding received by them, irrespective of the amount donated and full details of donors making donations to them.

Civil society plays an important role in this regard. Several organisations are working in India towards a more vibrant and stronger democracy. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) has been working in the area of electoral and political reforms for the last 25 years intending to reduce money and muscle power in the Indian political system.

The growing acceptability of politicians with criminal antecedents is a dangerous phenomenon that undermines the quality of our democracy as crime and money, rather than merit/performance drive electoral choices.

According to an ADR analysis, a candidate facing criminal charges had a 15.5 percent chance of winning the 2019 Lok Sabha elections against a 4.7 percent chance for a clean candidate.

In the 17th Lok Sabha, 2019, 43 percent (233) of elected MPs had declared criminal cases against them (an increase of 44 percent since 2009). Speaking of winning based on assets, there were 21 percent chances of winning for crorepati candidates contesting elections against a 1 percent chance of candidates with assets below Rs 1 crore.

As a result, several lawbreakers become lawmakers. Governance will not improve merely with cleaner candidates and representatives. A lot more needs to be done. Political party reforms and greater voter awareness are a must. The

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public discourse built by ADR over the years on these issues is significant.

The key interventions of ADR are building awareness and mobilising/empowering citizens about informed voting, training citizens for public engagement, advocacy for policy design and implementation, facilitating independent and inclusive journalism, and last but not least, using the Right to Information (RTI) as a tool to hold the public authorities accountable by getting information.

The ADR has successfully filed many Public Interest Litigations (PILs) in the Supreme Court and obtained landmark judgements which upheld the citizens' right to know. These PILs have also resulted in collective pressure on the political institutions to deliver better governance.

Some of the ongoing petitions of ADR are related to matters of urgent importance such as bringing political parties under RTI, seeking direction for the inclusion of 100 percent VVPATs in all EVMs, a ceiling on the political parties' expenditure during elections and challenging amendments to the 'Foreign Contribution Regulation Act', 1976 and 2010. All these issues are at the heart of free and fair elections and directly impact the health of our democracy.

To reverse the global shift towards authoritarian norms, democracy advocates working for freedom in their home countries will need robust solidarity from like-minded allies abroad. Democracy is remarkably resilient and has proven its ability to rebound from repeated blows.

Most free countries have strong values and civil society which resist further decline. Even in repressive environments, ordinary people, media, activists and civil society continue to express discontent on subjects ranging from corruption, inequality, concentration of power, and rights of the vulnerable and the marginalised.

It would be appropriate to end with the quote of Justice Felix Frankfurter:

"No office in the land is more important than that of being a citizen."

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# DEMOCRACY AND ITS DISCONTENTS







Over the last decade, India has been described as a 'lesser democracy' and an 'elected autocracy' by international bodies auditing democracy across the world. At home, we have been directly experiencing a form of 'direct democracy' at play. This finds expression in a mob-lynch mentality both in the electronic media and virtual social media on the one hand and in the physically lived and breathed world on the other.

A team of journalists, academics and scholars constituted as India Hate Lab based in Washington D.C. have tracked and collated online and offline 'hate events' against minorities, primarily Muslims (captured on video and/or live streamed) in India through the year 2023.

Their recently-released findings are not any less unsettling because they are on expected lines: there were 668 anti-Muslim hate speech events recorded that year, 75 percent of which took place in BJP-ruled states or union territories, including the National Capital Territory of Delhi where the central Home ministry is in charge of the police and public order.

The perpetrators comprise, for the dominant part, the broad spectrum of the Sangh Parivar, from BJP leaders to the lunatic fringe of the right which seems to cock a snook even at the BJP/RSS as it pushes its taunts of and attacks on Muslims to more and more brazen levels.

Apart from cow vigilantism which has, since 2014, acquired the status of a lawless law taking its toll on innocent victims, the conspiracy theories – like the Great 'Replacement' threat (to the Hindu population in the country by its Muslim population, if you please), have been a brainchild and hobby horse of VHP leader Pravin Togadia.

There are the perversely conjured-up categories of 'jihads', including but not limited to love jihad, land jihad, economic jihad, Halal jihad, Mazar jihad, spit jihad, population jihad, UPSC (Union Public Service Commission) jihad and fertiliser jihad. It would be zany and funny if they were not of such lethal consequence for the targeted minority. It is like a no-holds-barred open season on the community.

The rule of law has been reduced to the law of the ruler as zealously and obsequiously interpreted and implemented by the law and order machinery on the ground. Criminal law has been stood on its head to make jail the rule and bail the exception, rather than the other way round.

The courts seem to send out mixed signals on this shift. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, D.Y. Chandrachud, while addressing the All India District Judges Conference recently, expressed concern about this trend and the tendency of district courts to shy away from protecting the citizen's liberty by passing the buck on bail or jail to the higher courts.

However, hardly a month earlier, the Supreme Court seems to have taken the position that the principle of bail as the norm does not apply in cases under the UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act). Considering the indiscriminate manner in which the act is used by an aggrandising State, the personal liberty of the citizen continues to be in jeopardy.

The bulk of the mainstream news media seems to have surrendered its role of speaking truth to power, particularly, TV news channels. Far from demonstrating their fortitude, the fourth pillar of democracy has become weak. They are apologists and pathetic propagandists for the ruling party and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Worse, many of them play the role of a cat's paw of those in power at the centre, swiping at all criticism and demonising all opposition. A free and freewheeling news media is the 'sine qua non' of a robust democracy. Elections alone do not make for a democratic polity.

After all Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and their ilk were also elected to power. So were contemporary leaders like Viktor Orban in Hungary, Recep Erdogan in Turkey or Rodrigo

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Duterte in the Philippines. Sans the invigilating role of the free press, democracy quickly descends into autocracy, as in these countries and as seems to be the direction in which India is headed.

The situation of freedom of expression in India now is a throwback, leapfrogging the gains of the independence movement and after, to that in England in the 18th century when journalism as we know it today was taking shape through struggle and strife against the King and the early parliamentary aristocracy.

It was a given then that scribes did not denigrate or criticise the lords and the royalty. Ever since the Tudor King Henry VIII, the ‘Scandalum Magnatum’ statutes forbade, as the term suggests, publishing anything that was seen as scandalising the magnates of the land.

As criticism of the government of the King and parliament by an incipient, loose-knit and amorphous but determined precursor of the press as we know it today grew, the powers that be pushed back with indignant ferocity. It became seditious libel to criticise the government.

As Chief Justice, John Holt rationalised it in 1704, “If men should not be called to account for possessing the people with an ill opinion of the government, no government can subsist, for it is very necessary for every government that the people should have a good opinion of it.”

It did not matter that the criticism could be legitimate and truthful. Truth was not a defence in libel. The greater the truth, the greater the libel. That was the warped wisdom of the time.



Centuries later, we seem to live in quixotic times very akin to those. Criticism of the ruler is tantamount to anti-nationalism. Social media and the street are replete with hate speech, but reporting it can land the press in trouble for supposedly inciting communal tension itself.

The media, by and large, where they are themselves not complicit in peddling falsehood, choose to look away from uncomfortable truths. But then as the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko reminded us, “When truth is replaced by silence, that silence is a lie.”

We live our sorry lives of lies.

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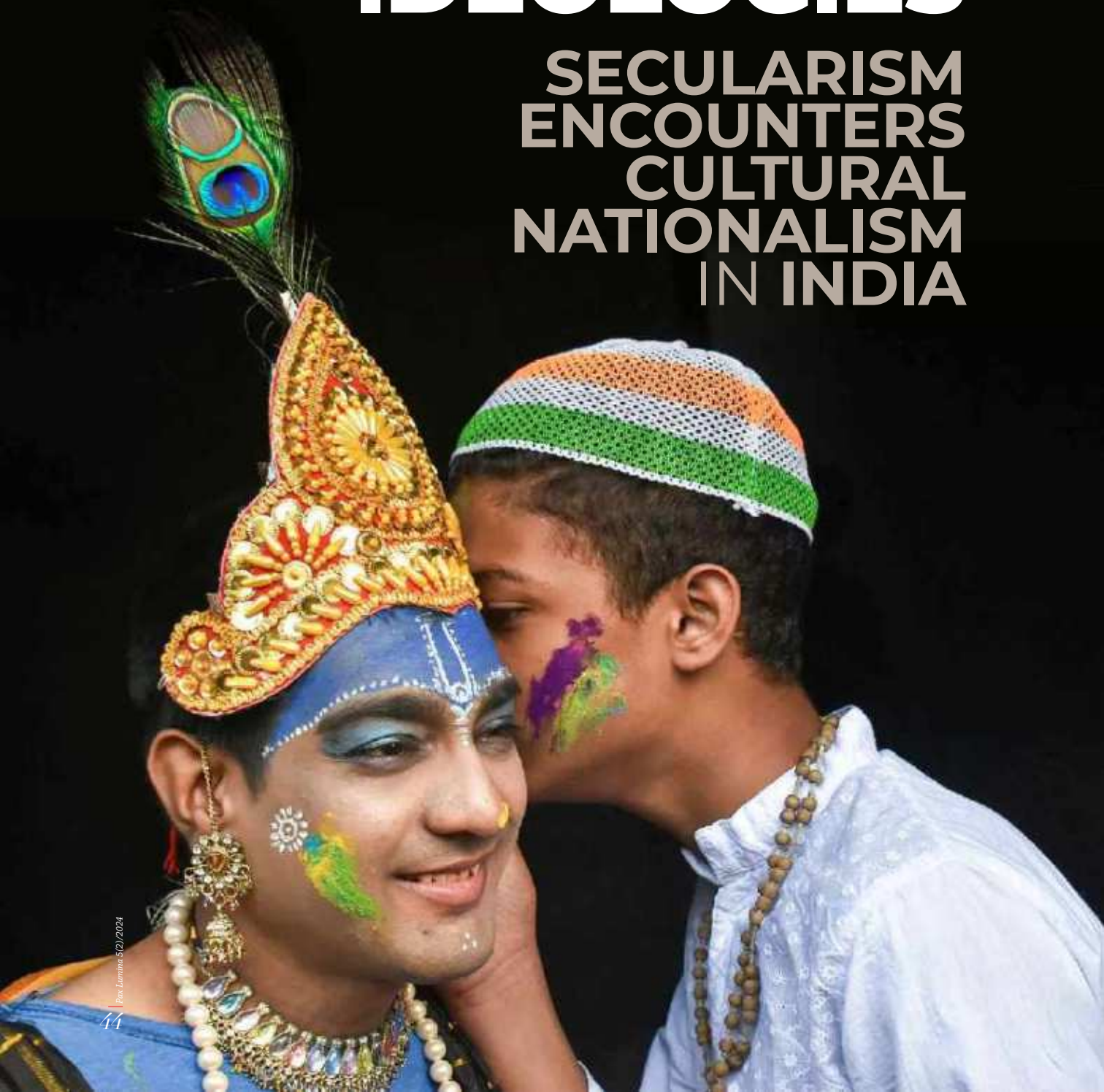


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# DISCORDANT IDEOLOGIES

## SECULARISM ENCOUNTERS CULTURAL NATIONALISM IN INDIA





**D**rawing inspiration from local folklore, traditions, myths, and landscapes, the romantic writers placed a strong emphasis on the uniqueness, beauty, and significance of their cultural heritage. **Their fascination with popular culture found in folk traditions, not modern popular culture, helped lay the groundwork for cultural nationalism.**



## **I**ntroduction: Nationalism and Cultural Nationalism

The late 18th century witnessed a surge in aspirations for nation-states – unified political entities with centralised governance and shared identity. This yearning for national self-determination inspired revolutions like the American and the French, which, in turn, played a crucial role in shaping and solidifying the ideology of nationalism.

With its complex and varied history, nationalism as an ideology tries to unify people based on factors such as their shared territory, history, ethnicity, culture, customs, traditions, religion, language, and political aspirations. These elements, often subject to debate and change, become the building blocks of national identity.

Cultural nationalism, a particular offshoot of this ideology, prioritises cultural aspects such as language, religion, customs, and traditions, viewing them as essential elements in shaping a resilient and unified national identity.

### **Romanticism: The Spark of Cultural Nationalism**

The 19th century saw the rise of Romanticism, a cultural movement emphasising emotion, individualism, folk traditions, and cultural identity. This movement inadvertently became the intellectual and emotional crucible from which emerged cultural nationalism, evolving into both an ideology and a political force.

The focus of romanticism on individual experience paved the way for concepts such



as individual and collective rights, as well as the distinct cultural identity of each nation. This fostered the belief that every nation had a unique destiny and the inherent right to self-determination. This ideological framework significantly influenced political movements seeking national independence.

Drawing inspiration from local folklore, traditions, myths, and landscapes, the romantic writers placed a strong emphasis on the uniqueness, beauty, and significance of their cultural heritage. Their fascination with popular culture found in folk traditions, not modern popular culture, helped lay the groundwork for cultural nationalism. Diverse expressions of popular culture within the folk traditions contributed to the concept of national identity.

Furthermore, romantic literature, spurred on by national myths, historical events, and cultural symbols, played a crucial role in crafting a shared narrative that further strengthened the sense of collective identity.

As part of the broader impact of romanticism, a revival of interest in national languages, literature, and art took place. This resurgence entailed a deliberate effort to safeguard and promote indigenous languages and traditional forms of expression as a means of asserting cultural uniqueness.

Moreover, the romantics' fascination with nature contributed to a strong sense of rootedness and belonging, emphasising the idea that a nation's identity was intricately tied to its geographical and cultural landscape.

The Romantics were instrumental in shaping national identities by championing the vernacular, reshaping historical narratives, and celebrating the distinctive spirit of landscapes. They transformed historical figures into heroes and rekindled national epics, fanning the flames of shared struggle, glory, and cultural unity.

However, it is important to note that the Romantics did not necessarily directly endorse cultural nationalism. Nonetheless, their emphasis on emotions, cultural uniqueness, and the power of shared narratives undoubtedly provided fertile ground for its growth across Europe. Their focus on these elements resonated with people seeking a sense of belonging and identity and unintentionally created fertile ground for nationalistic movements to flourish.

## The Paradox of Cultural Nationalism

Cultural nationalism has an inherent paradox. While it can nurture a sense of national unity, cultural identity, and social harmony, on the flip side, its inclination towards promoting a single dominant culture may result in marginalisation, prejudice, and the stifling of diverse viewpoints, critical perspectives, and disagreements.

The history of Germany serves as a poignant illustration. Though initially nationalism played a pivotal role in the unification of the country, it later metamorphosed into a force of exclusion, aggression and annihilation during the Nazi regime. The unification of Germany in 1871 was not merely a political act, but a carefully orchestrated campaign to forge a collective national identity emphasising the uniqueness of the shared German culture, language, and history. Some influential 19th-century Germans played decisive roles in crafting this cohesive national identity.

Philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder and composer Richard Wagner, for instance, ardently promoted the notion of a distinctly German character, emphasising its cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. The Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, further solidified this sense of shared heritage, cultural unity, common identity and belonging among the German people by assembling, publishing and conserving German fairy tales and folklore.

Jacob Grimm's efforts in standardising and promoting the German language not only facilitated communication across different regions but also served as a powerful means of national cohesion. Multi-faceted efforts such as these to cultivate a collective national identity proved instrumental in the unification of Germany in 1871.

During the regime of Adolf Hitler (1933-45), German nationalism transmuted to a virulent form of ultra-nationalism known as Nazism. This distorted nationalist ideology fuelled by supremacist notions, proclaimed the 'Aryan' German people as inherently superior and entitled to dominate 'inferior' races. This misguided worldview justified the systematic persecution and extermination of millions, including Jews, Roma, and other targeted groups.



**T**he Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, became a prominent platform for the promotion of Indian cultural nationalism and the fight for independence from British rule. **Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi played pivotal roles in moulding the fabric of Indian nationalism. The Gandhian interpretation of nationalism, characterised by inclusivity, underlined unity amidst the rich variety of cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity.**



Nations across the globe often cultivate unique expressions of cultural nationalism such as Nihonjinron in Japan, Francophonie in France, Russkiy mir in Russia, Han-guk minjok ju-ui in South Korea, Negritude in French-speaking West Africa, Zionism in Israel, and Hindutva in India.

### **Secular India's Cultural Nationalism**

Indian nationalist consciousness began to emerge during the British colonial era. The imposition of Western ideals on Indians during colonial rule sparked an Indian yearning for independence and a return to their rich cultural heritage.

This pursuit of autonomy and identity ignited a call for unity among the diverse linguistic, religious, and regional communities within India. Leaders of the independence movement rallied under the banner of a common territory and cultural identity to unite people in their fight for freedom.

The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, became a prominent platform for the promotion of Indian cultural nationalism and the fight for independence from British rule. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi played pivotal roles in moulding the fabric of Indian nationalism. The Gandhian interpretation of nationalism, characterised by inclusivity, underlined unity amidst the rich variety of cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity.

It posited that all people residing within the Indian territories, irrespective of their origins, held a collective national identity and merited equitable treatment. This foundational tenet was rooted in the belief that birth within the Indian subcontinent bestowed the entitlement to belong to the envisaged independent India.

In 1923, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, an Indian freedom fighter and politician, proposed the ideology of Hindutva, a form of nationalism based on Hindu cultural and religious principles. This ideology envisioned a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation) defined by shared religious consciousness, cultural heritage, and historical identity.

This brand of cultural nationalism excluded Muslims and Christians based on Savarkar's arguments about their distinct religious, cultural, and historical identities. This exclusionary nature has drawn criticism, with concerns about its potential to marginalise religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians. Critics further argue that the aggressive and often hostile stance associated with certain interpretations of Hindutva contradicts the democratic ethos of India, enshrined in its secular constitution.

India's evolving cultural nationalism has played a significant role in shaping the country's socio-political landscape in the post-independence period. Early leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, drawing inspiration from Gandhian ideals, attempted to foster a secular and inclusive national identity that nurtured the nation's vibrant cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity.





However, this vision for India has encountered persistent challenges, as differing interpretations of the country's cultural essence continue to influence the socio-political landscape to this day.

These interpretations range from inclusive understanding that celebrates multiculturalism to exclusive narratives promoting a dominant cultural identity, often associated with the ideology of Hindutva.

While secular political parties in India draw inspiration from a Gandhian and Nehruvian model of nationalism emphasising multiculturalism and secularism, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) promote a distinct view based on Savarkar's Hindutva ideology.

This interpretation emphasises India's rich Hindu heritage, including certain interpretations of specific mythical events portrayed as representing advanced scientific or technological achievements. Furthermore, the BJP's passionate promotion of Hinduism through various means, and the prioritisation of Hindi as the national language, raise concerns about potential marginalisation of other religious communities and languages.

The construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's participation in its consecration ceremony have reignited discussions about India's interpretation of secularism and its compatibility with cultural nationalism.

Many people across the world see the temple, built on the disputed site of the Babri Masjid, as a symbol of Hindu dominance and a step towards realising the vision of a 'Hindu nation' championed by organisations like the RSS and the BJP.

However, critics argue that Modi's participation in the ceremony, especially his assumption of the role of a 'temple priest,' contradicts the principle of religious neutrality enshrined in the Indian constitution.

This principle dictates that the State should not favour any particular religion but equally respect all faiths. They argue that by actively participating in a religious ceremony, the Prime Minister, representing the State, violated this principle.

It is important to acknowledge that different perspectives exist on this issue. Supporters of the BJP and Hindutva ideology often argue that India's secularism does not negate the cultural and historical significance of Hinduism in shaping the nation's identity. They believe promoting Hindu practices and traditions does not constitute religious discrimination but rather recognises the majority community's heritage.

However, concerns persist about the potential implications of blurring the lines between State and religion, particularly for minority communities. Critics emphasise the need to uphold the constitutional principle of secularism to ensure equal rights and protections for all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address at the Ram Temple consecration ceremony in Ayodhya on January 22, 2024, sparked reactions and interpretations about its implications for India's secularism and cultural identity. He asserted that the day of the consecration of the idol of Lord Ram at Ayodhya was the beginning of a new 'kaal chakra' (cycle of time).

He associated Lord Ram with 'India's faith, foundation, idea, law, consciousness, thinking,

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prestige and glory.' His assertion and association resonated with the advocates of Hindutva ideology and the supporters of BJP who see the temple as a symbol of Hindu cultural and religious revival, a significant step toward the envisioned Hindu nation.

The prime minister's involvement in the event and the endorsement of the Hindu religious worldview are seen by critics as deviating from the Indian Constitution's principle of religious neutrality. They argue that his invitation to the people of India to expand their consciousness from 'Dev to Desh, Ram to Rashtra, from deity to nation', is an instance of blurring of lines between individual religious beliefs and national identity, potentially marginalising minority communities. When he declared that 'this grand temple will be a witness to the rise of a magnificent India', one wonders if he was referring to a secular India or a Hindu India.

### **Conclusion: The Essence of the Indian Identity**

The Indian Constitution embodies democratic and secular principles as the bedrock of its socio-political structure. Indian democracy is founded on the principles of pluralism, equality, liberty, fraternity, inclusivity, and the rule of law.

Secular values in India strengthen its democratic foundation by ensuring respect and equal treatment for individuals of all faiths and beliefs, thereby guaranteeing the safety and security of all citizens. The relationship between democracy and secularism in India enriches the nation's democratic discourse.



If and when diluted by versions of cultural nationalism, secularism can be undermined, resulting in the debilitation of the very fabric of democracy. Indian democracy and secularism collectively form the cornerstone of its inclusive and egalitarian society, which celebrates unity in diversity – a central aspect of Indian identity.

However, the surge of cultural nationalism, exemplified by Savarkar's Hindutva, presents a significant challenge to India's democratic and secular foundations. Therefore, maintaining a healthy balance between Indian cultural nationalism and its secular principles is crucial for preserving democracy and nurturing a just, egalitarian society that embraces unity in diversity, embodying the essence of the Indian identity.

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# CONSTITUTIONALISM AND DEMOCRACY





**T**he Indian Constitution imbibed immensely from the constitutionalism of Great Britain. **British history has seen a relentless and ruthless conflict between the king and ecclesiastical authority since the times of Henry VIII.**



‘Constitutionalism’, as the caption suggests, is an ideology of constitutions, a belief in an intention and expectation hidden within the statutory texts towards a harmonious balancing and inclusive state.

It is different from constitutional government which governments often spread out to legitimise or camouflage their unconstitutional actions. While the constitutional government is merely a set of fundamental laws, customs, conventions and rules which steer the governance of any country, constitutionalism is a spirit and a characteristic of any State which cherishes three definable principles.

They include the rule of law which ensures the integrity of judicial proceedings, equity or the embedded design to achieve inclusive governance and lastly access to every voice or *‘audi alteram partem’* (Latin for listen to the other side). This establishes a process for executing the above two principles percolating into the dictum, that no person should be judged without a fair hearing.

Constitutionalism is an intellectual energy that drives through democracy. Former US President James Madison’s famous quote reflects upon a multifaceted open spirit that should guide the relationship between the government and the governed:

“If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself.”

The Indian Constitution imbibes constitutionalism from several Shrutis (retained by hearing the elders) and Smritis (retained in human memory). Padmashree Nicholas Kauzanas, a contemporary Greek philosopher on the Vedas, refers to over 8000 years of philosophical history of India.

In works such as ‘Yukti Vichara’, reason is kept superior to religion or emotion. The same idea was later propounded by Abu Hanifa in ‘Istihsan’ which mentions juristic equity in accordance with the three basic ingredients of constitutionalism.

One would find similar ideas in ‘Shukla Yajurveda’s’ structure of law-making in Chapter XX, Verse 43, the famous dialogue between Bharat and Rama in ‘Katchit Sarga’ of Ramayana and ‘Shantiparva’ that carried fundamental principles of kingship as told by the dying Bhishma to Yudhisthira, the Pandava king after the gruesome war of Mahabharata. Kautilya linked constitutionalism in his treatise ‘Arthashastra’ with two principles: Rule of law and limited government.

The Indian Constitution imbibed immensely from the constitutionalism of Great Britain. British history has seen a relentless and ruthless conflict between the king and ecclesiastical authority since the times of Henry VIII. Later, the strong Catholic leanings of Charles I, his

grandson, who married the Catholic Spanish princess erupted into a direct conflict with the Puritans or the English Protestants bringing together both the Calvinists and Lutherans in the church.

Their opposition was against the ostentatiousness of kings and bishops who refused to hear ordinary citizens. Many humanistic principles such as the one on preventive detention or the 'Great Writ' of habeas corpus (show the body) became a fundamental right of citizens against unlawful and indefinite imprisonment.

The voice of the people grew stronger when the Five Knights Case attracted natural rights advocates from the nobility and the Lords such as Lord Seldon. The other humanistic principle, 'No taxation without representation', which continues to be the basis of British and American constitutionalism till today, also emerged during this uprising of the Puritans against the King.

Finally, on January 30, 1649, Charles I was beheaded. The leader of the opposition Cromwell declared England a Commonwealth and Free State on May 19, 1649. One can see a 'just balancing of rights' during this conflict between the king and Parliament.

During this period constitutionalism was fed with works such as 'Paradise Lost' (1640) and of social contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These are known to be prized Anglican constitutional principles of limited government and the rule of law.

The reflections on Indian constitutionalism start from struggles of the many tribes such as Kols, Oarons and Mundas in 1672-1857, against the excesses of the East India Company. This set the stage for Gandhi's Hind Swaraj on non-violence and inclusive institutions.

The Gaya Congress of 1922 and Dr. Annie Besant's 'The Commonwealth of India Bill' 1924 pushed through the idea of self-governing institutions which Jawaharlal Nehru placed within the Objective Resolution that he presented to the Constituent Assembly on December 13, 1946.

The constitutional mantra of non-violence, democracy and decentralisation became the basic structure of the world's largest constitution having 448 articles, 25 parts and 12 schedules. Out of 106 amendments, at least half of them can be seen as tiny Glorious Revolutions reinstating the original constitutional mantra. It is this spirit that has driven a reformist developmental State to a transformative platform of open governance.



**T**he constitutional spirit of freedom and harmonious institutional balancing with judicial independence has prevented a collapse of the Indian Constitution.

**Indian constitutionalism has also evolved from its reformatory status to a transformative Pharos.**



Indian constitutionalism has lived through many obstructive times but the mischief of a despot has always been shot down to reinstate constitutionalism. Art. 12 reveals the basic spirit when it defines the state as composed of Parliament, State legislatures, and local and other authorities, but carefully excludes the judiciary within the meaning of the State.

This single article not only establishes an independent judiciary but also brings along the principle of separation of power and with it the judicial review. This article sets the stage against a bulldozing arbitrary State trampling on civil liberties, and public institutions and hoaxing the constitution.

Justice H.R. Khanna in the epochal Keshavananda Bharati Case 1973 brought out a sacrosanct basic structure clinching constitutional values and spirit within it. The government has never looked at judicial independence with a spirit of constitutionalism.

In the infamous case of SP Gupta v. Union of India 1982, the appointment of judges was made subservient to the will of the government, but the Supreme Court Advocates on Record Association retrieved the situation immediately after that, and also protected judicial independence when the Apex Court struck down the 99th Amendment as unconstitutional and void in 2015.

The positions of governors, Enforcement Directorate (ED) and CBI are being stringently debated for acting against the basic structure of our constitution. In the recent cases in 2023, involving the governor of Punjab and Kerala, the relationship between the elected Chief Minister and the unelected governor was corrected as per the constitutional framework.

The argument goes equally well with the unelected ED and the CBI, especially when they become some sort of a powerful genie with the conviction rate of arrested persons being less than 1 percent (.5 percent) only, especially since the controversial judgement in the Vijay Madanlal Choudhary case. This was corrected in the recent Pankaj Bansal Case in which ED was seriously reprimanded by the Supreme Court for its misuse of powers.

The constitutional spirit of freedom and harmonious institutional balancing with judicial independence has prevented a collapse of the Indian Constitution. Indian constitutionalism has also evolved from its reformatory status to a transformative Pharos.

The rights of LGBTQ and also the right to privacy are futuristic initiatives where a distinction is made between a representative and a substantive democracy. It is rather impossible to confine Indian democracy within a mechanised exercise of electioneering towards a gold rush for numbers in Parliament.

Constitutionalism reinstates a spirit of substantive democracy cherishing the ideals of the Rule of Law, equity and freedom. It survives through canons of destruction like a tiny seed which awaits springtime to be able to sprout.

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*Pax Lumina 5(2)/2024/50-53*

# DEMOCRACY AND AI

**‘THAT GOVERNMENT IS  
THE BEST THAT GOVERNS  
THE LEAST’**



**W**atching the ‘pranprathistha’ (consecration) of Ram Temple in Ayodhya on January 22, 2024, as a citizen of India, one is confused as to where one’s sympathies should fall: on India as a democratic nation, or on Hinduism as Sanatan Dharma?

The role and function of the Prime Minister of a democratic country seem to overshadow the status of a religion that believes in the Ultimate that supersedes all other identities.

The prime minister functioned as the high priest of a religion. Is it not a disservice to Hinduism as a religion? The refusal of the four Shankaracharyas to attend the function perhaps implied that. Does democracy replace all other identities other than majoritarianism, or does it allow and facilitate multiple identities including religions, to coexist? Is there a quiet manipulation of the Ultimate into ‘rightist politics’?

### **From Pyramid to Oceanic Circles: A Gandhian Version of Democracy**

“That Government is the best that governs the least”. This seems to be the underlying belief of Mahatma Gandhi’s social thinking (Collected Works, VII, p.30.). In this, he was very much influenced by several social thinkers like Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin and Henry David Thoreau. All of them would disapprove of the State as an absolute principle.

Instead, seminal thinkers like Gandhi thought of a situation, when a State becomes least necessary, and where a State of enlightened anarchy in which each person will become one’s ruler (Collected Works; hence CW. LXVIII, p.265).

**T**he goal of democracy, or any form of genuine governance, should be to enable self-rule (‘freedom’ or liberty’ - Swaraj [self-rule]), at every level.

**The individual and every unit of society will be enabled to self-rule.**

The goal of democracy, or any form of genuine governance, should be to enable self-rule (‘freedom’ or liberty’ - Swaraj [self-rule]), at every level. The individual and every unit of society will be enabled to self-rule.

One enjoys freedom or liberty, when one is enabled or grown to exercise self-rule at all levels: from the individual to the village, to State and nation. Such self-rule is the goal of any democracy. Swaraj is meant for self-realisation, the ultimate goal of all, at different levels. Real freedom is based on ‘Truth and Non-violence’; if not, it will lead to self-defeat.

“For ages, the oppressed have cried for freedom, and yet a thousand man-made statutes have failed to give it to them. They can give only to themselves; they shall find it only in obedience to the divine statues which are inscribed upon their hearts. Let them resort to inward freedom, and the shadow of oppression shall no more darken the earth.” (CW. XXXVIII, p.1.).

Gandhi’s concept of independence meant that every village would be a republic or panchayat, having full powers as a self-sustained and self-dependent body, having the individual as the ultimate unit who would render his cooperation freely and willingly.



The ultimate basis of village-society, nation state and the individual is truth and non-violence, and hence firmly rooted in God, as truth and non-violence. In other words, the life of every individual and nation-state is premised on a transcendent ideal of 'self-rule'. True democracy functions as an enabler in this process.

“In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, but never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle where the centre will be the individual, always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle for which they are integral units.” (C W: LXXXV, p.33).

The utmost circumference of this design, would not wield power to crush the inner circle but would give strength to all within and derive its strength from it. Machinery would not displace human labour nor would there be concentration of power in a few hands.

True freedom would be political: free from foreign and economic domination, free from the oppressive domination of capitalist technology, and free from every kind of inner compulsion. True democracy is striving after truth through non-violence at every level of society. Democracy is an enabling act for every individual/society for self-realisation. Looking at the different models of democracies that exist today, it seems that Gandhi's idea of democracy is rather utopian; but is it so?

## Democracy of Oceanic Circles and AI

Humankind is at the cusp of Artificial Intelligence (AI) upsetting our calculations, promising inconceivable possibilities and hinting at major disruptions in our way of living. AI promises to make education, health and knowledge universally available, and challenge our social theories of capitalism, democracy, socialism and communism as outdated.

Knowledge can be augmented through a chip planted in the brain. Education is made available without a classroom in personalised online coaching through AI, and health is available to all as we saw happening during the Covid.

AI can and does make huge leaps in all these areas. Are we at the start of a new world order where the technology of AI rules the world, making services and benefits available to all, in a short time? Is it the democratisation of benefits for all? Is this the dawn of a new democratic order?

Dipankar Gupta, a sociologist ('Times of India, 13/2/2024') holds that AI depends on HI (Human Intelligence) to provide 'generative intelligence'. "True generative ability allows, for example, a person with very basic minimal linguistic skills and information to frame complicated sentences of a kind perhaps never uttered before. AI, however, as it exists today, cannot say anything new other than perform complicated algorithms based on the knowledge it is supplied with." Does this position negate the guarantee of a democratic set-up through AI in future?



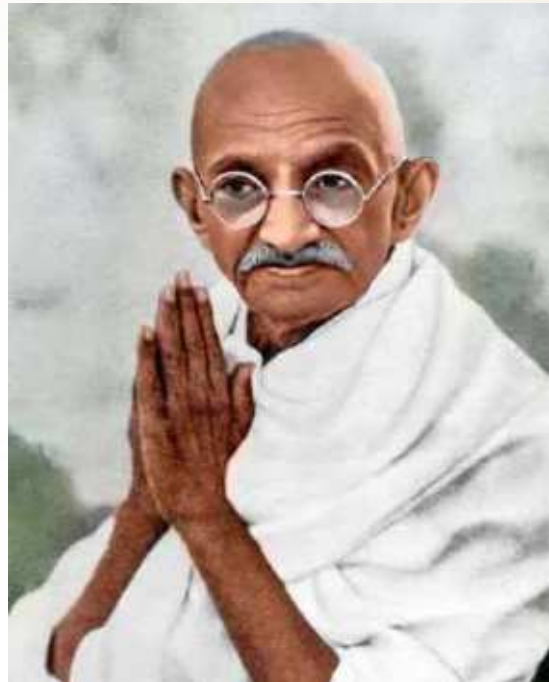
**T**he bifurcation of people with huge and meagre wealth could impede social mobility. All need to be a Superman to survive, driving 'man' to extinction. **Can there be a benevolent AI, capacitating huge masses, and hostile AI causing drone wars resulting in mass destruction?**



Techno-thinkers like Sramana Mitra look at AI with admiration and as a future-oriented evolutionary phase. (YouTube: Sramana Mitra: 'India's prospects in the Age of AI').

AI is better placed today to read the massive super high volume data emanating from MRI/X-rays/CT scans, and give results in minutes, thus enabling healthcare on a massive level and at high speed. In education, AI-enabled personalised tutoring can reach millions of people, without formal schools and colleges. It not only democratises education but also replaces massive infrastructures and institutions.

AI can upgrade people to an educated mass in no time, and empower all with enabling knowledge chips. AI can even provide universal basic income for those masses driven out of work due to technological devices. There will be man and Superman: AI can upgrade them all to Superman.



AI-created narratives can also inflict on people the propaganda of hatred and anger and thus lead people to internal wars and massive social unrest. On the one hand, climate change, water scarcity, and seawater conservation can be better addressed by AI. On the other hand, it can leave large segments of people at the mercy of Superman AI.

The bifurcation of people with huge and meagre wealth could impede social mobility. All need to be a Superman to survive, driving 'man' to extinction. Can there be a benevolent AI, capacitating huge masses, and hostile AI causing drone wars resulting in mass destruction?

If the universe and humans have been evolving for the last 13.5 billion years, can we look at AI as a natural ally of this evolutionary journey, quickening the pace of democracy?

This human intellect could be capacitated to honesty, justice and truth, and thus create a new brave world, even if the opposite drive will continue to retard this. Music, art, and spirituality edge out as the 'future' of evolution. This cannot be smothered or reproduced purely by AI.

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# CREATING AN AWARE CITIZENRY

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Out of over 4600 directly elected representatives in India, there is not one constituency which provides equal access to services for its constituents, i.e., justice, education, healthcare, etc. Not one. Yet, as the world's largest democracy, we must discuss democratic concerns, without pointing to ourselves (we are already overburdened) and without antagonising our circles.

Democracy requires diligence. Yet, we are primarily a nation which relies on excuses. We are finger-pointers. Our troubles are not of our creation. We point towards others for the problems we face: towards the right, left, past, present or future, in just about any direction which points away from us.

The core belief is that each of us is individually shouldering the burden of the entire nation. We must be because we are constantly tired, unhappy, and surrounded by so many who know nothing at all - which is true - but we stagnate in such ruts because these are our safe spaces.

Circles created by coincidences of birth, education, or the lack of. These circles teach us acquiescence, subordination, hierarchy and to protect our common interests. Unsurprisingly, 'activism' becomes a dirty word and the 'activist' an outcast, a reckless 'anti-national' who endangers the safety of the entire circle. Their confident attempt to bring about progressive, positive change is rejected. The circle will punish, rather than promote her/him.



Even the high degrees of premier institutions do not ensure that societal welfare is paramount. No social lodestar advocates 'each one, teach one'. Instead, each man must fend for himself.

Low-quality education - a pan-India malaise which discourages independent thought - ensures that the population is brainwashed by cringy sloganeering, biased headlines and aggressive debates in which an abysmal articulation of arguments, devoid of accurate data and credible information, are propelled by flag-waving rhetoric, magnificent myths and nonsense.

Our teaching system is the prime suspect. It has been struggling for decades on the shoulders of those who do not welcome questions which are 'out-of-syllabus', or which may be seen as 'political'. The few (both teachers and students) who do speak their minds are quickly silenced.

Since 1975 (almost half a century ago), the Supreme Court of India encouraged citizens to be aware of the diverse issues which affect our democracy. In 2002 (over two decades ago), we acquired our right to know the antecedents of elected representatives and all nominated electoral candidates.



**T**he core belief is that each of us is individually shouldering the burden of the entire nation. **We must be because we are constantly tired, unhappy, and surrounded by so many who know nothing at all - which is true - but we stagnate in such ruts because these are our safe spaces.**

Since 2013, 'NOTA' (None Of The Above) has been a fundamental right: a means for voters to compel political parties, irrespective of their colour, to nominate candidates that are of high moral and ethical values.

Yet, sparing the handful of wise voters, the majority still fails to grasp that we, in India, do not elect our Prime Minister. We refuse to point at ourselves, that only we can remedy this cycle. This problem is exacerbated by the economic self-interests of the Fourth Estate which ensures that we focus only on distant Alpha men and women, who have nothing to do with the progress and inclusivity of our local constituencies.

The above highlighted both problems and solutions. Yet, the components needed to be placed together on a publicly-accessible platform. It was clear (to me) that if India hoped to muster the courage to become the world's leading democracy (not just the largest one), people must participate, and do so transparently, together, in one common safe place, irrespective of their social status, political leanings, and professional fields.

For such an initiative, the non-negotiable requirements are discipline and effort, both of which are difficult traits to come by in a population which is no longer in the throes of fighting for freedom. Free time and mental focus do not mix well.





American cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead's inspirational quote is worth remembering: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'

A space was required for in-depth discussions to be based on expert-led, credible information; a space free from power or influence, free from bias or discrimination, and from fear or favour, especially free of the requirement of funding (which usually leads to pressure tactics); a space where responsible, relevant interactions would lead the way to 'Creating An Aware Citizenry'.

An all-inclusive circle where participants would be inspired with the power to ignite their minds.

Like a phoenix, Citizens' Forum India (CFI) arose from the devastating flames of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first interactive session (April 18, 2020) on 'Zoom Security' with Prof. Sandeep Shukla of Computer Science and Engineering, IIT Kanpur, was hosted three weeks into India's national lockdown.

To date (March 2024), over 200 plus consecutive Saturday sessions have encouraged direct interactions between experts from diverse fields and exceptionally focused, onscreen participants. And this is without recourse to funding.

Since 2013, 'NOTA' (None Of The Above) has been a fundamental right: **a means for voters to compel political parties, irrespective of their colour, to nominate candidates that are of high moral and ethical values.**



End-to-end encryption is a core cybersecurity feature of 'CFIonZOOM' (an acronym for 'Citizens' Forum India on Zoom'). Enthusiastic, responsible and respectful interactions have become synonymous for this sincere community.

What is observed is that there exists a group of citizens who are, by far, 'needles in a haystack': persons who have inculcated a lifelong passion to acquire knowledge from credible sources.

Such patient minds have developed the essential skills to focus on scheduling their time and to participate in a face-to-face, mutually respectful conversation, in which they learn from experts as well as other participants. Not for them are the mundane excuses, or the black screens which throught other platforms.

Our participants showcase the core skills that are needed to develop India into a democracy where it is acknowledged that our citizens are informed and aware.

\* CFIonZOOM Interactive is a pro bono, educational, apolitical, nonpartisan, participatory civil society initiative. Interactions are hosted every Saturday evening, 4:30 pm IST onwards.

To participate in the interactive sessions, send an email to: [citizens.forum.india@gmail.com](mailto:citizens.forum.india@gmail.com)

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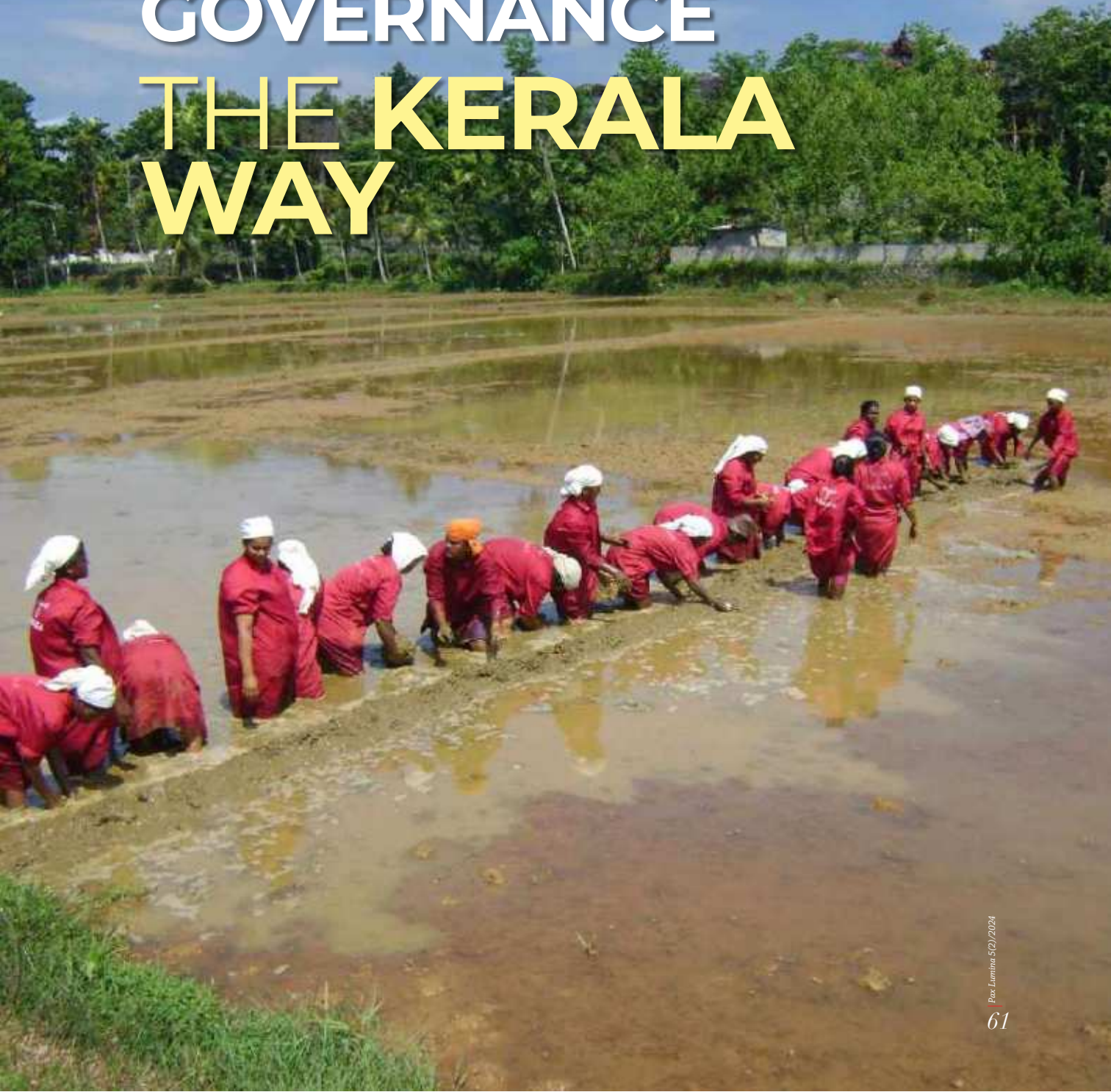




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# DECENTRALISATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE THE KERALA WAY







**D**ecentralisation is considered an important process for making management efficient and effective. However, the term decentralisation has been defined by many in different ways. There is no consensus on a precise definition of decentralisation, as there is a 'diversity' in the degree of decentralisation across the world.

The classical definition of decentralisation is 'the extent to which power is held by an autonomous elected subnational government capable of taking binding decisions in at least some policy areas. (Burki et al., 1999)'.

If this is considered from a governance perspective, the definition by the United Nations Development Programme is worth considering. The organisation defines decentralisation as 'the restructuring of authority for a governance system where responsibilities between institutions of governance at the central, regional and local levels are shared according to the principle of subsidiarity for enhancing the overall quality and effectiveness of the system of governance while increasing the authority and capacities of sub-national levels (UNDP, 1999)'.

Decentralisation is a process of reform that transfers responsibilities for planning, management, and the raising and allocation of resources from higher-level governments to sub-national units or other levels of government.

This has to be perceived in terms of the Principle of Subsidiarity – those which can be done at a particular level should be done at that level. It means that the higher levels of government should be performing only the tasks that cannot be performed more effectively at a lower level.

A key aspect of synergy between decentralisation and subsidiarity relates to the advantages that local governments have about the allocative function i.e. the quest for allocative efficiency. (Ryan and Woods, 2015).

Planning, budgeting, monitoring, taxing, spending, and regulatory functions should be exercised by lower levels of government unless a convincing case is there for assigning them to the higher levels of government.

There is a view that decentralisation is all about giving away power and responsibilities to lower levels. It is to be noted that decentralisation does not seek to replace higher-level governance, but to establish complementary roles for national and sub-national actors to cooperate for accomplishing desired outcomes. In practice, almost all countries, regardless of their being unitary or federal, have some degree of decentralisation.

There are three ways in which decentralisation could be done - commonly referred to as 3 D's.

Deconcentration is the transfer of authority for specific decisionmaking, financial and management functions by administrative means to different levels under the same jurisdictional authority of the higher government such as subordinate lower-level units like regional, district or local offices of administration or service delivery organisation. This has very limited transfer of authority.

Delegation is the transfer of government decisionmaking and administrative authority and/or responsibility for carefully spelled-out tasks to institutions and organisations that are under indirect control of the government



such as semi-autonomous organisations not wholly controlled by the government but legally accountable to it.

Devolution happens when the higher level government relinquishes/transfers certain functions and creates new units of government, outside its direct control. These units are perceived as separate levels of government over which higher authorities exercise limited control.

Different types of decentralisation are based on their characteristics, policy implications, and conditions for success. They are political decentralisation, fiscal decentralisation and administrative decentralisation.

Political decentralisation is all about democratic decentralisation, involving the transfer of administrative, fiscal, and political power. This is strengthened through 3 Fs – functionaries, funds and functions.

A summary of the benefits of decentralisation based on analysis of studies and practical experience on decentralisation reforms across different countries (DRI, 2017) mentions that decentralisation leads to improved economic efficiency, improved service delivery that reflects local needs and deepening democracy through improving public participation and enhancing transparency and accountability.

While discussing decentralisation, there is a need to discuss local governance as it is the fulcrum around which the processes related to decentralisation function.

Local governance comprises a set of institutions, mechanisms and processes through which citizens

**D**uring this period, Kudumbashree also made its stride. **While it is a group of autonomous federations of women's neighbourhood groups, the design is such that it is under the broad umbrella of the local government system.**



and their groups can articulate their interests and needs, mediate their differences, and exercise their rights and obligations at the local level. The building blocks of good local governance are citizen participation, partnerships among key actors at the local level, the capacity of local actors across all sectors, multiple flows of information, institutions of accountability and a pro-poor orientation. The context, approach and system influence how this is defined. It is also to see what is one decentralising – power, responsibility, authority or actions.

It is in this context that Kerala went in for massive-scale decentralisation, after the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution of India. It was a 'Big Bang' approach. In one go, functions, functionaries and funds were





transferred. It also adopted the strategy of learning by launching the People's Plan Campaign (PPC) popularly known as 'Janakeeyasoothranam'.

The PPC was launched in 1996. It was a campaign for making citizens engaged in planning and thus strengthening local governance. In addition, there was the launch of 'Kudumbashree', the federation of women's neighbourhood groups.

These were mass movements, which saw public action in local development. Development planning is done by the citizens through various platforms for citizen engagement in planning. Thus, the local plans became transparent and accountable. Pressure from below was created and a new democratic civic culture as well as citizen-centric politics were established. It was a Bottom-Up process, starting from village assemblies. A massive capacity-building initiative was launched through cascading and phase-wise training. Village assemblies (Gram Sabhas or Ward Sabhas) became the platforms for citizen engagement and deepening democracy.

As mentioned, it was an exercise of learning by doing which led to the development of a definite methodology for participatory planning. This was preceded by a formula-based devolution of funds with 30-35 percent of the State's development transferred to the local governments. A massive capacity-building initiative was launched through cascading and phase-wise training.

During this period, Kudumbashree also made its stride. While it is a group of autonomous federations of women's neighbourhood groups, the design is such that it is under the broad umbrella of the local government system.

A massive movement with more than 45 lakh families as members, the Kudumbashree has moved from a poverty-eradication movement to a change agent for local economic development.

As stated in the Constitution of India, the objectives of the local government system are to ensure social justice and local economic development. The symbiotic relationship between the Kudumbashree and the local government system has strengthened the local government system as well as community empowerment which all have strengthened the local governance.

Twenty-five years of the PPC has changed the development scenario. The most important among the impacts is the even distribution of development across the state. Every part has benefited from the development initiatives. This would not have happened in a centralised planning system. Specifically, large-scale community infrastructure in villages and towns was created which was decided by the people. There has been an improved public service delivery during this period.

If we look at the expenditure side, it is clear that there has been a focus on pro-poor expenditure. This can be corroborated with the latest status about poverty where the NITI Ayog report places Kerala on top with 0.53 percent based on a multi-dimensional poverty index.

Due process and criteria for beneficiary selection were introduced which were participatory and transparent. Local governments are now engaged in activities related to climate change, disaster management, employment generation and many other initiatives leading to the building of a new Kerala.

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Clifford Johnson

*Pax Lumina 5(2)/2024/65-66*

## EXCERPTS FROM ANCIENT ROMAN HISTORY AND LESSONS FOR DEMOCRACY TODAY

Dear American Senators,  
You are too young to know me in person, but we have a lot in common. We respect the voices of our countrymen. We believe in the power of democracies. We believe that is the only way. It is no accident that your founding fathers - Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, wrote under my name, 'Publius' to defend the American Constitution ['Publius' was the pseudonym used by Alexander Hamilton (who became the first Secretary of the Treasury), James Madison (who became the fourth President), and John Jay (who became the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court) to write the 85 papers that make up *The Federalist*, which supported the US Constitution].

Along with my colleagues Brutus, Collatinus and Tricipitinus, I established the Roman republic in 509 BC. We and our countrymen were so proud of our republic. We thought we had put an end to monarchy. Our republic endured for 482 glorious years. Then something went wrong. The beginning of the end of our republic has an uncanny resemblance to the events in present-day America. If you wish to learn from our mistakes, please read on.

You may blame the demise of our republic on Julius Caesar. He was an able and ambitious man. But by himself, he would have been no match to our mighty republic. The wheels of monarchy were set in motion many years before Caesar. In my opinion, the major reasons behind the collapse of the Roman republic were the gradual erosion of norms and the blatant disregard for norms and laws. The very two linchpins that held the republic together were undermined. I want to draw your attention to certain events that predate Caesar, events that painfully remind me of today's America.

The year is 133 BC. At the helm of the republic is a pair of consuls, elected to single-year terms. Ten Tribunes, again elected to single-year terms and also subject to a single-term limit, could veto the consuls and also veto each other. To pass a bill into law, a Tribune would first get it approved in the People's Assembly, where citizens voted directly. Once approved by the People's Assembly, the Tribune would seek senatorial approval, the Senate being a council of influential Romans.

A populist named Tiberius Gracchus was elected as one of the ten Tribunes. Knowing that he lacked senatorial support for his agrarian reform



bill that already passed the People's Assembly, he decided to bypass the Senate. He recognised that senatorial approval was only a norm and not a legal requirement. When his fellow tribune, Octavius, vetoed this bill, Tiberius moved to depose Octavius. When Octavius was about to veto his deposition, Tiberius' supporters physically removed Octavius out of the Tribunal meeting. Afterwards, Tiberius vetoed all bills causing a complete governmental paralysis in 133 BC. Disregarding the single-term limit on the Tribunate, he then ran for re-election in 132 BC. In the protests and mayhem that followed, Tiberius was killed. But his fellow Romans learned the lesson that both norms and laws can be bent to their will.

In 123 BC, Tiberius's brother Gaius Gracchus was elected as a Tribune. He succeeded where his brother had failed. Not only did he get re-elected as Tribune for a second term in 122 BC, but he contested the Tribunate for an unprecedented third term in 121 BC. When he lost that re-election bid, he indulged in unsubstantiated claims of election fraud and never conceded the election to his opponent. Although his fate was not different from that of his brother, Gaius stretched the foundations of the Republic even thinner.

Others like Marius, Sulla, Crassus and Pompey all followed the footsteps of the Gracchi brothers. With the gradual erosion of norms and disregard for law, there was not much else to hold the republic together. Then came the ambitious and ruthless Julius Caesar, of Shakespearean fame, but the foundations for his power grab were already laid by his predecessors. Although he was murdered by Brutus and others in 44 BC, the damage to the republic was already done. The government apparatus had lost its vitality and failed to fill the power vacuum left by Caesar's death. The final nail in the republic's coffin was hammered in when Caesar's heir Octavian assumed the title of Augustus — 'The Revered One' in 27 BC.

How is all that history relevant for Americans?

I do not dare to say that any of these events have a direct correspondence with events in present-day America. However, I cannot overlook certain similarities. Note that my goal is not to point fingers at any individual or party. By pointing out these similarities, I hope I can warn you of the impending dangers.

While Tiberius disregarded the centuries-old norm of senatorial approval, Democratic senators are considering the end of the senatorial filibuster, a procedure that necessitates consensus building.

While Tiberius got his supporters to physically remove Octavius from the Tribunal meeting, Donald Trump got his supporters to storm the Capitol building in a bid to stop the certification of the election he lost. While Tiberius's supporters turned a blind eye to his actions, Trump's supporters in the Senate are vowing to do the same as it is politically expedient for them.

While Tiberius vetoed all bills until his reforms were passed, American lawmakers from both parties blocked most bills regardless of the merits of those bills. While Gaius made unsubstantiated claims of election fraud and refused to concede the election in 121 BC, Trump did the same in 2021. While Gaius's supporters turned a blind eye to these lies, Trump's Republican colleagues are doing the same. While the Gracchi brothers contested Tribunate re-elections flouting their term limits, how can you be sure that America is not safe from such power grabs in the future?

While Marius, Sulla, Crassus and Pompey further eroded the Roman republic, how can you be sure that the future of American democracy will be different? While Julius Caesar and Octavian finally put an end to the Roman republic, how can you be sure that history will not repeat itself?

If you want to be sure, you need to act. You need to act now. Those who disregard the norms of your sacred democracy, those who break its laws, and those who spread blatant lies must be held accountable. They must be held accountable regardless of their political affiliations. They must be held accountable regardless of whether it is politically expedient for you. If you say that American democracy has been around for a long time and hence it is safe, I will disagree. If I count from the Declaration of Independence in 1776, it has only been a mere 246 years. That is roughly half the life of the Roman republic. If the Romans can slip back to monarchy after 482 years of being a republic, I will argue that it is too early to tell that American democracy will last forever.

I witnessed the demise of the Roman republic with throbbing pain. I hope you will stand up for American democracy.

History has its eyes on you.

■



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**BOOK  
REVIEW**

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# QUESTIONING THE FATEFUL CRUMBLING OF DEMOCRACIES

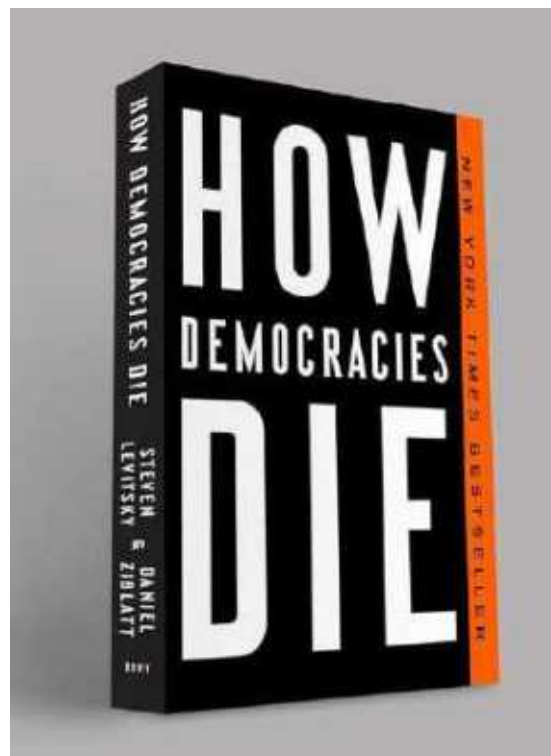
**Democracies still die  
but by different means.**

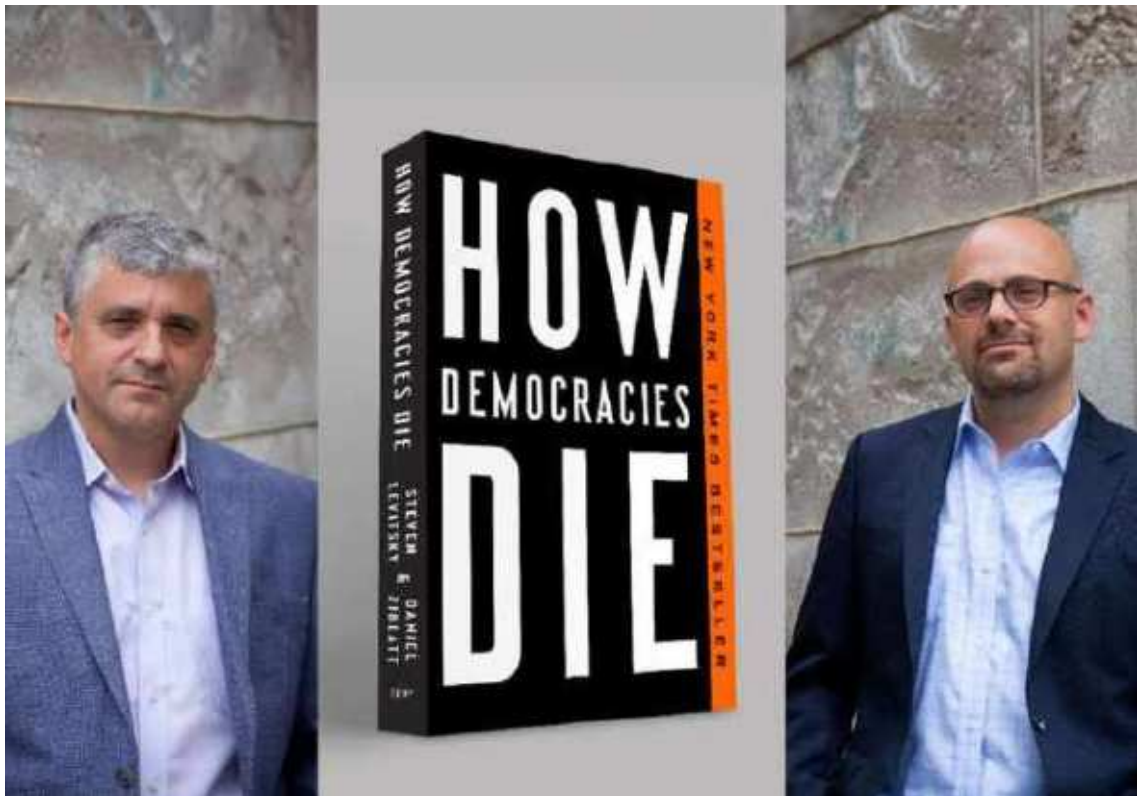
**- Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt**

**T**he New York Times Bestseller ‘How Democracies Die’ mourns the fateful disintegration of democracy. ‘It is arguably the most important book of the Trump era,’ said The Economist.

This thought-provoking and timely political masterpiece explores the factors contributing to the decline of democracies around the world. Written by political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, the book delves into historical case studies and contemporary examples to identify patterns and warning signs that democracies may be at risk.

Columbia University historian Adam Tooze describes the book as the ‘most thought-provoking book comparing democratic crises in different nations’. The historical examples of autocrats offer a sober look at what can happen in any given democratic State.





The authors argue that democracies are not typically overthrown in a dramatic coup, but often erode from within. They highlight the importance of norms and institutions in maintaining a healthy democratic system and identify actions and behaviours that can undermine these foundations.

To provide a theoretical framework, the book explores the disintegration of democracy by tracing its lopsided journey in the twentieth century. Beginning from Europe's dark era of the 1930s to Latin America's repressive 1970s change in the democratic rule of curtailment of rights and toleration of violence, Levitsky and Ziblatt meticulously decipher the nuances of the great fall of democracy.

The authors have scrutinised the older to the newer forms of authoritarianism and multiple ways of erosion of democracy. There is an introductory history course that describes a wide array of populists and demagogues marking the death of democracy.

The political text begins with the interrogation, 'Is our democracy in danger?'

To answer this question, the authors start analysing the democratic crises in different

nations and deciphering the ways of autocratic rulers such as Adolf Hitler (Germany), Hugo Chavez (Venezuela), Augusto Pinochet (Chile), and Benito Mussolini (Italy), to name a few, and then finally, centres on the capitalist and wealthy businessman turned, president Trump.

Levitsky and Ziblatt believe that Trump qualifies as an autocrat: They write: 'Trump, even before his inauguration, tested positive on all four measures on our litmus test for autocrats.'

They now turn their attention towards demagogues. The use of harsh and provocative terms to assassinate the character of the opponent is one of the symptoms of autocracy.

They give an in-depth analysis of the four characteristics of a demagogue. Primarily, a demagogue is someone who rejects the rules of democracy.

Secondly, he is someone who denies the legitimacy of political opponents, sometimes falsely accusing them. 'Demagogues attack their critics in harsh and provocative terms — as enemies, as subversives, and even as terrorists.'

Hugo Chávez described his opponents as 'rancid pigs' and 'squalid oligarchs.'



**T**his thought-provoking and timely political masterpiece explores the factors contributing to the decline of democracies around the world. **The book delves into historical case studies and contemporary examples to identify patterns and warning signs that democracies may be at risk.**



President Alberto Fujimori of Peru linked his opponents to terrorism and drug trafficking; while Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi attacked judges who ruled against him as being ‘communists.’

The third characteristic is the encouragement of violence and finally the readiness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents. The erosion of norms, including influencing the media, is a great harbinger of disaster.

Levitsky and Ziblatt demonstrate, through riveting case studies, how polarisation can destroy democratic norms when socioeconomic, racial, or religious differences give rise to extreme partisanship.

The polarised societies sort themselves into political camps whose worldviews are not just different, but mutually exclusive. In such a situation, toleration becomes harder to sustain. Such polarised societies are a great breeding ground for autocrats. They believe what the State has become, in the words of Duke Law professor Jedediah Purdy, a ‘microcosm of the country’s hyper-partisan politics and growing mutual mistrust.’

They clarify that there’s nothing in our Constitution or our culture to immunise us against democratic breakdown because of the unwritten rules of the Constitution which are misinterpreted and then reframed.

The final part is a thought-provoking analysis of political recommendations to safeguard democracy in the form of a pledge: ‘We must be humble and bold. We must learn from other countries to see the warning signs. We must be aware of the fateful missteps that have wrecked other democracies. We must see how citizens have risen to meet the great democratic crises of the past.’

The two primary norms that Levitsky and Ziblatt think underpin democracy are ‘mutual toleration’ and ‘institutional forbearance’ which can counter any level of authoritarianism.

They refer to the idea that as long as our rivals play by constitutional rules, we accept that they have an equal right to exist, compete for power, and govern. Forbearance means ‘patient self-control; restraint and tolerance,’ or ‘the action of restraining from exercising a legal right.’

It can be argued the book focuses more on the United States and Western democracies, potentially limiting its applicability to a broader global context. However, the principles and patterns discussed are broadly applicable. The authors do make efforts to draw insights from a range of international cases.

In conclusion, ‘How Democracies Die’ is a compelling and insightful examination of the vulnerabilities inherent in democratic systems. Its exploration of the importance of norms, institutions, and the behaviour of political actors provides readers with a framework to understand democracies worldwide. The accessible writing style and relevant examples make it a valuable resource for anyone interested in the current state of democracy and its future challenges.

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*Surya Joy is a research scholar at the University of Kerala.*



# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pax Lumina 5(2)/2024/70

Dear Editor,

Thanks a lot for sharing the highly useful and latest articles on Substance Use Disorders. I am sharing it with my students right away.

**Dr. Meenu Anand**

Asso. Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Delhi

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Dear Editor,

I had shared Pax Lumina with some of my contacts. The feedback is excellent. January 2024 issue has come out very well. Congratulations to Team Pax Lumina.

Best wishes.

**Dr. Roy Kallivayalil,**

Vice President (Asia Pacific), World Federation for Mental Health.

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Dear Editor,

Some of us who have been involved in the fight against substance abuse find it very difficult to educate the public when the traders of liquor and other addictive drugs (legal or illegal) spend crores on schemes to instil absurd ideas in the gullible public.

In Kerala, we have been following the Gandhian models in combating this evil of substance abuse. Along with peaceful protests against licensed liquor outlets, we have held demonstrations and other means of protests against surrogate liquor advertisements in the 1990s. Liquor lobby used to have full page ads in glossy magazines and also used to set up huge hoardings with their brand names. In these ads at some corner in small print, the brand's club soda or some other item would be mentioned. They were circumventing the ban on liquor advertisements in India and getting away with it. In some of the visual ads, they showed a popular film star coming on horseback. They conveyed the message that having a hard drink, a peg or two, was 'the' sign of masculinity. In the next two decades, they spread the notion that alcohol consumption in small quantities, was good for health. Now the idea they spread in Kerala is that tax on liquor is the main source of income of the State government. Though any sharp mind can see through these fallacies, people in general believe these lies and some are heard proclaiming these as gospel truths. Intellectuals have to get together to combat this.

**Prof. Susan John Puthusseril,**

President of Society for the Inculcation of Values in Youth (SIVY), Kochi.

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Dear Editor,

Congratulations to you and the Pax Lumina team on bringing out the eye-opening issue on Substance Abuse. It was sad to read about the many lives lost and wasted due to drug abuse in India and different countries across the globe. I hope the articles in this issue awaken the conscience of people and governments to address the problem of the production, distribution and consumption of these harmful drugs.

Best wishes,

**Denzil F.,** Paris

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Dear Editor,

Thank you for sharing the January 2024 issue of Pax Lumina on "The Violence of Substance Abuse." Congratulations and all the best wishes to the editorial team! You all are doing great services to society by bringing positive stories for solving problems we all face as humanity.

**Raju Deepti,** Managing Trustee - Jeevantirth, Gujarat.

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Dear Editor,

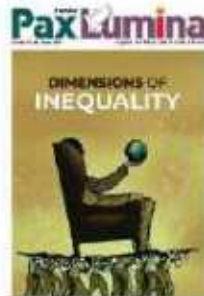
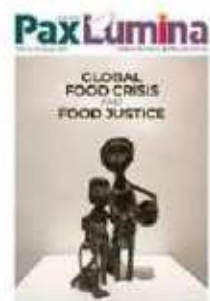
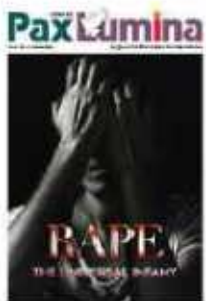
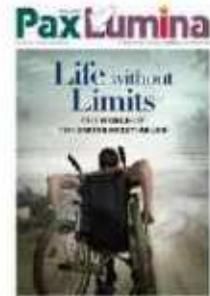
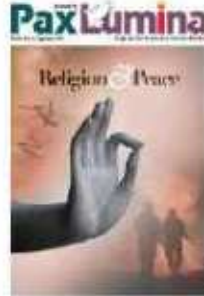
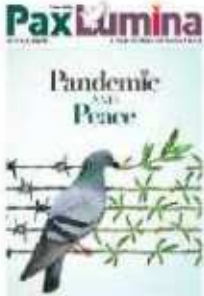
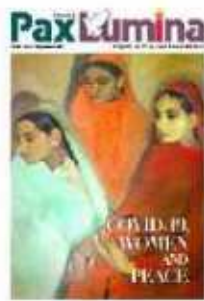
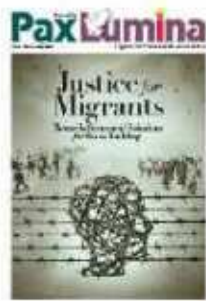
As usual, this issue is another Masterpiece from Pax Lumina as The New Year Gift to the Readers. The layout and sequencing of the articles, etc. really reflect the commitment; the whole Team from the Writers to the Editor(s) is appreciated for bringing international and national experiences from understanding all aspects of drug Addiction, supplying violence to Resilience with support from the Family, Professionals, and the Civil Society.

Congratulations and look forward to reading many more issues.

**Sudesh Mukhopadhyay**

Former Chairperson, Rehabilitation Council of India.

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**Rights that do not flow  
from duty well performed are  
not worth having.**

- Mohandas K. Gandhi