

DEMOCRACY

In the supermarket of democracy, choice is an illusion. Is there a real alternative?

Too many decades have been lost to the myth that liberal democracies will deliver.

Ashish Kothari

Yesterday · 09:00 am

READ IN APP [Play icon] [Apple icon]



A protest against president-elect Donald Trump in New York City in November 9. | AFP

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States has consolidated what appears to be a swing towards citizens voting right-wing authoritarian politicians into power. Argentina

OTHERS ARE Reading



1 What does ending tax exemptions for Christian clergy mean for Hindu Undivided Family benefits?



2 How Dutch-ruled Jaffna became a major economic hub in South Asia

consolidated considerable power, such as Russia's Valdimir Putin and India's Narendra Modi, were re-elected.

Those who have fought for decades for democratic spaces and fundamental human and environmental rights have asked: what is going wrong?

Analysts have proposed various reasons for this: the failure of left-wing or progressive parties to deliver on their promises, the charisma and moneypower of "strongmen", a reaction to what is seen as the intellectual snobbishness of the Left, anti-incumbency sentiment, mass brainwashing through social media posts, including about the evil "other" – such as immigrants and refugees – which builds on existing racist, patriarchal or xenophobic beliefs.

Undoubtedly, some or all of these have played a role. But there is another factor that should be considered: the inherent tendency of liberal, electoral, party-based politics to be anti-democratic.

What is being seen is not a distortion of so-called democracy as practiced for the last few decades in most countries but its inevitable outcome, especially when combined with two other factors: modern industrial or capitalist notions of development and progress that raise impossible-to-meet aspirations, and formal education and the media that dumb us down, making us willing, pliant subjects.

The illusion of choice

There are [several features](#) of national electoral politics that are relevant. Primarily, that it enshrines the belief that democratic rights are about voting or, at best, "participating" in decisions taken by bureaucrats and politicians – not embracing the right to *take* decisions.

It institutionalises hostile competition, reducing campaigns to mudslinging rather than working towards a collective future. Democratic politics is susceptible to money power as well majoritarian tendencies where numbers equal might or right.

An economic analogy might help.

As consumers, we are under the delusion that in supermarkets, we have enormous choice. But the numerous brands of soap, cereals, beverages on offer are more or less variations of the

same, convincing us that buying something that is priced way more than it costs to produce it – to enable profits for the producer – is actually contributing to our “consumer sovereignty”.

But typically, in a country like the United States, hundreds of brands of consumer products are made by a [tiny handful of companies](#). More importantly, there are other, more just and sustainable, ways of producing the same things – by ourselves, or by small producers using ecologically friendly methods.

Today’s “democracy” is like a huge political supermarket. We have on the shelf a range of political parties from Left to Centre to Right. This gives the illusion that we have a real democratic choice. But as experience over many decades suggests, these are variations of the same theme: a party or a coalition of parties is elected into power and proceeds to concentrate power rather than empower citizens, fails most of its election pledges and compromises on ideals in the quest of simply staying in power.

Some left-wing parties have been better at distributing welfare schemes – notably in Europe and South America – but there are few that have created genuine and long-lasting freedoms for their citizens. Those that have, have done so at the cost of citizens elsewhere, which explains the next point.

Virtually all parties, when in government, have opted for economic growth-based “development”. Aggressive advertising of what is a “good life”, based on the American ideal, has raised aspirations among the majority of the world’s population to reach high levels of material prosperity. But development simply cannot deliver this on the scale needed, as inequality and the cornering of most of the generated wealth by a minority is part of its DNA.

Where it is possible, such as in Europe and the United States, material prosperity has been built on global loot and devastation, in colonial and current times, resulting in visible climate and biodiversity crises.

The inability to meet sky-high aspirations, or even to produce adequate jobs in a system in which profit-seeking replaces such jobs with automation, coupled with typically high inflation that today’s economies are prone to and the effects of climate change and other crises, results in very large, dissatisfied populations.

This can lead to one of at least two outcomes: people take matters into their own hands to provide for their basic needs, or they look for another party to deliver them from their suffering.

A [visible global trend](#) towards voting out the incumbent party is a sign of this. I will wager that after four years, the American public will swing back to the Democratic Party (unless Trump miraculously delivers on key promises), and the latter part of this decade will see some sort of return of leftist parties in many countries (as has happened in the UK and France). But that is unlikely to change anything fundamentally.

Here a third, crucial, factor is worth considering. Education and communications systems, since colonial times, have dumbed citizens down to a mass of unquestioning subjects incapable of their own critical analysis. Instead of believing that it is migrants or refugees who are taking away jobs, or that religious minorities are breeding at such high rates that they will soon become the majority, or that a revolutionary leftist party will deliver on socialist ideals, we should be able to assess for ourselves the veracity of such claims.

Are there alternatives?

What, then, is the alternative? Nearly a century ago, Mohandas Gandhi wrote about “swaraj”, or self-determination, in which he proposed that real freedom lies in all communities being able to take decisions for themselves, with responsibility for the freedom of others. He called the state the “enemy of the people”.

Philosopher Karl Marx wrote that true communism is where every commune self-governs and the state “withers away”. Kurdish activist and ideologue Abdullah Ocalan said that one of the biggest flaws of modern life was the nation-state, as it concentrates power and does not enable true freedom. He proposed “democratic modernity and confederalism” as alternatives.

Many strands of feminism (including the “jineoloji” worldview of the Kurdish women at the centre of the freedom struggle of Kurds) question liberal electoral politics and consider the centralised state as forms of toxic masculinity. Movements for self-determination by Indigenous peoples, who are still colonised by non-Indigenous people in dozens of countries, make the same points, adding especially the need to work with and within nature. Many of these ideas and assertions can be said to be in the best traditions of anarchism – a seriously misunderstood

concept.

There are examples of radical or deep democracy flourishing even under adverse circumstances: for instance the [Kurdish Rojava](#) autonomous region in north-east Syria, or Indigenous peoples in Latin America, Australia and Canada who have managed to secure recognition to govern themselves. In India, the Maha Gramsabha (federation of village assemblies) in Korchi, Maharashtra, have claimed collective control over forests and lands, resisted mining, and asserted their central role in decision-making.



A protest against the Islamic State and Turkish-backed violence against Kurds in this September 2014 photograph. The protester is wearing the colours of the Rojava autonomous region. Credit: Montecruz Foto, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

These movements are not restricted to claiming grounded political power, but moving towards ecologically responsible living, equitable economies and cooperative businesses, social justice, cultural identity and diversity, alternative education, community health and representation of all sections of society, especially the historically marginalised.

They attempt to move towards a holistic vision called the “[Flower of Transformation](#)” where multiple, intersecting dimensions of justice and equity are attempted. The [Global Tapestry of Alternatives](#), for instance, hopes to consolidate grounded radical democracy into a more global platform.

It is surprising that many so-called revolutionary movements, including those on the Left, have ignored the practice, theory and potential of radical democracy. They forget the original meaning of democracy – demos=people, cracy=rule – and remain focused on “capturing the state”, despite historical evidence of the futility of such an approach if not accompanied by enabling people on the ground to be their own decision-makers.

They, in fact, even ignore the evidence of thousands of years of self-organisation by human communities. As the late anthropologist David Graeber said, “The basic principles of anarchism – self-organisation, voluntary association, mutual aid – have been around as long as humanity.”


They often also do not question the approach of industrial modernity, though they challenge its capitalist underpinnings – and in so doing, fail to interrogate policies that socialist countries, such as Russia and China, have pursued, entailing undemocratic, repressive measures against their own populations through imperialist practices of occupying lands and economies of less powerful nations.

But many in the newer Left movements are seeking deeper forms of democracy, and finding new interpretations of Marxism that support ecological, feminist approaches. In so doing, they would do well to align with radical Gandhians, ecofeminists, Indigenous peoples and small-scale peasant-fisher movements and those arguing that other species too need to be core participants in decision-making (in what a couple of us have [called “earthy governance”](#)).

Many are realising that the nation-state, and the model of electoral politics that underpins it, is a dead-end. Since we are embedded within such political systems, we must continue to fight for major electoral reforms and reinforcing independent institutions of the state like the judiciary, in the short run. But the longer-term vision has to be the grounding of power in the hands of every person and every collective (human and non-human) that they are a part of. Too many decades have been lost to the myth that liberal democracies will deliver.

Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam, and Global Tapestry of Alternatives. Views

here are his own.

 Get the app

ANDROID 

iOS 

We welcome your comments at letters@scroll.in.

Donald Trump

Democracy

Radical Democracy

Swaraj

Capitalism



Related

Ahead of elections, Mauritius’s attempt to ban social media reflects dwindling rights

Trending

Christian

How Dutch-ruled Jaffna became a major economic hub in South Asia

In the supermarket of democracy, choice is an illusion. Is there a real alternative?

‘Interesting to see how many people have suffered from the brunt of storytelling’: Amit Chaudhuri

The Sabar and the future of cinema