So what is democracy about?

By Odd R. Hunnes

It is an indisputable fact that democracy, along with a handful of other concerns such as health, development and peace, has become one of the core and foremost preoccupations of the people of the world today. All over the world, millions of men and women are clamouring for it, ready to consent enormous sacrifices of sweat, tears and blood, up to and including death, to secure it. This is the measure of the value of democracy to civilized mankind.

Afrifa Githonga

The what and how in government

In general, governments exist to secure order, equality and freedom and supply certain public goods and services. The main purpose of order is to preserve life and property, if necessary by the use of force. Human Development Report (HDR) claims that 'when order breaks down in a country, poor people usually suffer first and most' (UNDP 2002: 6), indicating an important link between order and equality. Equality may be reached through redistribution of wealth and securing a minimum of human welfare, and the main question of debate is how to define equality and how to fund the provision of it. Both order and equality will most certainly reduce the individual freedom of the citizens. Therefore, striking a good balance between order, equality and freedom is a fundamental and continuous challenge for any government. Public goods and services may be physical infrastructure (clean water, sewage, roads and the like), health services and education and the relevant political

The substantive part of government

debate runs along the line of how much of which goods the government should provide for. That which is mentioned so far may be called the substantive part of government, or *what* the government tries to do (Janda et al 1993: 37).

The procedural part of government

The procedural (or formal) part of government focuses on *how* government tries to do what it wants to do. To conclude on such matters (both what to do and how to do it), decisions have to be made. The main activity in government, therefore, is decision making. And democracy offers a set of normative principles for how government, actually any ruling body, ought to make decisions (ibid: 37). The aim of this chapter is to give an overview over democratic principles and the values and the culture that go with it.

Some central aspects on democracy

Democracy is a relatively new concept

Starting with the philosophers and practices of the city states of ancient Greece and reinforced by the assumption that 'all men are created equal', it has been a long and difficult process to reach universal suffrage and citizens' participation in decision making in societies. Shutt (2001) observes that in this perspective it is fair to say that the Western world has been pioneering the establishment of common citizenship and he continues to write: 'Seen from the perspective of human history, ... the idea of popular democracy based on mass enfranchisement is still relatively new' (ibid: 146).

Government by, of and for the people

Abraham Lincoln in his Gettisburg address defined democracy as government of, by and for the people, a definition that has been cited often since. *Of* the people should indicate that the government is not alien to the peoples' way of life; it is in accordance with the values, attitudes and ways of the people. This is commonly expressed in the country's constitution. *By* the people may mean the rule of law, as the law is accepted by the ruled ones. Rule of law should be combined with the people's possibility to decide who should make decisions and also influence the decisions that are made. Participation is a key concept in this connection. *For* the people means that the people are the ones who should benefit from the government's decisions, be it in material, spiritual, psychological, social or in other ways. (Githonga 1995: 11)

The procedural part of government in a democracy is usually described in the constitution of the country and in additional laws,

rules and regulations. A fundamental aspect of 'rule of law' is that there are procedures and regulations concerning how decisions should be made, who should be given power to act on behalf of government and how this power should be handed over to others. Rule of law also implies that the content of the laws, rules and regulations is generally known and the government as well as the citizens is obliged to live by them. Therefore an important part of developing democracy in a country is to write the needed or wanted changes into 'the law' of that society and to follow this up through unbiased enforcement.

Rule of law

In addition to the laws internal to a country, there are international conventions and declarations that have a substantial influence on governance and the way of life in most countries. A well known example is the UN's Declaration of Human Rights (DHR), which most countries have ratified. The mere existence of DHR is a continuous reminder to legislation and performance by government world wide. It is also very effectively used as a tool for human right's organizations to pressure governments to follow suit.

International conventions

The underlying value of democracy may be said to be human dignity. Human dignity implies that a person deserves respect by self and others. This respect is mainly shown through the intention of meeting the set of psychological, spiritual, social and material needs every human being has. Parts of these needs imply ability to influence own destiny through having a say in how decisions should be made as well as the material content of the decisions. The Human Development Report underlines the importance of this by claiming that the freedom to express one's views and participate in decision making are just as important for human development as being able to read or enjoy good health (UNDP 2002). Masolo states that democracy is 'an attitude because it is a way of doing things that is dependent upon how we regard ourselves, our abilities and those of others' (1987: 24). Consequently, on the individual level, democracy is also a matter of identity, a matter of who we are. Therefore, respecting democracy when this suits our own ends and disregarding it when it seems to be to own disadvantage, is a violation to own identity and to the idea of democracy. Democracy should not be treated like a suit that one may chose to put on or take off, it should be regarded more like one's skin in which one lives day in, day out, 24 – 7. On the society level, democracy is also a matter of culture and even the social 'climate' (Pateman 1970).

The underlying value: human dignity

A transition is not enough, a transformation is needed

In his paper 'We Want Change': Transition or Transformation?' Chirwa (1998) maintains that countries need to realize a *transformation* to democracy and not limit the process of democratization to a *transition*. While transition only shows on the surface, for instance through established procedures and institutions, a transformation goes deeper and is characterized by a change in culture with the ideas, values, attitudes and practices that are associated with this culture. A transformation therefore is about a social process and a political practice which are founded on a moral imperative.

Democracy – holds the government accountable

Human Development Report 2002 presents some important features for democracy as a mode of government. It states that political and civil freedoms allowing citizens to think, speak and act as participants in decision making are obvious assets of democracy compared to other systems. Transparency makes it possible for the citizens to hold government accountable and this may help protect people from economic and political catastrophes such as famines and descents into chaos. Even so, in its review on the literature on democracy and economic growth, the report points out that there are few consistent patterns to be found world wide. Empirical studies are largely inconclusive. However, there seem to be some robust findings. One of them is that at all income levels, fertility rates are significantly lower in democracies. This may be interpreted as a sign of optimism and improved human welfare (Mamdani 1974, Hesselberg & Engh 1998). Secondly there seems to be certain relationships between economic performance and democratic governance. It is reported that 'while the economic performance of dictatorships varies from terrible to excellent, democracies tend to cluster in the middle. The fastest growing countries have typically been dictatorships, but no democracy has ever performed as badly as the worst dictatorships .... The same is true for poverty reduction .... Thus democracy appears to prevent the worst outcomes, even if it does not guarantee the best ones' (UNDP 2002: 56). A third point is that 'middle-income countries have been more likely than poor or rich countries to move from dictatorships to democracies' (ibid: 56). And finally it is reported that there 'is also evidence that reversions to authoritarianism are likely in economic downturns, but it is not clear ... whether bad economic performance causes democracies to fall or whether democracies about to fall exhibit bad performance' (ibid: 56). Democracies seem to contribute to political

Democracy – shows economic performance 'in the middle'

stability since they provide open space for political opposition and handovers of power. In its overview the HDR 2002 illustrates this argument by pointing to the time period between 1950 and 1990. In this period riots and demonstrations were more common in democracies, but more destabilizing in dictatorships. Moreover, wars were more frequent in non-democratic regimes and had much higher economic costs compared to democracies. Finally the report maintains that democratic governance can trigger 'a virtuous cycle of development' since political freedom empowers people to take responsibility and influence decisions through discussions. Consequently, the report presents the following strategy for human development: 'For politics and political institutions to promote human development and safeguard the freedom and dignity of all people, democracy must widen and deepen' (UNDP 2002: 1).

Democracy – is associated with political stability

Kamwendo (1998) points out that since language touches on the soul and identity of any society it is also an important aspect of the process of democratization of a country. Here the use of the vernacular as the language of instruction in schools and language of information and debate in politics is very much in focus. In March 1996 the Malawi government directed that the vernacular should be used as language of instruction in the first four years of primary school. So far, these directions have not been implemented due to a wide variety of opposing views on the subject combined with the lack of necessary recourses[4]. Nevertheless, the relationship between language and democracy is a fundamental one and needs to be further elaborated upon, politically as well as academically.

Democracy – is inter-twined with language

A lot of work has been put into the effort of developing a yardstick for democracy, illustrating that the nature of democracy is such that it is difficult to measure[5]. What seems to come out of such exercises is twofold. First, it is not so much a question of absolutes, whether a society or country is democratic or not, but rather a question of to which degree the society / country may be said to be democratic. Second, the way democracy is measured reflects how it is defined.

Democracy – is not easy to measure

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[4]   See chapter 9: 'Promoting the Use of Mother Tongue in Education – a Case for Democracy'
[5]   See chapter 13: 'Can Democracy be measured?'

Dimensions and foundations of democracy

In his paper 'The meaning and foundations of democracy' Afrifa Githonga (1995) presents democracy by pointing out three dimensions and three foundations of democracy. The three dimensions are the abstract, the practical and the concrete dimension of democracy, while the foundations are the infrastructure, the technostructure and the superstructure of democracy. This part of the present chapter draws heavily on Githonga's paper in structure, points made and wording used.

The abstract dimension: People's vision

The abstract dimension exists in the imagination of men and women. It is an intellectual creation, a mental model of what is possible within given frameworks. In its abstract dimension democracy is therefore a vision, a dream. A democratic system is one which has its roots in the people's culture (ideas, values, attitudes and practice) and therefore is not foreign to people's ideals. It is rather created in the particular people's image, thus being representative of the people that is being governed and their vision of their society.

The practical dimension: How to organize decision making

The practical dimension exists in the ways and means of men and women, in short: how things are done. This dimension of democracy is about how the vision, the ideas and ideals are transformed into reality. It is mainly the question of how to organize decision making. Janda et al (1993: 37) point to three basic questions that need to be addressed in this connection:

1. Who should participate in decision making?
2. How much should each participant's preferences count in voting?
3. How many voters are needed to reach a decision?

One person – one vote

The fundamental principle in this context should be political equity, which means equal rights and equal responsibilities for citizens. This principle is often illustrated by the slogan 'one person, one vote.'

The separation of powers is fundamental

It is obvious that decision making must be organized, or structured. There should be some kind of division of labour, division of responsibilities and division of rights. This is what is commonly called the 'separation of powers' in government, where checks and balances are built into the structures, securing a balance of power

between the different branches and different institutions of government. A deep wisdom is expressed in the phrase that 'no person should be accuser, judge and executioner all in one.' The separation of powers also leads to the matter of sharing out work for greater operational efficiency, creating institutions which have their specialized tasks within government. And traditionally the assembly of the representatives of the people has the supreme authority and all the other institutions of government are subordinate to it.

The concrete dimension exists in the experience of men and women and concerns to what degree they find the government delivering good, fair and just services in their everyday life. Lip service to principles and procedures is not good enough. The success of a democracy is measured by what it delivers of order, equality, freedom and public goods and services in the manner and magnitude the people needs and wishes. 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating' and the proof of democracy shows through the ability to deliver good benefits to 'the people.' In this context a statement by Masolo (1987: 25) should be noted: 'what is to be considered as good rests with those that are governed.'

The concrete dimension: Does the government deliver good, fair and just services?

The first foundation of democracy mentioned by Githonga is *the infrastructure of democracy* which is about making people governable. In this connection he stresses the economy. The system of production, distribution and consumption of material goods and services must cater for the so-called basic human needs in order to make people willing and able to be governed according to democratic principles. In addition come the cultural aspects that also contribute to shape people's motivation and ability for governance.

Infrastructure of democracy: Making people governable

The technostructure of democracy concerns principles of democracy in practical terms. The following set of principles, or characteristics of a sound democracy, is compiled mainly on the basis of HDR (UNDP 2002: 51) and Chidam'modzi (1999: 95):

- People's human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected, allowing them to live with dignity, which means that citizens are treated as rational, morally sensitive and active people.
- Consent of the governed is the basis of the government's authority.
- Relations between citizens and government are characterized by freedom and responsibility.

Techno-structure: Characteristics of a sound democracy

- People have a say in decisions that affect their lives for example through free and fair elections at regular intervals and consultations on specific issues.
- People can hold decision makers accountable based on an ample access to relevant information.
- The government maintains impartial systems of justice and rule by law.
- Inclusive and fair procedures, institutions and practices govern social interactions.
- Women are equal partners with men in private and public spheres of life and decision making.
- People are free from discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender or any other attribute.
- There is tolerance of dissident or opposing views and peaceful resolution of conflicts.
- Economic and social policies are responsive to people's needs and aspirations.
- Economic and social policies aim at eradicating poverty and expanding the choices that all people have in their lives.
- The needs of future generations are reflected in current policies.

Summed up as
– openness
– simplicity
– clarity

Surely this list could be made longer, but making it shorter may be a better idea. Githonga seems to suggest that the principles of the technostructure of democracy may be summed up as openness, simplicity and clarity (Githonga 1995: 20):
1. The system should be open.
2. The operational mechanisms should be simple.
3. The institutional role structure should be clear.

Super-structure: Is govern-ment run in accordance with human dignity?

The superstructure of democracy is to be found in the values, beliefs, attitudes and practices of the people. 'And since the people must govern together, collectively, there is no way they can do so without a minimum of respect for one another, without according each other the right to human dignity...' (ibid: 22).

Dilemmas

Having described the dimensions and foundations of democracy, it is important to look at some of the dilemmas that become evident once the ideas and ideals are transformed into practical action.

Plato observed that democracy cannot guarantee good governance because it depends on the whims of the masses and according to him the masses are the least knowledgeable. Thus democracy may encourage opportunistic leadership, prioritizing issues and making decisions that are popular with voters rather than necessary for the people. Also, because of its emphasis on liberty, every individual may feel free to do as s/he likes, disregarding possible negative consequences of one's actions. 'In short, democratic ideals are capable of shooting democracy in the foot' (Chidam'modzi 1999: 95).

Democratic ideals – capable of shooting democracy in the foot

Obviously there is a need for a minimum of knowledge, moral and personal integrity among the participants in decision making. However, to find out if or when people have this minimum competence seems to be an impossible task. Thus democracy actually comes out as a tremendous social and political experiment depending on people's decision making competence. There are three mechanisms that may help to safeguard against negative effects of this experiment. First is the hope and belief that people rise to match the responsibilities that come with the freedom and the rights of democracy. Second is the institutional separation of powers in the government with the checks and balances that come with it. Third is the continuous capacity building in democracy aimed at every society and every citizen. In this connection the education system and the media are important tools for information and communication.

A tremendous social and political experiment

Legitimacy of a government is very much depending on the degree of human welfare the citizens experience. Therefore, Janda et al (1993: 44) point out that 'Governments must have means for determining what the people want, as well as some means for translating those wants into acceptable decisions. In other words, democratic government requires institutional mechanisms– established procedures and organizations – to translate public opinion into government policy to be responsive.' In theory, this may best be done through direct rule. But in most societies the complexity and multitude of cases that have to be decided upon, makes it impractical if not impossible for citizens to participate to a full extent. The usual solution to this problem is for the citizens to elect some persons to act on their behalf. The major dilemma in this connection is to find persons who are really representative of the citizens in all the kinds of cases that need acting upon. This dilemma grows larger as we take into account that representatives through time build their

Legitimacy and representation

own capacity in decision making: they become to a lesser or larger degree professional decision makers, in other words: professional politicians. These are able to devote more time to politics and have access to more information than the people they are elected to represent. Naturally it is very difficult to determine what kind of conclusions the 'average citizen' (if such a being existed) would arrive at providing s/he had access to the same amount of time and information as their representative(s) enjoy. To complicate matters, in a representative democracy, the citizens get a substantial portion of their information from their elected politicians, usually delivered through the media. This of course makes the citizens prone to manipulation by their representative(s). Transparency, ample access to information and possibilities for two way communication between represented and representative seem to be important measures to balance this dilemma.

A double role: Representative and leader

To complicate matters even more, the politicians are often expected to be representatives of 'the average citizen' and visionary and communicative leaders at the same time. With the responsibility of being visionary comes the need to assess matters in a long time perspective. This may implicate the need to abstain from enjoying short term benefits to the favour of possible or probable long term benefits. In the discussion of the relationship between represented and representatives it is also relevant to point at the danger of the representatives using their position to patronage the citizens. Shutt (2001: 158) claims that 'One of the most corrupting features of contemporary Western democracy is the enormous power of patronage typically placed in the hands of high officials.' The feature of hand outs at political rallies is an often mentioned example of how such corruptive patronage shows in the African context.

The case in question is the relationship between the representative and the represented. In essence, politics is about power and the representatives are elected to exercise some kind of power. The crucial point is that this power is supposed to be exercised on behalf of the citizens and to their fair benefit rather than to the politician's own benefit. Therefore Shutt points out that it is important to nominate and elect politicians who are motivated by public service rather than personal ambition and acquisitiveness (ibid: 159). Society needs politicians who identify with the view that holding office is more a duty than a privilege. This need is clearly illustrated

by the fact that the term 'politician' in the Malawian language Chichewa actually means 'someone who plays tricks on people.'

It is a common notion that in a group of decision makers, the majority generally should have its way. This is what usually is named 'majority rule.' However, there are some reasons for holding a consequent majority rule back, and below the following are touched upon: minority rights, low voter turn-out, efficient administration and judiciary and decisions that have long term consequences.

The main principle: Majority rule

There are some rights that everybody is entitled to, sometimes referred to as minority rights, and these rights should not be run over by a majority vote. Most people will agree that minority rights are for instance freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of religion. We know these as fundamental human rights. Opinion may differ on what else belongs to the category of minority rights. The following example may illustrate this. In Malawian context 'freedom of dress' is often mentioned as an example among civil liberties (for instance Chirwa 1998) demonstrating a reaction to the strict dress code that was imposed on civil society by the Banda regime (1961-1994). This raises the question if freedom of dress should be classified as a minority right. Opinion may also differ when it comes to what extent minority rights may be executed in a society. Does freedom of expression imply the right to express anything on one's mind, including insulting or throwing dubious suspicion on somebody else? Such questions are as important as they are difficult to answer on a general basis.

Majority rule and minority rights

Majority rule also faces a dilemma in instances when there is little voter turn-out in an election. What is the legitimacy of decisions made by a majority established through a low turn-out of voters? It is difficult to make general statements on this question. It has to be dealt with in each case individually. Even so, it underlines every citizen's responsibility to exercise one's right to vote.

Majority rule and low voter turn-out

In any government there are a vast number of decisions that need to be made. The principle of separation of powers in government implies that there are some types of decisions that should be withdrawn from the political scene. Examples may be decisions within the judicial and administrative parts of government. Impartiality and efficiency are the major gains in this respect.

Majority rule and efficient administration and judiciary

Most constitutions have regulations that imply that 50% of the votes are not enough to change it. Often 2/3 of the votes are needed. In some cases a change also needs to be backed by a sufficient

majority of the votes in two consecutive national assemblies. This is for instance the case for the constitution of Norway. Similar rules may be written into the constitution of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), businesses and the like. The motive behind this is that constitutions should be relatively stable and not subject to changes based on the whims of people or short time pressure groups. Similar restrictions on majority rule may be put on different types of decisions that have long lasting consequences in any country, municipality or organization that is run according to democratic principles.

Parallel with the model of majority rule runs the pluralist model which interprets government by the people as a system operating through competing interest groups. Political parties and trade unions have traditionally been the main instruments for people's participation in politics. But during the last few decades, NGOs and other organizations in civil society have increased their influence in this respect. Membership in different types of organizations may vary from time to time, reflecting different trends in society. It is therefore important to have a wide variety of vehicles for people's participation in decision making, offering opportunities for different people to influence decisions they find important. So best possible access to decision making processes and influential organizations for all, is an important ideal in a democracy. Still, in the real world, we know that people have uneven access to interest groups and uneven resources to participate in them. In addition, the influence such a group may have, depends heavily on the resources it has at its disposal. A problem in point is how people with money or other important resources may secure for themselves undue influence on the agenda as well as the content of concrete political decisions. Shutt (2001) claims that in order to enhance the quality of democracy in the Western world and elsewhere, restricting the influence of money interests is the one most important action to take. Alongside restrictions, he writes that transparency concerning the funding of political parties and political activities is absolutely necessary.

The development of the information and communication technologies (ICT) raises the question of how this may influence and promote democratic practices. ICT has the potential of working against all kinds of hierarchies through delivering information and organizing discussions and debates across large distances socially as

well as geographically. This electronic or digital democracy may lead to more direct democracy compared to what we have seen so far. And schemes where citizens may use their home computers to cast their votes in elections may come. There is little doubt that these channels in the future will play an ever increasing role in government and it will be interesting to see how this will affect democratic theory and practice.

Democracy and school

John Dewey states that democracy is devoted to education and this is so because 'a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated' (1966: 87). Clearly, to have a genuine democracy, citizens must have a minimum of general understanding of society combined with more specific knowledge of the matters to be decided upon and on how to make decisions. This kind of knowledge does not come by itself, it needs to be taught. The teaching may take place in different institutions in society, for instance in homes, religious and social groups and schools. In the following schools will be focused.

Democracy is devoted to education

It goes without saying that schools need to give the students a good cognitive understanding of the term democracy. The students need to grapple with the concept, looking at it from different angles, familiarizing themselves with the obvious strengths of democracy as well as the many dilemmas. Strange as it may seem, this is probably the easier part of the necessary democracy learning, mainly because it concerns learning *about* democracy[6]. It is mainly a theoretical approach to the concept which certainly must be taken seriously. Even so, the most important, difficult and time consuming part is the learning *for* democracy. This learning for democracy has several important aspects that need to be addressed.

*The easier part: Learning **about** democracy*

One aspect is the wide variety that constitutes the value base of democracy. This needs not only to be understood intellectually, but also to be learned in such a way that these values become part of the students' own values, part of their identity. The main goal is for the learners to internalize the values, beliefs, attitudes and practices of

*The difficult part: Learning **for** democracy*

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[6] See chapter 1: 'Learning Citizenship in Democracy'

human dignity, to make human dignity an important part of the learners' personal and fundamental values. If the teacher limits this teaching to talking, explaining and reading about these values, s/he will fail. These values have to show in the teacher's own attitudes and practices. This means for instance treating the students not like objects, but with respect, care and love. It also means to help students build their self respect so that they dare trust their own judgment, to voice their opinions, respect other people's opinion and yield to the better argument. In these ways the teacher may create a relaxed and secure atmosphere conductive to learning about and for democracy as well as other subjects.

Students need to participate in decision making

Another aspect is the practice of democratic procedures in the schools. MacJessie-Mbewe (1999: 29) states that 'Teachers, students, school administrators, and other participants in the educational system must understand what constitutes democracy and how it can be applied in educational institutions.' Understanding is not enough since teachers and administrators need to find ways to practise democracy in their own institution. The teachers need to introduce their students to participation in decision making concerning activities in school. This may be about teaching methods and activities in the classroom. It may be about deciding on codes of conduct, rules and regulations for the everyday life in the school itself. It is definitely about creating situations where the students are consulted, starting with decisions of limited consequences for the younger students and escalating as the students' maturity develop. Examples may be democratic decision making about a field trip and the running of a mini company[7].

The technicalities of democracy must also be learned

Democratic attitudes and procedures are important for the everyday life in the school itself and at the same time they point beyond school. MacJessie-Mbewe writes that 'Our students should learn, while still in school, the democratic behaviour of being able to negotiate, by listening to and valuing the views of others, so that they fit easily into the larger democratic society in which they will live after school' (ibid: 25). Therefore it is also an important challenge for schools to motivate students to participate in elections and other democratic procedures for decision making and problem solving. The students should also learn how decisions are made through voting, how to administer a debate in such a way that

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[7] See chapter 12: Entrepreneurship and Democracy

everybody who is entitled to speak, is allowed to do so and more of that kind. In short the schools should not neglect to teach their students the technicalities of democracy.

Teaching democracy and developing a democratic culture is a long process, a deep commitment to the principles of democracy must be adopted. It is not sufficient for the students to learn to know the *word* democracy they need to know the *concept*. It is a question of developing democracy as a habit and a common understanding and sense of common responsibility: a spirit of commonness (Midgaard & Rasch 2004: 39). This takes time and patience to foster. The school is in a unique position to make a positive difference in this respect.

To foster democracy takes time and effort

Is democracy a Western concept?

In his paper 'The Democratic myth in the African Traditional Societies' Simiyu claims that in African history there is no clear cut democratic tradition, but rather 'various mixtures of rudimentary democratic institutions and despotism' (1995: 51). On the not-so democratic side he characterizes African societies in general as hierarchical, with social structures where upward mobility is very much restricted and an age-set system that favours the older age-groups. These are societies where the rights of the individual usually are subordinate to the needs of the fellowship, for instance in questions of peace and equilibrium. This is very much different from the democratic ideals of individual human rights, self determination and the right for citizens to decide how they shall be ruled and who shall rule them.

Simiyu: some non-democratic elements in African culture

Among a few examples of rudiments of democratic features Simiyu mentions that the sense of equality among age-mates is very strong and that the army sometimes offers a possible road for upward social mobility. Even so, he maintains that 'In Black Africa, whether the political system was that of the highly centralized states or of the amorphous non-centralized communities, it did not belong to a democratic tradition. There were rudiments of democratic principles and practices, especially in the non-centralized communities, but it would be dangerous to equate those practices with advanced forms of democracy' (ibid: 68).

– and some democratic elements

The late Tanzanian statesman, Julius Nyerere, on the other hand,

*Nyerere:
There is a
traditional
African
democracy*

seems to find more than rudiments of democracy in African culture. He even claimed that there is such a thing as 'Traditional African democracy' of which discussion, equality and freedom are essential characteristics (Kweka 1995). He emphasized the tradition of free discussions and the principles of consensus as typical African examples of 'government by discussion' (Simiyu 1995, Green 1995).

*Kenya:
Harambee*

In Kenyan context 'harambee' is an important feature in political as well as social life. Harambee means 'pulling together' or putting our hands together for a special cause or some common good. It may be constructing a school or water pipe, it may be someone needing help to pay for a funeral, a hospital bill or something else of importance. So 'everybody' chips in, as an act of fellowship, solidarity or taking responsibility for each other. It seems plausible to associate harambee with a democratic mindset.

*Tanzania:
Ujamaa*

The policy of 'ujamaa' on Tanzanian turf is founded on an idea similar to harambee. Ujamaa means family-hood and mutual involvement of all family members for the fellowship. During the 1970s rural people in Tanzania were assembled in special ujamaa villages. Here the inhabitants were supposed to share duties and jobs in such an organized manner that a larger variety of services than before could be available and the infrastructure like good roads, clean water, health services and education could be more easily available to more people. Since the larger part of the Tanzanians was rural peasants, an important part of the ujamaa policy focused on improving agricultural practices, and this was easier to achieve if people lived in villages rather than scattered in the countryside. Today very few seem to regard the ujamaa policy as successful, but that seems to be more because of the way it was implemented than the idea itself. The sharing of responsibilities, including decision making, in villages is clearly linked to democratic ways. And there is no doubt that President Nyerere regarded the ujamaa philosophy as something genuine African as he stressed the need to 'build upon the foundation of our past, and building also to our design' (Komba 1995: 37).

*Malawi:
Proverbs and
storytelling*

Chidam'modzi (1999) and Moto (1998) present a lot of examples of features in Malawian traditional systems of governance, proverbs and story telling that easily may be linked to democracy: social responsibility, discipline, conversation and dialogue, freedom of expression, the need to tolerate and respect other people's opinions

and choices, the need for accountability and transparency, an impartial, just and independent judicial system and 'the rule of law.' Moto (1998: 24) claims that 'proverbs and folk stories provide overwhelming evidence that democracy as a concept is not a totally new way of viewing how communities should be governed, but rather that democratic practice, ideals and principles are deeply embedded in the fabric of Malawian society.'

Depending on culture, history and situation, the brand of democracy differs between countries. Even so, the value of human dignity with its many and far reaching implications is universal and cannot be compromised as the ideal of democracy: Human dignity is the quintessence of democracy. In our days Western countries dominate the rhetoric and generally do well on measures of democratic governance. Still they have no copyright neither to the principles, practices nor rhetoric of democracy. There is no room or reason for royalty charges. Therefore every country, be it African, Western or other, must develop her own democracy. The challenge is to connect with own culture and history and blend it with the values, ideas, attitudes and practices supportive of human dignity. In this way it may become clear to more and more people that democracy is not a Western concept, but rather a universal one.

Democracy is not a Western, but a universal concept

Questions

1. Explain the difference between the substantive and the procedural parts of government.

2. Explain the meaning of the statement that democracy is government of, by and for the people.

3. How would you explain that human dignity is the underlying value of democracy?

4. Name some of the important advantages of democracy compared to other modes of government.

5. Explain the dimensions and foundations of democracy.

6. In this chapter democracy is claimed to be a tremendous social and political experiment. Which mechanisms may help to safeguard against negative effects of this experiment?

7. What are the advantages and disadvantages of representative democracy?

8. Majority rule is a main principle in democracy. Discuss some reasonable limitations to majority rule.

9. What is the main difference between learning *about* democracy and learning *for* democracy? Explain why the latter is considered to be more difficult.

10. Why should democracy be practised in schools?

11. Mention some indications that democracy may not be alien to African societies and culture.

Activities

1. The Inter-parliamentary Union's Universal Declaration on Democracy.

Read the declaration (in textbox). The declaration states: 'Democracy is based on two core principles: participation and accountability.'

a. Discuss what participation and accountability means in practical terms in your situation today. Use concrete examples from your own experience.

b. In which ways may increasing participation and increasing accountability contribute to the development of democracy in your country?

THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNIONS' UNIVERSAL DECLARATION ON DEMOCRACY

In 1995 the Inter-Parliamentary Union assembled experts from various regions and disciplines to develop an international standard on democracy. Building on this work, the Universal Declaration on Democracy was adopted in 1997.

The declaration starts with basic principles. Democracy is a universally recognized ideal, based on values common to people everywhere regardless of cultural, political, social or economic differences. As an ideal, democracy aims to protect and promote the dignity and fundamental rights of the individual, instil social justice and foster economic and social development. Democracy is a political system that enables people to freely choose an effective, honest, transparent and accountable government.

Democracy is based on two core principles: participation and accountability. Everyone has the right to participate in the management of public affairs. Likewise, everyone has the right to access information on government activities, to petition government and to seek redress through impartial administrative and judicial mechanisms.

Genuine democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in conducting the affairs of society. Democracy is also inseparable from human rights and founded on the primacy of the law, for which judicial institutions and independent, impartial, effective oversight mechanisms are the guarantors.

The declaration sets out the prerequisites for democratic government, emphasizing the need for properly structured, well functioning institutions. These institutions must mediate tensions and preserve the equilibrium between society's competing claims.

A parliament representing all parts of society is essential. It must be endowed with institutional powers and practical means to express the will of the people by legislating and overseeing government action. A key feature of the exercise of democracy is holding free, fair, regular elections based on universal, equal, secret suffrage.

An active civil society is also essential. The capacity and willingness of citizens to influence the governance of their societies should not be taken for granted, and is necessary to develop conditions conducive to the genuine exercise of participatory rights. Society must be committed to meeting the basic needs of the most disadvantaged groups to ensure their participation in the workings of the democracy. Indeed, the institutions and processes essential to any democracy must include the participation of all members of society. They must defend diversity, pluralism and the right to be different within a tolerant society.

Democracy must also be recognized as an international principle, applicable to international organizations and to states in their international relations. Democracy is always a work in progress, a state or condition constantly perfectible. Sustaining democracy means nurturing and reinforcing a democratic culture through all the means that education has at its disposal.

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2. A mental map of democracy

    a. Write in each circle an association to democracy, or the name of an important aspect of democracy.

    b. Prioritize the associations or aspects of democracy.

    c. Explain your priorities.
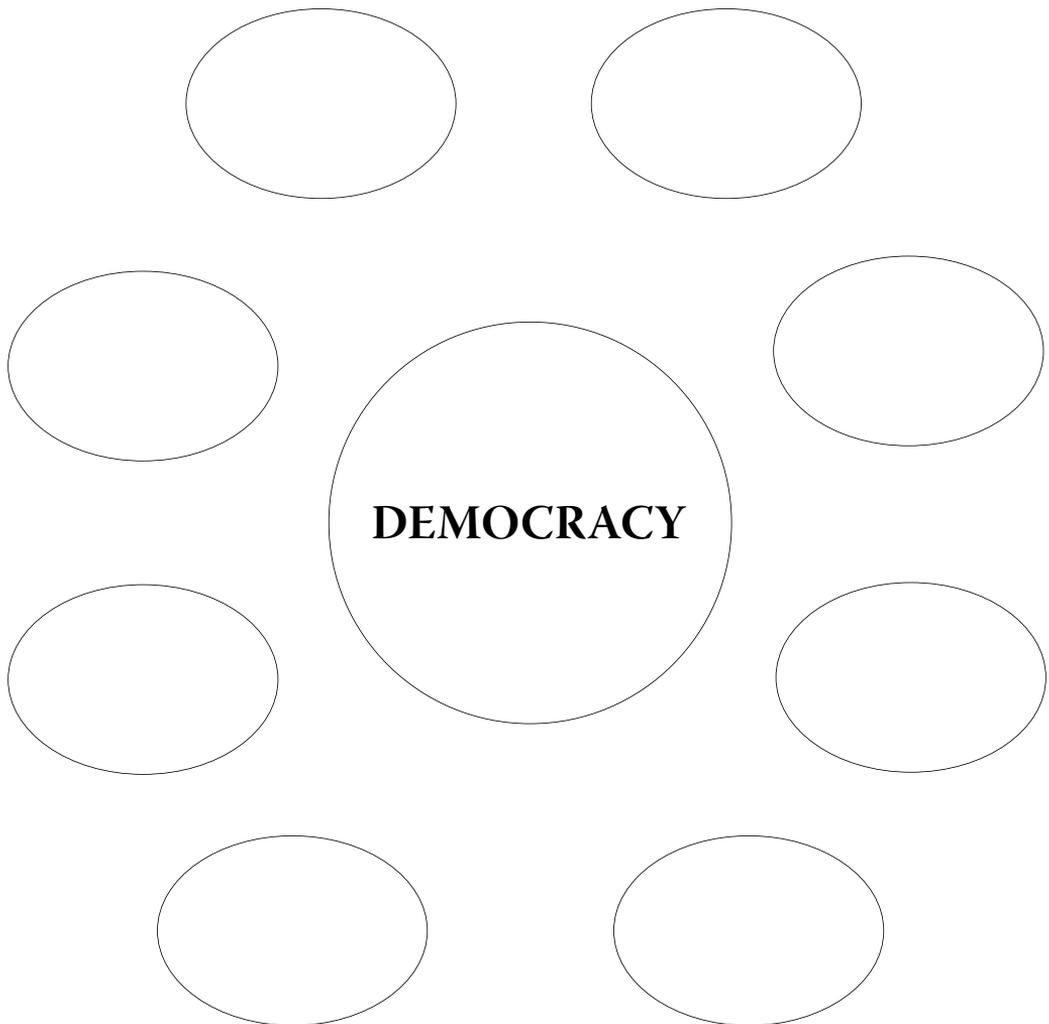
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