



More than the global North, communities from Global South know what democracy is

By Ashish Kothari



The contrast could not be starker. In 2024, with over 60 countries covering half the world's population going to the polls, there was a clear tendency to vote in right-wing political parties with thin democratic pretensions. In many countries including India, USA, Argentina, and Russia, and in the European Parliament, the trend was clear.

A powerful counterpoint to this was provided by a modest but inspirational gathering of Indigenous peoples and local communities from over 20 countries, in South Africa, in February 2025. Brought together by the Global **Tapestry of Alternatives**, Academy of Democratic Modernity, Jineoloji Academy and the Amadiba Crisis Committee, community after community described their vision and practice of radical democracy, with 'ordinary' voices on the ground being at the core of decision-making. They spoke about how their foundations were not hegemonic power and profits, but justice, equity, and respect not only amongst peoples but also with the rest of nature.

These two views of democracy are fundamentally different in many ways. And while the latter is as yet marginal, it provides dynamic inspiration of how broken liberal 'democracy' can be transformed to challenge and reverse not only authoritarian politics but also planet-destroying neo-liberal economic policies.

In an earlier piece **written in January 2025**, 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. 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). 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.” I cited detailed research carried out by the **Pew Research Centre** and **Hindu Business Line**, indirectly supporting such a view.

There is today a toxic mix of three dominant elements that has brought us to the point of despair, building on racist, patriarchal, or xenophobic beliefs that have old roots: the inherently undemocratic logic of liberal electoral politics, the capitalist manipulation of our needs and aspirations, and the dumbing down of our intellectual capacities by mass media and the education system.

Do we have an alternative? For that, we have to understand that the modern nation-state is itself inherently undemocratic, concentrating power and becoming a front for neo-liberal and capitalist forces. As the Kurdish activist and ideologue Abdullah Ocalan, Mahatma Gandhi, many strands of the feminist and ecological movements, and Indigenous peoples have articulated in different forms, the nation-state disables (rather than enabling) true freedom - one in which every person and community is empowered to take decisions, in tune with nature. Marx's formulation of the final stage of communism, with the state withering away, was also one basis of anarchist theory, e.g. of Peter Kropotkin.

Alternatives to liberal democracy are not only in concept and theory, but actually exist on the ground. At the February 2025 gathering, we learnt about and visited the Amadiba people, who have practiced radical autonomy for centuries, withstanding kings, the apartheid regime, and the current power-centres of South Africa. While the community has its structural hierarchies from local sub-chiefs to the king, in practice people in settlements appear to have considerable power to take and influence decisions. Political or traditional 'leaders' who have tried to align with exploitative outside forces (such as mining companies), have been deposed. For various historical reasons, women have considerably greater say than is the case in many other South African communities. An absolutely crucial basis of autonomy here is that all land is held in the commons, and is not privatized.



Representatives of the Kuna Indigenous people of Panama, of the Karen people in Myanmar, of the Lachung people in India, and others from across the globe, described governance structures and processes that are similar in essence, though vastly different in their specific manifestations. Commonalities included the centrality of collective custodianship and tenure of land and nature, the principle of subsidiarity in which decisions emanate from the most local unit of governance, respect of the experience and wisdom of elders while encouraging the initiative of the youth (built on robust intergenerational learning processes), and others.

But while such forms of radical democracy and autonomy are very real, there are several constraints to their full potential being met. First, they all exist within nation-states, and in so far as the latter wield considerable power (legitimized by the global world order), there are very few who can be completely autonomous, and that too at the cost of constant threats and violence from the nation-states they are located in (the Zapatista, and parts of Kurdistan, as crucial examples). Most have to continue negotiating with the governments of the countries they are located within, and in this they join struggles to make governments more accountable, transparent and responsive, and to mold constitutions and laws in ways that provide substantial local autonomy.

Second, even as they try to centre an economy of the commons, of caring and sharing, of solidarity and interdependence, they live within larger contexts of capitalist markets and relations. Again, this entails constant negotiation, for instance having to sell some products in the external markets to be able to raise necessary revenues. And it involves having to constantly resist the forces and seductions of private property, to maintain land and nature as the commons.

Third, all face the challenge of internal inequities and discriminations, which are not only unjust but can also reduce the strength needed to resist the nation-state and the capitalist market. In some of the examples described at the South Africa gathering, participants spoke about internal struggles against gender injustice, casteism, class or ethnic inequities, ageism, and majoritarianism that rides roughshod over the interests and rights of minorities. At the gathering in South Africa, Kurdistan colleagues recounted their constant (and fortunately, often successful) resistance to traditional patriarchy, trying to replace it with the ecofeminist worldview of jineoloji¹. A village headman from Ladakh in India admitted that women remain somewhat at the margins in decision-making.

Despite these challenges, the concept and practice of radical democracy and autonomy are very much alive. They even have an ancient heritage in many parts of the world – increasing evidence suggests that several Indigenous peoples and others have had consensus-based, grassroots governance systems for millennia (well before the so-called democracy of Greece). As the late anthropologist David 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.” In India, the concept of swaraj (self-rule) has been around for centuries; it was brought into public discourse by Mahatma Gandhi, who stressed that real freedom lies in all communities being able to make decisions for themselves, with responsibility for the freedom of others².

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, sumak kawsay, buen vivir, or newer ones like ecofeminism, convivialism 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. In the best of these systems, there are also methods by which the capacity of 'ordinary' people is constantly being enhanced, to take on leadership or representation. Where representatives are sent from each local unit of decision-making, to larger scale governance institutions, there are also methods of ensuring that they 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 reinforce 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. But increasingly, newer Leftist movements are critiquing such dogmatic faith, seeking deeper forms of democracy, and finding common cause with radical Gandhians, ecofeminists, Indigenous peoples' and small-scale peasant-fisher movements. Also allied are movements that assert the central role of nature, beyond humans, in decision-making – in what a couple of us have **called 'earthy governance'**.

What the gathering in South Africa brought out powerfully, is the need to challenge not only authoritarianism and dictatorship, but also liberal electoral politics and the centrality of the nation-state. This does not mean disengaging with interim struggles to make the state more accountable, or asserting the importance of independent institutions like the judiciary and the media. But it does imply the necessity of a longer-term vision and praxis towards radical democracy, the grounding of power in the hands of every person and every collective (human and non-human).

What was most refreshing about the gathering in South Africa was the seamless juxtaposition of very grounded, practical initiatives towards radical democracy, and the conceptual, theoretical and cosmological underpinnings of these practices. In the day-to-day reality of those struggling to achieve autonomous decision-making, while also engaging with the state where necessary, there is a constant interplay between doing, acting, being, dreaming, and relating ... with the actors being not only humans but all of nature. The Amadiba struggle was clearly not only about humans in the current generation, but also ancestors (“living in the sea, so how can we allow oil and gas exploration by Shell corporation in the ocean?”), those still to come, and other species who are considered to be kin. Powerful expressions of this kind were interspersed with songs, dance, artwork, walks on the beach, ceremonies, and gift-giving, to demonstrate that radical transformations need to be fully embodied processes, not only what is in the head. And while participants were from so many different cultures and languages, the desire to understand each other transcended what could have been barriers to communication.

Participants at the South Africa gathering have proposed forming a Global Alliance for Radical Democracy. What form this will take, how it will function, and other such aspects have to be worked out, especially to face the challenge of such a forum not becoming another centralized, rigid institution with some sort of politburo. Constituents of the Global Tapestry of Alternatives hope that with leadership of peoples and communities practicing radical democracy, such a Global Alliance can become a meaningful force helping humanity heal its relationship with the planet and with itself.

¹ <https://jineoloji.eu/en/2018/12/14/what-is-jineoloji/>

² <https://ashishkothari.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Radical-democracy-as-pub-State-of-Power-2016-wb-cover.TOC-etc.pdf>