Celebrating the Idea of Democracy in a Year of Elections

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In this talk, I want to celebrate the idea of democracy. In its popular meaning, democracy refers to the rule of the *demos*, demos being the Greek word for people. This year in Sri Lanka, we have had two crucial moments – one in January and the second just the other day [17th of August] – in which demos were called upon to provide both authority and legitimacy to their rulers to rule over them for a limited period of time. In the January moment, Sri Lankan demos opted for change. In the August moment, they re-affirmed their commitment to the continuity of change with moderate political forces in the country, in the North as well as the South.

Periodic and free authorization of political power for the rulers by the ruled is perhaps the most profoundly political idea of democracy. Demos do it not as subjects, but as free, autonomous and sovereign citizens, possessing, as claimed in political theory, the ultimate political power. With all its faults, limitations, distortions, and aberrations due to its being abused, the magic, or aesthetics, or even the seductive appeal, of democracy as a political idea lies in this particular fact. In human history, there are perhaps only four secular normative ideals to which millions of people have even been willing to sacrifice their lives. They are freedom, justice, dignity, and equality. They are in one way or another intimately connected with the vision and promise of democracy.

Modern democracy is an European invention. Historically, the idea of democracy had existed in elementary forms in many other societies as well. Village administration in many early agrarian societies may have had forms of collective decision-making based on such democratic principles as consultation, majority rule, and consensus. However, it is in Europe that democracy as we know it today evolved into a full-blown conceptual, philosophical and institutional paradigm. It has evolved in Europe through two historical forms: direct democracy of the classical Greece and the representative democracy of the post-17th century Europe. By modern democracy, we mean the representative form of democracy, which has also been described as 'parliamentary democracy,' 'electoral democracy', and 'liberal democracy.' Representative, parliamentary and electoral democracy is the form in which the modern political order in most countries in the world is organized today. Democracy is also being viewed as the most desirable form of political order for any society – industrialized, non-industrialized, Western, non-Western, developed, under-developed, capitalist, post-socialist etc.

Meanwhile, the idea of democracy has also been a part of our everyday common sense. Many of us are democrats, or want to be democrats, if not good democrats or even better democrats. We have this democratic desire not because we have mastered the political theory of democracy, but because democracy is an essential component of our political imagination, our political habits, our political choices, our everyday social life, and our social relations as well. In other words, democracy is in the blood of our individual self as much as it is in our social being. At the same time, we instinctively know that we have anti-democratic cells as well in our blood. At home, in the workplace and in the classroom, many of us display, knowingly or unknowingly, our authoritarian and autocratic impulses. It is only with an acute consciousness of the values of democracy can we tame the undemocratic

impulses in our social life. In other words, democracy is perhaps the only secular ideology that function as a check on the innate capacity we as human beings possess to be oppressive, autocratic and tyrannical in our personal and social relations. Socialism does not do that. Not nationalism either. They in fact encourage aggression and unlimited possession of power. Next to democracy, religion is the other source that controls our aggression towards others through various principles of moral restraint. Religion, with its moral injunctions for moderation, is the most influential check on the excesses that we are prone to commit as individuals. Democracy, on the other hand, constitutes a secular paradigm of restraint against the excessive and abusive use of power, political as well as personal. It is a restraint on power which, more often than not, is liable to be used for oppressive and tyrannical goals.

The point I wish to highlight here is that democracy is the most important secular principle that makes restraint, moderation, and equanimity virtues, and indeed key constitutive features of our modern self.

Democracy is an essential dimension of our political self as well. Our societies are located thousands of miles away from Europe where modern democracy has historically evolved. Even then, our contemporary political institutions, practices and beliefs are largely shaped by two traditions of modern democracy. They are liberal democracy and social democracy, both evolved in Europe. Elements of liberal democracy entered Sri Lanka's political institutions and practices during the early 20th century and took a definitive form in the early 1930s. From liberal democracy, we inherited the principle of popular sovereignty along with universal franchise, representative government, free and fair elections, rule of law, universal rights, procedural justice, and accountable government with legally defined limits to power. Our transition to a post-colony in 1947-48 was indeed marked by the constitutionalisation and institutionalization of these key principles of modern liberal democratic politics.

From social democracy, we learned that liberal democracy by itself was not adequate to address deep social inequalities arising out of economic inequalities inherent in capitalism. In fact, liberal democracy was the political creed of free-market capitalism. Its belief in the efficacy of the market mechanism in allocating resources equally among all came to be belied by its blindness to the injustices of unequal distribution of wealth, resources and opportunities.

The ideology of social democracy emerged in the industrial Europe during the second half of the 19th century to redress this fundamental shortcoming of liberal democracy. It advocated state intervention, wherever necessary, in order to assist those social groups – whose social and individual fate Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo described with sympathy and anger in their novels — that were left behind and ignored by the market mechanism under capitalism. In Sri Lanka, the social democratic argument began to evolve in the mid-1930s, more or less simultaneously with the liberal democratic argument. It, interestingly, is an outcome of the left-socialist agenda in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's social democratic ideology evolved in the form of the ideology of social welfarism. Despite, and perhaps because of, recent stress on neo-liberal economic reforms, social democratic expectations continue to be an important component of the political imaginary of our society.

Meanwhile, why is it that we get so excited about elections, celebrate elections as public spectacles, and vote at elections almost as a religious duty though it is actually a secular, civic duty? Why don't we get disenchanted with elections even when they are marred by violence, malpractices, false promises, and corruption? There can be many reasons, but one plausible reason is that democracy has become an essential dimension of our understanding of the world and a defining factor of our individual and collective self as 'moderns.' As moderns, we know that we the demos are the ultimate repository of political power, as I learnt from some of my urban poor neighbours as much as from books on political theory. We also have the keen awareness that an

election is our rare moment to assert our authority as citizens. What we do at an election is something that was unimaginable during pre-modern times: authorizing a political party or a coalition of parties, as we did on August 17, to exercise political power on behalf of us, but subject to conditions which they themselves have defined for us. It is the moment that we citizens as voters become conscious of the fact that without our authorizing, no organized body of professional politicians can call, or become themselves, 'rulers' or the government. Perhaps, the fundamental criterion of demarcation between the democratic and all non-democratic political systems lays in the answer to the question: how, and from where, do the rulers obtain the authority to govern? Democracy's answer is, it is the people who constitute the sole source of political power.

Most of the countries in the world today have institutionalized this idea of people as the sole source of political power but occurred mostly only during the second half of the last century. England, France and the United States are among the countries that developed their political and constitutional orders much earlier than other countries – England after 1688, France after 1789 and America after 1776. These European powers which had democratic political orders at home did not replicate their democratic rule in societies that were parts of their colonial empires. It is a historical irony that, for example, democratic Britain ran its global empire in Asia, Africa, America and the Caribbean not setting up democratic political orders in any of the colonies. All the colonies were administered by governors or viceroys who were military-bureaucratic autocrats.

The democratic idea that people are the sole source of political power has other connotations that have a resonance with some of the major themes in Sri Lanka's contemporary political debate as well. It tells us that political power is a limited resource available to professional politicians and that its sole objective is public good, and not private gain. The thesis that political power is a limited resource was developed in the 17th century in the social contract tradition of liberal political philosophy. John Locke, an English political philosopher, was the first to develop the thesis of democracy as limited government. Locke lived in a Europe which saw the transition of politics and the state from feudal autocracy to early forms of representative democracy.

As an early liberal, Locke articulated the classical liberal suspicion of unlimited political power as a resource that can be abused by the rulers to deny liberty and freedom of the people. Classical liberals believed, against the historical experience of European feudal autocracies, that unless restrained and made conditional, political power could lead to tyranny. Locke's democratic theory of limited government thus advanced the thesis that governmental power is a trusteeship, assigned to the rulers by the ruled, the people, on a condition. That is, the government is obliged to protect the life, liberty and property of the governed. It is a contractual obligation the violation of which should lead to the people, who are sovereign, recalling their rulers. In the Lockean notion of limited government, the government's powers are limited by the rulers' contractual obligations to the people as well as the limited term of office for which the government gets authorization from the governed. That is the core idea of the liberal theory of political obligation. The democratic theory of periodic elections and the limits to the term of office of government are essentially grounded on this principle that political power is a limited resource. Sri Lanka's contemporary debate on reducing the powers of the executive branch of the state and re-empowering the legislature echoes this classical liberal doctrine that political power is not an unlimited resource available to rulers.

Politics as public good is rooted in an older and more ancient tradition, the republican ideal of politics developed in the classical Hellenic world. A key principle of Hellenic, or Greek, tradition of politics was the view that the state was an association, the human association, aimed at the common good. Common good in classical as

well as medieval philosophy referred to goals of social and political life that can be shared by, and beneficial to, all members of society. Justice, security, welfare, and good life were the 'common good' that political philosophers saw as the shared goals of a political community. Actually, when we elect our representatives, we expect them to serve the common good, and not their own selves, families, friends or cronies. The oft repeated claim of politicians that they want to 'serve the people' by getting elected to political office is also derived from this notion of common good that has now been embedded in the expectations of democratic politics. Why do we get so outraged when we hear stories of politicians turning politics into a money-making enterprise, or public officials misusing their office to get themselves enriched? It is not because we have read philosophical treatises on ethical governance, but because we instinctively believe that separation of the public good and private gain is an essential virtue of public life. That is a fundamental ethical value that democracy upholds and promotes. Sri Lanka's latest political concept *yaha palanaya*, resonates with this democratic ideal of common good.

In the historical evolution of democracy, we can also see that it has been a travelling, or migratory, concept. Born in Europe, it has travelled across the globe. In its global travel, there are two very significant developments to which the idea of democracy has been subjected. The first is the appropriation of it by subordinate, marginalized and disempowered social groups as a medium of social and political emancipation. The second is the adaptation of democracy to local social and cultural conditions.

To illustrate the first, we can take Sri Lanka's own historical example. Sri Lanka began to experience a limited measure of political democracy in the second decade of the twentieth century when the colonial rulers introduced to the island limited franchise. When a proposal came in the mid-1920s to widen the franchise and to expand the framework of representative democracy, the reactions from local groups was fascinating. As many of us know, the elite, who had dominated what has been described as our 'national movement' at the time, strongly objected to the extension of the franchise beyond the educated, wealthy and propertied men. They were particularly opposed to women being given franchise rights, because if women entered politics, it would destroy the core unit of our island's civilization, the family! However, as I discovered some time ago when I went through original archival documents of the Donoughmore Commission, there were three constituencies who passionately campaigned for universal adult franchise – women's associations, labour unions and associations of oppressed caste groups in both Sinhalese and Tami societies. Those who wanted the expansion of democracy were those who were oppressed, marginalized, and excluded from power. For them, the extension of democracy was a qualitatively new step towards political and social emancipation. This was not unique to colonial Sri Lanka. Even in Britain, the extension of democracy by extending voting rights to the working class and women was largely an outcome of the struggles by trade unions and the women's movement. The emancipatory potential of democracy has historically been realized first by those excluded from power. That is why the capitalist class too waged civil wars against the feudal monarchy in Europe demanding democracy. Thus, historically, modern democracy has been a weapon of the oppressed for emancipation.

However, democracy has also lent itself to transformations that have blunted its emancipatory edge. This happened when the democracy came to be identified with political power and the state. When it became an instrument in the hands of those who hold economic, social and political power, democracy's emancipatory mission was turned upside down. The evolution of the liberal democratic state in Europe was also the story of this process of de-radicalization of democracy. Deradicalized and attached to the structures of state power, democracy lost its substance but carried its form. This is what political theory describes as 'procedural democracy.'

Procedural democracy is associated with the liberal state. Its basic premise is that since the liberal state protects the rights of citizens through institutions and procedures within a framework of rule of law, negative rights, and free elections, citizens are not required to engage with the state as active citizens. Procedural democracy anticipates passive citizens, because when procedures and institutions are in place, there is no reason for citizens to organize and mobilize themselves, to demand, to agitate, and to resist. The idea of substantive democracy challenges this view of minimalist democracy and tries to retrieve some of the radical potential of democratic politics. While procedural democracy views democracy top down, from the point of view of the liberal state, substantive democracy views democracy from below, from the point of view of citizens who need more democracy to fulfil their entitlements as citizens. It brings democracy to the substance of good life not only of individuals but also of social groups as well — such as social classes, ethnic communities and women — raising questions about social inequalities, group rights, injustices arising out of unequal distribution of power, and group discrimination.

I want to conclude my talk by using this procedural-substantive divide about democracy to highlight an interesting discovery a group of South Asian researchers made about democracy in South Asia. This group of researchers, of which I was also a member, did a South Asia-wide study on the state of democracy in the region. This was in 2004-2005. The study was later published as *State of Democracy in South Asia* (2006), published by the Oxford University Press, India.

One of our research objectives was to find out what had happened to the concept of democracy after it travelled to South Asia from Europe. One key question we explored in this research was: what particular meaning has South Asia accorded to democracy having appropriated it? Our assumption in this exploration was the following: although it originated in Europe, the idea of democracy has entered and deeply embedded in our cultures and therefore it has not remained European as such. Indigenous cultures usually have the capacity to appropriate, tame and even re-define things that are originally foreign.

What has been the effect of South Asian cultures and societies having appropriated the idea of democracy on the very idea of democracy? We found that all South Asian societies define democracy more in substantive terms, while retaining its procedural imprint. As the study showed, parallel to the procedural meanings, the ordinary people associate democracy with the idea of people's rule, political freedom, equality of outcomes and community rights. The most common meaning that the South Asians have with the idea of democracy is 'freedom.' They understand freedom, not in the classical liberal sense of negative freedom – 'absence of constraints' by the state or society –, but as a goal to be achieved through the provision of public goods by the state. Similarly, the idea of equality, central to the concept of democracy, has undergone a change in South Asia. It is no longer views as formal political equality, as in the liberal democratic political theory. Its meaning has been expanded to include socio-economic equality, dignity, and access to material well-being that guarantee basic necessities of life. The idea of rights has also undergone a change in South Asia. South Asians have shifted the principal locus of rights from the individual to the community. This shift from the individual to the community also carries the risk of majoritarian democracy.

One of the most important findings, which is particularly relevant to Sri Lanka, is that people in South Asia have greater trust in periodic elections, rather than political institutions, as the most effective means of ensuring democratic governance. Elections, according to the perception of the people, are the mechanism that ensures 'popular control' the process of government. Thus, ordinary people's experience reflects what we political theorists call the 'decay and crisis of democratic institutions.' Thus, in South Asian popular understanding of democracy, the idea of popular control takes clear precedence over other institutional mechanisms. They show

more trust in 'periodic elections' than political parties.

Now, let me conclude by saying that democracy in Sri Lanka has resilience because it has been appropriated, and given new meanings and significance to by the ordinary people. They have re-worked a formal, textbook and culturally foreign idea to reflect their own socio-economic and cultural conditions, but retaining and re-affirming the magical essence of it – its emancipatory and transformative potential.

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