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**ON THE LIMITATIONS OF DEMOCRACY
AS A POLITICAL REGIME**
Siyasi Bir Rejim Olarak Demokrasinin Kısıtlamaları Üzerine

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate the limitations of democracy as a political regime. Democracy deserves much reverence with its delegation of the sovereignty to the people, its facilitation of change by peaceful means, its ability to keep the political authority accountable to the people by various means, and its contribution to the political awareness and activeness of the people by letting them take roles in political processes. Despite all such desired virtues, democracy has various limitations too, however, which are discussed in this article with reference to massive human rights violations of various leading democracies, the preservation of various monarchical and aristocratic institutions in many leading democracies, the democratic insufficiency to protect ethnic, religious and such minorities from the occasional hegemony of the majority, the occasional misuse of the authority by the elected political leaders (or corruption simply), the delegation of the management of various policy areas of knowledge and expertise under popular control, the possible change of state policies with the change of the government, the difficulties of forming coalition governments and their practical ineffectiveness and, finally, the democratic aggrandizement of the individual at the expense of moral and social values significant for the order and stability of the political life.

Keywords: Limitations of democracy, democratic insufficiency, political effectiveness

Öz

Bu makalenin amacı siyasi bir rejim olarak demokrasinin kısıtlamalarını inceleme altına almaktır. Demokrasinin, alternatifi olan rejimlerden çok daha iyi olduğu aşikârdır ve demokrasi birçok özelliğiyle takdir edilmektedir. Bu özellikler arasında demokrasilerde egemenliğin millete ait olması, değişim taleplerinin barışçıl yollarla gerçekleştirilebilmesi, siyasi otoritenin çeşitli şekillerde halka karşı sorumlu kılınması ve insanların siyasi süreçlere dâhil edilerek siyasi anlamda daha bilinçli ve faal hale gelmesi gibi şeyler sayılabilir. Bu gibi çokça takdir edilen özelliklerine rağmen demokrasinin çeşitli kısıtlamaları da bulunmaktadır. Bu makalede bu kısıtlamalar şu faktörlere referansla ele alınmaktadır: Önde gelen bazı demokratik devletlerin işlemiş olduğu büyük insan hakkı ihlalleri, birçok demokratik devletin çeşitli monarşik ve aristokratik uygulamalar takip etmesi, demokrasinin etnik, dini vb azınlıkları çoğunluğun hegemonyasından korumakta kimi zaman yetersiz kalması, seçilerek iş başına gelmiş siyasetçilerin sahip oldukları otoriteyi kimi zaman suiistimal etmesi (ya da daha net bir ifadeyle yolsuzluk), bilgi ve uzmanlık gerektiren bazı devlet işlerinin dolaylı olarak genel halk kitlelerinin idaresine verilmesi, hükümet değişiklikleriyle birlikte devlet politikalarının da değişebilmesi, koalisyon hükümeti kurmanın zorluğu ve koalisyon hükümetlerinin etkisizliği ve son olarak

da siyasi toplumun düzen ve istikrarı için son derece işlevsel olan ahlaki ve sosyal değerlerin yüceltilmiş bir bireycilik lehine terk edilmesi.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Demokrasinin kısıtlamaları, demokratik yetersizlikler, siyasi etkililik

“It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.”

Winston Churchill

Introduction

Democracy is generally accepted as the best political regime among all the political regimes that have historically been tried. Such that, an idea like return from democracy to any kind of monarchy or oligarchy is not likely to be taken seriously by any political analyst or to be supported by any serious political or social organization in our contemporary life. The belief in the superiority of the democracy against its alternatives is usually based on some basic reasons, which include the propositions that democracy makes the people their own rulers, that it facilitates political change by peaceful means without any need for revolution and bloodshed, that it keeps the rulers accountable to the people via the periodical elections and other political mechanisms, and that it enhances the political awareness of the people as well as the quality of the political life by giving them roles in the political life. But despite all these basic virtues, democracy has some notable limitations and weaknesses as well, which are discussed in this article with reference to the theses that, first, quite a number of the leading contemporary democracies like the US, UK, France etc. have been implicated in serious human rights violations claiming the lives of millions of people in their overseas operations; second, so many leading democracies maintain hereditary crowns and aristocratic parliaments not liable to the general public at all; third, in countries divided along ethnic differences, democracy leaves the ethnic minorities to the mercy of the majority; fourth, almost all the democracies are troubled with rampant corruption of various types by the elected politicians; fifth, democracy delegates various policy areas that must be managed with knowledge, expertise and prudence under popular control; sixth, the change of the offices of political authority in electoral periods of four to five years produce difficulties from time to time with maintaining stable, orderly and time-taking state policies; seventh, highly likely coalition governments and fragmented parliaments in democracies occasionally produce weak, non-functional, instable and ineffective governments and parliaments; and lastly, democracy places individual choice over and above the religious, moral, social and cultural codes of the society that serve

critical functions in combating crimes, radicalism and similar other problems in the society.

Virtues of the Democracy Undenied

The virtues of democracy are probably quite a lot. The most important virtue of the democracy is without question the fact that it provides the people with the means and opportunities to make them the rulers, governors and legislators from the subjects. In democracies, by using their votes in the periodically organized elections, the people elect certain other people as the authority to lead the government and to make the laws on their behalf. By this way, democracy comes to restore the political power to the people from the kings and the nobility, who claim to have a legitimate right to exercise it from their fathers, and it thus turns the people into the owners and arbiters of political power rather than its subjects, figurants and maybe the victims too. Democracy balances the weight of the political power among the people in this process by dispensing them the same single vote to exercise the political power and making them equals in terms of rights and liberties.

Secondly, the democratic institution of periodically organized elections allows the people to change the elected rulers if they choose to do so; if they, for instance, violate their authority, if they try to be tyrannical, or if they are implicated in acts of corruption, or if they are not pleased with their performance, or for any other reasons that they consider to be important. The democratic elections thus serve as an institution of political accountability by which the people monitor and evaluate the practices of the elected statesmen and reward or punish them with their votes as they view necessary (Wojtasik, 2013: 31-32).

Thirdly, democracy facilitates political change with simple and nonviolent means. The goals that the people try to achieve with resort to revolution, bloodshed and violence with liberal, Marxist, religious or other motivations could be given a fair, peaceful and less costly chance of accomplishment through the democratic norms and institutions of elections, political parties, civil society organizations and a thick list of human rights and freedoms. By practicing their freedoms of thought, belief, meeting, gathering and propaganda, and by establishing or supporting political parties and civil society organizations that represent their ideas, by joining in the elections for this purpose, the people could introduce all the changes they want without violence if they secure the support of the necessary ratio of the people provided that the implementation of their goals does not jeopardize

the rights and the freedoms of the others (Kinsella and Rousseau, 2008: 484-487).

And finally, democracy serves as a kind of political school for the people to make them more aware about the political issues and to enhance the general quality of the political life. Democracy makes the people involved in the political life and enables them to take part in the state affairs as participants, thinkers, evaluators, decision-makers and practitioners. By making them the ultimate source of political power with the right to vote and be voted, democracy encourages the people to develop views on political issues, which they share and deliberate with the others, to establish or support political organizations and movements for their advancement and to undertake duties in various public offices. By this way, democracy not only enhances the knowledge, awareness and inventiveness of the people on political issues, it also leads them to be a constructive agent of good governance (Almond and Verba, 1989; Conway et. al, 1996).

Limitations and Weaknesses of Democracy

The above mentioned virtues of democracy are not denied to prove it a far better political regime than its classical alternatives. But democracy is troubled with some serious limitations and weaknesses as well, mostly in its practice but also in its theory, that undermine its credibility noticeably. Firstly, to start with, Jack Goody (2005: 10, 16) draws attention to some situations in the context where various leading democratic countries compete with the authoritarian regimes in massively violating the democratic political norms and institutions they claim to struggle for. The US War in Iraq which started in 2003 stands as a remarkable case in point here. The reason for the start of War was explained by the US as the support of the Iraqi government to al-Qaida and its development of weapons of mass destruction, but non of these claims have been proved to be true by far.¹ The cause of the war was in its course changed to fight against tyranny and introducing democracy and human rights in Iraq, but this is also very far from being a legitimate excuse for war at the present stage of international law. And it was the scale of human casualties that discredited the US war in Iraq more than anything else as the number of Iraqi deaths changed between 200.000 and 500.000 according to the most and the least optimistic surveys (Hagopian et. al..

¹ If Saddam had supported al-Qaida with a motivation to organize attacks to the US, the US war in Iraq could have been justified for simple reasons. But the start of a war against a country for its development of WMDs is highly controversial still.

2013). And the estimates inform that more than 70 % of the casualties were civilians.²

For Goody (2005: 10, 16), secondly, Israel stands as another stark example of how high standards of freedom and democracy enjoyed by a country could go together with its massive violations of human rights. The Freedom House ranks Israel as the freest and the most democratic country in the Middle East with its freedom score ranging between 1.5 and 2 out of 7 since 1998,³ but Goody asks the question what democracy could mean if it ends up with the election of governments responsible for the most terrible massacres of the near history. Could it be possible to establish a democratic state on a land occupied in violation of the international law and could it be consolidated with further territorial expansion and liquidation of the natives of a land?⁴ Israel also benefits generously from the support of a powerful coalition of democratic states in the world led by the US on the top. It was again very ironic from a democratic point of view that in a peace plan sketched by the US in 2003, Palestine was urged to depose its democratically elected president Yasser Arafat as a precondition for the start of the peace negotiations.⁵

Thirdly, a good deal of the leading liberal democracies of our time happen to possess hereditary crowns trusted with various executive and legislative powers whose examples include Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Australia, Spain, New Zealand, Sweden and Norway among many (Bulmer, 2017: 3-17; Low, 1988). And still some others have senates and houses of lords to which the candidacy is limited to various qualifications and virtues while some people of noble origin don't even get elected but

² This is still the death casualties of the war. The number of casualties is much higher if the injured, homeless and other casualties are also counted.

³ Freedom House ranks countries according to their degree of freedom on a spectrum ranging from 1 to 7, 1 being the highest and 7 being the lowest grade. Israel receives such high grades from Freedom House probably because the Freedom House surveys the records of the countries towards their own people only.

⁴ Israeli statesmen often try to justify the occupation of Palestine by the Jewish religious doctrine that the Palestine is a land promised to them by God, but the international law cannot accommodate any such claims. And one could imagine how the world political landscape would look like if such religious doctrines were used and tolerated as justifications for acts of aggression.

⁵ The last US presidential elections brought to the attention of the international community one more striking development in the context: Both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton promised that the unconditional US support to Israel will continue in case of their election.

appointed to them directly like the one in the UK, Canada and Sweden. Such a phenomenon is against the very basics and the spirit of democracy as democracy essentially means rule by the people assigning the sovereignty to the people in its entirety. And it is the election of the legislative and the executive by the people that makes a regime essentially democratic. One is therefore prompted to ask the question how far the western pressures for democratization on various countries should be heeded while so many of them prefer to preserve their traditional non-democratic political institutions. Is it not comprehensible for the non-democratic world to adopt paths of modernization in peace with their traditional political norms and institutions, for instance, as it is commonly done by the generality of the western states by leaving a number of democratically very important criteria out of the analysis maybe like, in their case, the design of the laws and the political institutions according to their legal and political traditions?

Fourthly, in societies divided on various sociological terms – ethnical, racial, religious, ideological etc. – one man one vote proposition of democracy may not produce very ideal outcomes for in such societies there happens to be a very high likelihood for the political parties to exploit the identity divisions to eventually make one (or a coalition) of such groups the winner of the elections at all times. Problems that could appear in such situations include underrepresentation in the parliament and the government, assimilation and ethnic cleansing. Against such concerns, for instance, Arend Lijphart (1977) offers the solution of power-sharing and consociationalism as a more ideal model which he dissociates from democracy with the distribution of legislative, executive, judicial, administrative and all the other powers and offices to the people according to their ratio in the population; and the assignment of a veto power to each group so that they are not left to the mercy of the other groups.

Fifthly, democracies suffer from various types of corruption, whose news appear so frequently on the TVs, as a problem that can never be eliminated successfully to lead to major political instabilities in the countries. And such practices could sometimes be terribly institutionalized. Political parties, for instance, often appeal to monetary contributions of the donators to organize effective electoral campaigns which often makes them pay special attention to their individual concerns after the elections. But more important for concerns of corruption, democracy gives the winner of the elections the authority to manage and distribute the economic resources of the country. Once elected to the public offices, they enjoy privileged access to the economic resources of the country with their executive and

legislative powers and there are so many different ways for them to collect gains in an unfair way. Even though there could be proper mechanisms of accountability in democracies, the units of accountability are informally accountable to the elected politicians eventually who could interrupt the processes of accounting at many points and who could inflict serious punishments to them if they, for instance, try to uncover corruptive practices of the elected politicians. And again, people could be manipulated very easily by money and media in democratic countries. The politicians could, for instance, buy, bribe or intimidate in different ways the media to give greater voice and weight to their campaign against the others; and they can offer such favors towards various public figures of importance to advertise them, and they can simply buy the votes of the people too. Jobs and other types of benefits for votes is a very common practice in many democracies today that no one can deny (Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Pani, 2011).⁶

Sixthly, in a democracy, people play a direct role in the course of state policies by voting for the candidates that will implement them along their opinions on their behalf, but there are various policy areas in every state that must be governed by expertise, knowledge and prudence in isolation from popular influence for accurate and desired outcomes. Examples could be given to this from the economic policy area. Leading democracies of our time like the US, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Canada etc. all suffer from high amounts of public debts and they experience much difficulties to bring a balance to their debts. While the conventional wisdom tells that they must cut down on their debts and expenditures to protect their economic and national sovereignty, they happen to follow the popular but the unwise way to do it the otherwise, for the people prioritize jobs, welfare and various other policies that require government expenditure. Democracy thus gives the articulate and the uneducated, the experienced and the inexperienced, the wise and the mediocre, the able and the unable, the

⁶ Further to that, for our time, political parties in democracies could promise the electorate more than what the resources of the country could bear to win the elections. This may lead to the neglect of various national interests and victimize electoral minorities. The issue of minimum wages has been a case in point in November 2015 general elections in Turkey. The competing parties promised to increase the minimum wages at rates of 30, 40 and 50 % and the winning party, the AK Party, carried out its promise to increase it 30 %, but only to the disappointment of the employers who were not ready to bear such a financial burden. 10 % of the increase is in turn met by the Treasury to place a new burden on the national budget in turn.

professor and the illiterate the same single vote to shape the public policy (Brennan, 2016: 6-17; Arneson, 2009: 200-205).

Seventhly, the periodical elections that repeat in every four, five or more years serve many benefits in democracies, but they bring by some problems as well especially when the elections give birth to a new winner that challenges the policies of its predecessor. The party(s) in government introduces so many policies, projects and programs as per its duty by investing so much from various state resources throughout its term(s) in the office. But such policies are often used as a stock of political criticism by its rivals no matter whether they really prove useful or not. And if such rival parties win the elections, what is done and invested by the previous government is cancelled in part or whole in almost all the democracies. The democratic change of the public offices in such short periods and under the condition of fierce electoral rivalry poses a major blow to the political and economic well-being of the democratic countries. The conventional political wisdom tells that the state policies must bear continuity and stability for them to prove their utility and for the wise use of state resources. To illustrate, Turkish democracy faces such a threat now with the AK Party Government having introduced so many projects and programs in the last 16 years while according to its rivals many of the government policies are wrong and must be quitted. The rivals of the AK Party often argue that if they win the elections they will cancel much of those projects and programs despite so much of the resources spent for them already.

Eighthly, establishment of a coalition government is a very frequent phenomenon in democracies, particularly in parliamentary democracies with proportional electoral system, where the people don't vote for the government straight in the elections, but rather for the parliament that will produce the government, to remain as a proved cause of political instability and inertia. In many parliamentary democracies, the parties often fail to secure more than 50% of the votes and are thus required to work on a coalition government with the other parties. And this is usually done after a fierce electoral rivalry among the parties when they have already publicized all the dirty clothes of one another. Problems show up at any phase of the democratic process in such cases in, for instance, their prospects to negotiate a coalition, to maintain an effective, functional and powerful government, and to maintain a government indeed that could be broken down at any time (Hiroi, 2009: 488-489). And in case of the presence of ideological polarization and fragmentation in the party system, the problems tend to deteriorate further. The problem is then attempted to be solved in much of the parliamentary democracies with the introduction of an electoral threshold

that leaves the parties under the threshold out of the parliament or permission for minority governments that violates the principle of rule by the majority.

Ninthly, as a liberal political institution, democracy, by making the sovereignty belong to the people in its entirety, by making them the major source of political action, leads to the neglect of the religious, moral and social codes of the society that play a significant role in its continuity. It is through such codes that the people acquire certain qualities like responsibility, integrity, respect, moderateness, complacency, communitarianism etc., the set of values completes the normative aspects of stable political systems, which are very seminal, for instance, in combating against the crimes and radicalism in the streets, breakdown of the families, mistreatment of the elderly people, corruption in the public offices and so on and so forth.⁷ Democracy tends to aggrandize the man to such greatnesses and heights that it becomes very difficult to hold stable the sociopolitical base that that man stands on. A stable political regime must certainly rely on the qualities of the people much as their quantity (Minogue, 2010: 1-15).

Conclusion

To sum up, democracy has various undeniable merits like its elevation of the people from the level of subjects to the rulers, or making the sovereignty belong to the people simply, its provision of an effective mechanism of political accountability via the periodical elections, its facilitation of change by peaceful means not to leave any need for revolutions and such aggressive ways, and its contribution to the political education and awareness of the people. But democracy suffers from some very serious limitations and weaknesses as well, discussed in this article, with regards to massive human rights violations of some leading contemporary democratic states, the presence of various undemocratic monarchical and aristocratic institutions in much of the leading democracies, the insufficiency of the democracy to protect ethnic, religious, ideological and such minorities from electoral majorities, the suffering of a great deal of democracies from rampant corruption, the delegation of various policy areas that must be managed with knowledge and expertise under popular control, the change of state policies and programs together with the change of the government in occasions, the instability and political problems related with the difficulties of establishing and maintaining viable coalition governments, and finally the attachment of excessive importance to the individual in

⁷ The recent school and street shootings in the US are examples in point here.

democracies at the expense of various religious, moral and social norms that serve critical functions for the order and stability of the society.

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