

Elections, power, and the illusions of choice

In analysing the swing to right-wing politics, are we barking up the wrong tree?

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Dongria Kondh Indigenous people, Odisha (India) - resisting mining & sustaining a level of self-governance @ Ashish Kothari

2024 was an election super-year—over 60 countries, covering half the world’s population, went to the polls. Month after month, voters waited with bated breath for results, hoping the party or candidate they voted for would win. With hundreds of millions of people exercising their suffrage, the dance of democracy appeared to be in full swing. But was it?

In February 2024 I wrote a piece, [Illusions of Elections](#), in which I suggested that countries claiming to be democratic are pretty far from the original meaning of the word or from the intent behind this form of politics. From the Greek words *demos* and *cracy*, it means power of the people. I wrote that “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.” By willingly (or not so willingly) giving up our own inherent rights to power and decision-making, handing them over to politicians and bureaucrats, we lay the foundation for various forms of autocracy, authoritarianism, selfish and hostile competitiveness, corruption, violation of basic ethics, and much

more that goes in the name of democracy. These forms are common to both right-wing and left-wing political parties and those occupying the middle ground (centrist). For, I contend, it is in the nature of modern liberal democracies to concentrate political and financial power in the hands of a few, creating insecurity, unsustainability, and vulnerability for the vast majority of the earth's population.

In a detailed assessment of the 2024 election results in about 60 countries, the [Pew Research Centre](#) found that incumbent parties did not do well, while right-wing populism retained its hold or gained ground. It noted the influence of inflation and economic inequality, polarization on cultural grounds (religion, ethnicity, race), anger against elites, and other such factors. Another analysis, by [Hindu Business Line](#), noted a rise in right-wing parties winning elections.

The most prominent case of such a swing was the election of Donald Trump in the USA. Before this, it was witnessed in Argentina and several countries in Europe, as well as the European Parliament. Other political leaders who have consolidated considerable power to themselves, like Putin and Modi, were re-elected. Counter-trends such as in the United Kingdom, with the return of the Labour Party, seemed to be exceptions.

Given that modern life was supposed to expand democratic spaces and fundamental human and environmental rights, why are parties that centralise power and push unsustainable neo-liberal economic models being elected?

I think the explanation lies in the inherently undemocratic logic of liberal electoral politics and the nation-state, combined with capitalist manipulation of our needs and aspirations and the dumbing down of our intellectual capacities by mass media and the education system. These build on continuing racist, patriarchal, or xenophobic beliefs that have old roots. As my colleague and [co-editor of Pluriverse](#), Ariel Salleh, said in response to my previous article, “the global move towards right-wing governments is a regression into patriarchy—an infantile search for security as random modernisation throws all certainties aside.”

So, what we are seeing is not a distortion of so-called democracy as practiced for the last few decades in most countries, but *its inevitable outcome*. In a sense this is not a crisis of democracy itself, but rather of a system of state, or nation-state, that we mistakenly call democracy, as pointed out by the brilliantly [astute anthropologist David Graeber](#). The 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. In various ways, Mahatma Gandhi, Karl Marx, the feminist movement, and parts of the ecological movement have said similar things. Unless we understand this deeply and search for truly democratic alternatives, we are condemned to repeat history ad infinitum.

Fatal flaws of liberal democracy

There are [several crucial features](#) of national electoral politics that are relevant:

1. It enshrines a belief that our democratic rights are essentially about our ability to vote, or at most to 'participate' in decisions that politicians and bureaucrats are taking. We forget that the power to take decisions is as much our birthright and as much a basic need as the right to breathe, eat, drink water, be healthy, etc. This erasure has deep historical roots, including in centuries of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism.
2. It institutionalizes hostile competition where some people actively try to undermine others. This often reduces election campaigns to personal attacks and mudslinging instead of reasoned dialogue or debate on substantial issues and undermines the possibilities of collaborating towards a better collective future.
3. It enables those with sufficient money power to sway voters towards them, though occasionally this can be countered by charisma on the other side or dissatisfaction against an incumbent party or politician.
4. It is based on majoritarianism and populism, where numbers equal might or right, leading to or reinforcing discrimination against certain kinds of minorities (e.g., religious, gender, sexual).

The above tendencies are common to, or influence, both right-wing and left-wing political parties. Even those that start off with progressive ideals and values and manage to use some of them in their policies and programs have to compromise heavily in order to have a chance to be elected. Or, once elected, to stay in power. The painful experience of Syriza in Greece, several left-wing parties in Latin America, and even Green Parties in Europe attests to this dynamic.

Today's 'democracy' is like a huge political supermarket. In a shopping mall, we think we have a lot of choice when we see dozens of brands of cereals or soaps or soft drinks, but in a fundamental sense they are all the same with minor variations. They steal our imagination, making us forget that we could be producing these things ourselves or getting them from local producers in our neighbourhoods. In the political mall, we have on display a range of political parties from left to centre to right, and we think that we have real democratic choice. But this too is illusory. With very few (if any) exceptions, what happens is the following: elected parties proceed to concentrate power in themselves rather than empower citizens, fail the electorate in many or most of their election pledges, and compromise on ideals in the quest of staying in power. Some left-wing parties have been better at distributing welfare schemes (notably in Europe, Latin America, and India), but we would be hard-pressed to find any that have created genuine and long-lasting freedom, dignity, and economic security for their citizens.

Additional factors: neo-liberal economics and education

Even those who have performed better on social welfare and basic needs have done so at the cost of someone somewhere. For in an age of neo-liberal economic policies, pursued by nearly every country (including so-called socialist ones), 'development' means exploitation of both the environment and of the working classes. The pursuit of economic growth rests on an ideal of the 'good life' set by the USA and Europe, raising aspirations in the majority of the world's population to reach high levels of material prosperity. Nearly everyone wants a big house, a private car, the latest gadgets, and vacations in exotic destinations. But development in its neo-liberal form simply cannot deliver this on the scale needed, as growing inequality and the cornering of most of the generated wealth is also inherently part of its DNA.

Additionally, it is based on a rapid depletion of the natural environment locally or somewhere else on the planet. Typically, European and American material prosperity has been built on such global loot and devastation, both in colonial and current times, resulting in the very visible climate and biodiversity crises. USSR (and now Russia) are no different, and in more recent times, the Japanese, Chinese, and Indian pursuits of growth are having similar consequences within and outside their borders.

Not only is neo-liberal economics unable to meet the sky-high aspirations it generates (indeed, no economic model would be able to), it even fails to produce adequate jobs. More profits can be made by replacing manual jobs with automation; besides, machines don't go on strike or do sit-ins for wage rises. Then there is typically high inflation that today's economies are prone to, and the growing impacts of climate and other crises that are displacing existing livelihoods. All this results in very large dissatisfied populations. Even those in the middle classes who are doing ok compared to the poor are not happy, for they want to reach the standards of the elite. Such frustration is one key reason for the anti-incumbency trend, as is also very high distrust of political parties and cynicism about elections in general, noted by the Pew Research Centre.

One puzzling phenomenon is, if people are frustrated and angry at governments for the above failures, why the tendency to stick with or vote in the right-wing? Especially given also that such parties often represent elites that are visibly sucking the economy dry? In my understanding, a third factor is at play here. For some generations, we have been 'dumbed down' by the education, communications and media systems that dominate our lives and in turn are dominated by capitalist or state-dominated regimes. Since colonial times, in both the colonized and the coloniser countries, these have turned us into 'the masses' - unquestioning subjects who are incapable of asking sharp questions or making our own critical analysis. In some ways, dogmatic religious orders have also often turned us into passive believers, accepting our 'fate' without murmur. As a result of all this, most of us do not play the role of aware, active citizens, who would keep those in power on their toes, who would assert that public 'servants' in fact should be serving the public.

This starts from school and continues in our adulthood. If, from childhood, we were encouraged to be critical, enabling us to come to our own reasoned conclusions based on all available information and data, we would likely be much more skeptical

of the tall or misleading claims made by political parties. We would be able to assess for ourselves the veracity of claims that migrants or refugees are stealing our jobs, that religious minorities are breeding at such high rates that they will soon become the majority, or that we can sit back while a revolutionary Leftist party will deliver on socialist ideals. We should not be shocked that many Americans believed Trump's baseless claim that Haitian immigrants eat domestic pets, or in India, the lies spread about Muslims beginning to outnumber Hindus. These are grist for the capitalist-statist-dogmatic religion mill, and we are often wilful accomplices, especially those of us who don't have to worry about our next meal.

It should also not be surprising that people who question capitalist or neo-liberal economic models, or communities which resist destructive development projects (mega-dams, fracking and mining, super-highways, etc.) that threaten to take away their lands and waters, are not only called 'anti-development,' but also 'anti-democratic,' and, alarmingly, 'anti-national,' even 'ecoterrorist.' In many countries where the state and a dominant religion work together, challenging religious orthodoxies also opens critics up to the charge of being anti-national. Those who have concentrated economic, political, and social power and rule nation-states and the global economy find it convenient to equate or combine all these terms. Being 'nationalist' has been equated to accepting what these power elites define as development and progress, or right and wrong, or to their version of who is to blame for unemployment, inflation, and conflicts.

But genuine democracy exists!

Most of those who criticize the tendencies of electoral 'democracy' focus on reforming it. Appointing independent watchdogs (like independent election oversight bodies), instituting practices like the right to recall, carrying out public audits, strengthening the judiciary and media, and so on, are aimed at making governments more accountable, transparent, and responsive. But while these are useful and necessary as long as we remain within systems that focus on a centralized state, we have to think beyond them, towards what genuine democracy could be. Fortunately, we already have several examples to guide us.

In fact, if democracy is about common people being in control of political governance (and of their economic, social, cultural, and ecological life), then various forms of it have existed for millennia. David Graeber repeatedly pointed to the mistake of thinking that democracy has its roots in the assemblies of Athens, Greece (which in fact excluded women and slaves). Rather, several Indigenous peoples and others have had consensus-based, grassroots governance systems that are older and closer to democracy than the Greeks were. In India, historians like Romila Thapar (in her classic book *Early India*) and [S. Muhlberger](#) have pointed to the existence of assembly-based decision-making in clans, villages, and other formations many centuries back. None of these were perfect, but there appears to have been much greater mass participation in day-to-day decision-making than in modern so-called democracies. As Graeber said (equating anarchism, i.e., self-rule without a central

state, with radical democracy), “the basic principles of anarchism—self-organisation, voluntary association, mutual aid ... have been around as long as humanity.”

Let us come back to recent times. Nearly a century ago, Mahatma 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.’ Karl Marx wrote that true communism is where every commune self-governs and the state ‘withers away.’ Abdullah Ocalan proposed ‘democratic modernity and confederalism’ as alternatives to the nation-state. Many strands of feminism also question liberal electoral politics and the centralized state as forms of toxic masculinity. Movements for self-determination by Indigenous peoples, who are still colonized by non-Indigenous people in dozens of countries, make the same points, building on their own ancient institutions. They also add 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.

These are not simply theoretical. I was recently in the Xolobeni region of South Africa, where I met up with members of the [Amadiba Crisis Committee](#), resisting mining, oil and gas exploration, a mega-city, and a mis-aligned highway. One of their strengths is a centuries-old system of governance that includes mass participation; another is that they hold all their territory as a ‘commons,’ not privately owned by anyone. While they have chiefs and a king, they also have a history of resisting top-down decisions by them and long-held traditions of women having a strong voice.

Dozens of other such examples of radical democracy are flourishing, some under very adverse circumstances. Currently Syria is headlining in the news, but mostly hidden in the news reportage is what is taking place in the Kurdish region in its northeast. Here, especially in the region of Rojava, an attempt at creating a non-state-based system of ‘Democratic Confederalism’ has been thriving, based on an ecofeminist ideology called ‘jineoloji’ (derived from Abdullah Ocalan’s work). It is struggling because of constant attacks by surrounding nation-states, including right now by Turkish forces that have entered with the overthrow of the Assad regime.

Indigenous peoples in Latin America, Australia, and Canada that have managed to secure recognition to govern themselves are other examples to learn from. The Zapatista autonomous region in what is today called Mexico has shown the potential of distributed power, with each community governing itself and coordinating with others in larger landscape-level institutions that are not allowed to concentrate power. As in the case of the Kurdish movement, it too [faces constant threats](#) from the Mexican state, drug mafia, and corporations. In central India a federation of 90 village assemblies, [called Korchi Maha Gramsabha](#), has been asserting some level of self-governance, pushing the limits of relevant Indian laws relating to decentralization. There are even urban examples of radical democracy, such as Christiania in Copenhagen.

In all these initiatives, it is not only about claiming grounded political power but also moving towards more ecologically responsible living, localization of economies and cooperative businesses, social justice and equity, cultural identity and diversity, alternative education, community health, physical and intellectual commons, and representation of all sections of society, especially the historically marginalized. They attempt to move towards holistic visions that [build on a pluriverse](#) of ancient cosmologies like ubuntu, swaraj, country, sumac kawsay, and buen vivir, or newer ones like ecofeminism, convivialism, degrowth and ecosocialism. Another way to look at what they are attempting is as a '[Flower of Transformation](#),' where multiple, intersecting dimensions of justice, regeneration, and equity are attempted.

A crucial component of many such radical democracy initiatives is the use of consensus, rather than voting. People will discuss, debate, and dialogue until there is an agreement of the whole group, rather than quickly finish things by taking a vote and going by what the majority says. The use of majoritarianism in liberal 'democracy' is what, as Graeber said, "the most likely means to guarantee the sort of humiliations, resentments, and hatreds that ultimately lead to the destruction of communities." Of course, consensus can also be distorted by the unequal power of some in the community, but processes that enable minorities and marginalized sections to have an equal voice (as seen in the Zapatista, the Kurdish, and the Maha Gramsabha cited above) make that much less likely. These systems also have many methods of ensuring that institutions at larger scales (where face-to-face decision-making is not possible), where delegates or representatives are sent, do not accumulate power and remain accountable to the grounded units of democracy. These include frequent rotation of representatives, no salaries during their term, their constant re-education to re-inforce the principles of democracy, and others.

With people's movements, including the Left, remaining focused on 'capturing the state' through revolutionary parties, these real democracies have remained on the margins in even civil society (and of course actively marginalized by nation-states). But increasingly, newer Leftist movements are critiquing such dogmatic faith, seeking deeper forms of democracy, and finding [new or unconventional 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, as also those arguing that other species too need to core participants in decision-making (in what a couple of us have [called 'earthy governance'](#)). An upcoming gathering of 20 such communities, organized by [the Global Tapestry of Alternatives](#) to consolidate the narrative of radical democracy into a more global platform.

Many are realizing that the nation-state and the model of electoral politics that underpins it are a dead-end. Since we are currently embedded within such political systems, we must, of course, continue to fight for electoral reforms and reinforce independent institutions of the state like the judiciary. But our longer-term vision has to be the grounding of power in the hands of every person and every collective (human and non-human). Too many generations have been swayed by the myth

that liberal democracies will deliver if only we elect the 'right' party. This myth has to be replaced by the narratives emerging from actual, grounded democracies, both historical and current.

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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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