Illusions of elections: super-year 2024

How half the world will stake the planet's future on superficial democracy

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Village Mapping at Kunariya (Kachchh), India - combining direct and representative democracy @ Kunariya Panchayat

About 50% of the world's population will be voting in national elections in 2024, across several dozen countries. Some, like Bangladesh and Taiwan, have already taken place. This is the biggest polling year ever in history, in terms of the number of people participating. But more than the mind-boggling statistics, what is remarkable is that several of these countries have a disproportionately high impact on the world's affairs, and it is somewhat sobering to note that in many of these, right-wing, dictatorial, ecologically insensitive candidates are trying to retain their seats (Putin in Russia, Modi in India) or trying a comeback (Trump in the USA). Other influential countries or blocs going for elections include the European Union (with several of its countries also swinging to the right or abandoning their previous pacifist approaches to join NATO), and South Africa, suddenly in the limelight because of its complaints of genocide against Israel at the International Court of Justice.

Whatever takes place in these elections, one thing is clear: we continue to miss the real meaning of democracy, and because of that, the possibilities of achieving meaningful transformations for billions of people (and the planet) independent of national elections.

We have forgotten what democracy means

The term democracy is a combination of the Greek words 'demos' (the people) and 'cracy' (rule). As practiced in ancient Greece, it denoted forums in which all citizens (minus, and this is of course glaring, women and slaves), could decide on matters of wide significance. Democracy was not about power being in the hands of elected politicians and appointed bureaucrats, which is what modern, liberal democracies have mostly been reduced to.

When India proudly proclaims it is the world's largest democracy, it bases this claim on the fact that it has 'fair and free' elections for the entire citizenry above 18 years of age. This phenomenon is not to be underestimated, for ensuring such a process (even if not entirely 'fair and free') for the 950 million people of voting age in India is a stupendous task. At least in theory, it gives such a large population some degree of control over which party will form the next national government, and therefore also the next Prime Minister. And, taking the theory further, the government so formed is supposed to then be accountable to the people, taking actions that benefit them.

And yet, however awe-inspiring such an exercise, it fails to come anywhere near the true meaning of democracy. Unfortunately, when hundreds of millions go to the polling station to put their endorsement on a political party candidate, they (we!) also partially cede their right to be decision-makers on their (our) own. We ignore or are willing to let go of the fact that we are all born with the power and the right to make decisions for ourselves, at least on matters that impinge on our lives. We have been so conditioned by decades of liberal democracy to hand over power to politicians and bureaucrats, that we forget our birthright.

The erasure of people's power runs deep and wide. It builds on thousands of years of patriarchy in which women and minority genders have been marginalized from forums of decision-making; hundreds of years of centralized rule (kings and despots) in which 'subjects' were told it was in the natural course of things to obey their rulers; hundreds of years of casteism, racism and colonialism that deprived millions from exercising decision-making power; and decades of liberal, representative democracy which has brainwashed us into thinking that nation-state governments are the best alternative to kings and despots, most able to run our lives for us. These have been sanctified by religious or secular systems convincing us that such centralization of power was 'natural' or 'god-given' or the most 'rational', with priests, political scientists, and economists providing the sanctifying texts.

Combine this with the gods of capitalism, and we have a heady mix. Economic globalization based on neoliberal economics has fueled much wider, deeper, and more long-lasting aspirations amongst the 'masses' than was ever historically possible. I would wager that most people on the planet now dream of achieving riches (monetary), fame, and power, living in a mansion, buying the latest gadgets and vehicles, taking holidays in exotic destinations, becoming the envy of their neighbours, and if they don't have the money for all this, to take loans and at least try. But the same economy is unable to meet these aspirations and desires. As capitalists rake in enormous profits, rates of unemployment are rising in many parts of the world partly due to the destruction of jobs by automation and digitisation, inequality between the rich and the poor has widened to its worst ever in global history, and over a billion people are not even able to meet their basic needs of food, water, energy, housing.

Simultaneously, with the corporate capture of media, especially so-called 'social' media, people are fed seductive lies that it is the 'other' who is to blame for their crises – refugees, religious or ethnic minorities, 'foreigners'. Public discussion (and the education system) has been dumbed down so much that entire generations of people are finding it difficult to dig below the surface of the pat answers they are presented, or simply too 'comfortably numb' (to use Pink Floyd's perceptive words) as screen junkies hooked onto Netflix, to do such digging.

But some have not forgotten

Not everyone, however, is so brainwashed or lulled into complacency. In the 1980s, Indigenous people in the hills of Chiapas in the nation-state of Mexico decided to take their lives into their own hands; consolidating this a decade later, the Zapatista movement declared itself autonomous of the Mexican state. Since then, they have run their affairs with no central state. Also around the 1980s, a village of Adivasis (Indigenous people) in central India raised the slogan, 'we elect the government in Delhi, but in our village we are the government.' Since then, they have steadfastly stuck to a democratic process in which they take all decisions through the gram sabha (village assembly) by consensus, and force government departments to spend their budgets according to priorities the assembly sets. Another 90 villages in the same district in the state of Maharashtra, federated under the [Korchi Maha Gramsabha](#), are trying a larger scale of self-determination (with the threat of government-supported mining hanging on their heads).

In the war-torn quadri-junction of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, the 40-million-strong Kurdish ethnic people along with other (smaller) communities have attempted to carve out a zone of autonomy and self-determination. This is struggling due to continued oppression and violence by the nation-states they are embedded within (especially Turkey), but at least in some parts of the region, there are remarkable successes. This includes Rojava (contained in Syria) where the feminist ideology jineoloji is one foundation of governance, economy, and socio-cultural relations. In the heart of capitalist Europe, the urban settlement of Christiania (Copenhagen) has attempted an anarchic, democratically governed

community with no private property or central command structure, and only cooperative-run businesses. And as the late scholar-activist David Graeber showed, crucial elements of recent movements such as [Occupy Wall Street](#) in the USA, had elements of anarchic direct democracy, even though their potential was only very partially actualised.

All these and many other initiatives are showing what true democracy – the power of the people – can look like. It is where people, 'ordinary' people in various kinds of collectives, have the rights, capacities, and forums to participate in all decisions affecting their lives. Importantly, these cannot be based on tokenistic participation, e.g. where women in an Indian village assembly are present because Indian affirmative action law reserves positions for them, but stay quiet because an ancient patriarchal order has robbed them of the capacity to speak. Nor is it a situation where the majority brow-beat the minority or powerful castes and classes steer decisions in their own interests, and show them to have been taken by consensus.

Rather, in these initiatives, many years of process (such as special women's assemblies in advance of the full village assembly) have helped build the confidence and capacity of historically marginalized sections to hold their own. Here the rights, capacities, and forums of participation are added to by a fourth crucial element of successful democracy: the maturity or wisdom to make decisions that are in the best interests of all.

Unfortunately, much of the conventional Left political movements have focused predominantly on 'capturing' state power rather than building the power base of people on the ground. While many of them have been way better than right-wing parties in aspects like welfare schemes, they have centralized power, have not really changed economic paradigms, and failed to meet the impossible aspirations capitalism has created in the public. This perhaps explains, at least partially, the frequent shifts of the electorate towards authoritarian men promising seductive short-cut solutions, especially by 'dealing with' troublesome populations who have 'stolen the future' away from people who consider themselves more legitimate citizens. It also perhaps explains why global agreements on the environment, human rights, or the Sustainable Development Goals framework, are failing to tackle the planet's biggest crises - climate and ecological collapse, war, malnutrition, and more.

Nation-states are so busy competing with each other, so strongly focused on parties retaining power and propping up capitalist behemoths (who in turn prop them up), that they don't have the time, inclination, or imagination needed to solve these crises.

Only a few revolutionary leaders have recognized the need for a different form of democracy, placing much more faith in 'ordinary' people. In the first few years of the Kurdish rebellion against suppression by the nation-states they were surrounded by, their desire was to become an independent country. Very soon, however, one of their key leaders, Abdullah Öcalan, realized that such a goal could be self-defeating, for a centralized nation-state could itself rob people of real

freedom. He began arguing for a form of 'democratic modernity' that needed no centralized state, with autonomous communes running their own affairs but coordinating over larger landscapes as a form of 'confederal' politics. This has been attempted in parts of the Kurdish territory, especially in the areas contained in Syria and Turkey.

When India gained independence from British colonial rule in 1947, Mahatma Gandhi argued that the Indian National Congress (the party that formed the government) should focus less on consolidating power in New Delhi and more on empowering each village to become a 'little republic'. Unfortunately, our political leaders adopted the parliamentary system with a predominant focus on elections and representative politics, though they did set up a strong federal system with some levels of autonomy for states, and in the 1990s a partial devolution of powers to rural and urban bodies of governance. The contradictions inherent in a liberal democracy are however now painfully visible, with the current party in power intent on consolidating an authoritarian grip over the country, weakening both the federal and the local governance systems.

Worse still, having been lulled into a 'comfortable numbness' that we are exercising our democratic rights by participating in elections, and brainwashed into believing that a strong man in Delhi asserting a majority religious order will solve all our problems, much of India's electorate seems to be tolerating this subversion of real democracy.

Real democracy is an uphill battle but one we must wage

The dominant military-industrial-capitalist-religious order is astonishingly clever. It undermines the living conditions and future of billions of people (and millions of species), but it manages to convince us that it still has things in control, and is doing all it can to make our lives better. If you don't like a particular government, it tells us, well go elect another one. If you don't like a particular brand of soap, go buy another; there are 30 in the supermarket, and some are even 'organic' and 'skin-sensitive'. If you have no jobs, or you feel threatened in your daily life, blame not the system, but that 'other' who has no right to be in the country- that one with a different skin color, that one who does not adhere to the majority religion, that one who came in a boat from war-torn Africa, or that animal who eats up your sheep. And if someone has told you that there are colonial, racist, or other reasons for why such people and animals are also in your backyard, then they are feeding you lies.

Why get into complex explanations and difficult solutions when our ways are so simple: just go do retail therapy (thanks for the profits), go vote in the next elections, or (shh….) go and kill one of those intruders in your backyard. Or why stop carbon emissions in the first place when technology (mostly still untested, but hey, be optimistic!) will help us magically capture whatever we release?

The system will not tell us that there are real solutions that will benefit all and that this entails building community processes of taking things into our own hands, including political and economic power. Hundreds of examples of this already exist across the world, combining such localization and wise governance of the commons with the struggles for gender and social equity and ecological sensitivity into what can be called a 'flower of transformation'. In several, communities are also asserting their own (very diverse) traditional institutions of governance, sustaining the fluidity and maturity they often displayed, while rethinking some of their problematic aspects (such as domination by elder men). Many of these initiatives are not rejecting elections to some form of state institutions altogether, but rather asserting that such institutions must be accountable to the basic grounded units of democracy. Whatever decision-making powers they have, should be subject to constant people's checks and audits, delegates or representatives should be frequently rotated, and other such means used to curtail power concentration.

Electoral processes themselves need major reforms, if they are not to be distorted by who has more money, or not dominated by illegitimate social clout based on caste, class, gender etc, or not become a source of hostile divisions within society.

Mahatma Gandhi's notion of swaraj or Abdullah Öcalan's democratic modernity is very relevant to today's world. They are strongly assertive of individual and collective freedoms and autonomy, but with sufficient restraints in behaviour to ensure that the freedom of all other peoples is not undermined. One can even extend this to the non-human, such that radical democracy is infused with an ecological flavour, an eco-swaraj or *radical ecological democracy*. Perhaps Marx's final stage of communism, where the state 'withers away', individuals are no longer alienated from their labour, and the ecological rift between humans and the rest of nature has healed, has essential similarities to this. Unfortunately, the supposedly 'communist' regimes of Russia and China were (and are) completely contradictory to such a state of statelessness.

There is also a growing demand for rethinking political boundaries, especially between nation-states in regions that were earlier colonized, for these boundaries have divided natural and cultural flows with detrimental impacts on people, wildlife, and crucial ecosystem functions. Biocultural regionalism, or bioregionalism, is proposed as a wiser way to organize political decision-making, bringing in the voices of the rest of nature, rebuilding broken connections and the commons, enabling direct democracy as also networked institutions at larger land/seascape levels. It is also part of challenging the centrality of the nation-state, which is very timely given the failure of nation-state governments to solve the planet's most pressing problems like climate crisis and wars.

It's all a tough ask, but who said democracy was easy? Simplistic, convenient pathways have brought the world to the brink of ecological collapse and perhaps another world war; maybe the paths to a peaceful, saner future lie in more creative, deliberative, dignified, and inclusive decision-making processes. Meanwhile, of

course, let us hope that at least a part of the world's population is able to conjure up hopeful news in 2024, even if bringing in a progressive party will only be a short-term band-aid covering a deeply festering wound in the affairs of humanity.

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An environmentalist based in India, Ashish has helped found several national and global organisations and networks. Views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent the views of any of these.

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2. Korchi Maha Gramsabha (village assembly federation) meeting, Maharashtra, India - radical democracy in action @ Shrishtee Bajpai

3. Jinwar Women's Village, Kurdistan - asserting resistance to occupation by the nation-state @ Firat News Agency

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5. Assembly of Timbaktu Collective, Andhra Pradesh, India - democracy within institutions is crucial @ Ashish Kothari

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