

A LOOK AT KARL POPPER'S CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

As the most popular system of government, democracy has over the years received considerable interrogations and studies which have resulted into diverse perspectives and conceptualisations. This paper examines the conception of democracy as enunciated by Karl Popper. It evaluates the driving force behind Popper's vigorous defense of liberal democratic tradition over and above other systems of government. The paper established the fact that the Open Society that is characterised by public criticism of established order represents significantly Popper's notion of democracy. Therefore, in pursuance of a society driven by open criticism, Popper took a swipe on Plato's thought pattern and down played his emphasis on personality in leadership as totalitarian while elevating the imperativeness of situating governance on sound institutional framework that will ensure checks and balances for productive leadership. In Popper's thoughts, the prospects of leadership degeneration is a given in human society and this raises the concern for instituting enduring checks and balances on the political process to guard against tendencies towards impunity. Popper thinks that in the face of an eventual leadership degeneration, the democratic instrument of periodic election can be activated to occasion a seamless change of leadership without recourse to revolutionary upheavals, violence or bloodshed. This work engages expository, historical and critical-evaluative methods of philosophical analysis of data in view of unraveling the crux of Popper's notion of democracy and to historically locate the underpinning factors that informed popper's idea of democracy. The paper equally deploys the critical approach to interrogates Popper's conception of democracy for better appreciation of his perspective towards the enrichment of philosophical discourse on democracy as a system of government.

Keywords: Karl Popper, Democracy, Philosophy, Politics

Introduction

Democracy has obviously won a historic victory over alternative forms of governance the world over. This is because, in our contemporary world almost every regime or person professes to be a democratic regime or a democrat. As such, political regimes of all types throughout the world now claim to be democracies. This is mostly because as Held would argue “democracy now bestows an aura of legitimacy on modern political life: laws, rules and policies appears justified when they are democratic”¹. Hence, democracy has doggedly remained one of the leading systems of government the world over. This is sequel to the singular fact that, it remains a system of government that is directly responsive to the political dynamics, needs and aspirations of the people; practically allowing for inclusive popular participation of all, as well as ensuring equality, equity, fairness and the protection of the rights, liberties, freedom and properties of the people in any given political space. Equally worthy of mention is the fact that, democracy as a system of government inherently contains within its operational framework the mechanism to be self-corrective through its most celebrated instrument of periodic elections.

While it is indisputable in contemporary times that democracy has gained global acceptance in the face of alternative systems of government, its domestication in Nigeria and most countries of the third world has fallen short of the basic expectations of how this globally acceptable system of government should be practiced. It is therefore shameful to publicly observe that the political actors that seemingly drive the democratic process in most of the third world countries and emerging democracies have either failed in administering their states in tandem with the fundamental ideals of the democratic system of government or are completely inept and incapacitated in appreciating the workings of the democratic regime. Hence, all the glorious expectations associated with the democratic system of government have completely eluded these states.

Thus, other than build dependable and enduring political institutions, it is observed with dismay that the democratisation process in most of the third world countries and particularly in Nigeria is systematically fashioned towards building strong political individuals, personalities and even families; in what appears more aristocratic than democratic in nature. Hence, in most emerging

¹ Held, D. (ed) *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East, West*. Cambridge: Policy Press. 1993. P. 14

democracies, the situation is appalling, shameful and regrettable as democratic institutions and structures are trampled upon in the pursuit of parochial, individualistic and clannish sentiments. It is instructive to note that, even when there are democratic institutions in place, as is the situation with Nigeria, the over-riding interest of political heavy weights (super men) who themselves are creations of the fraud system, subdue these institutions of state and to a large extent are seen to impose their individual will and preferences on the society against public will, interest, expectations and good.

Through the ages, philosophers have variously conceptualized the practice of democracy. While some clearly undermines democracy in preference to other systems of societal administration and governance, others have consciously elevated democracy and its ideals as the best form of government in the administration of human society for the attainment of the common good and flourishing of the human person.

Popper's desire to have a functional and purpose driven leadership led to his vigorous defense for liberal democracy. In conceptualizing his thought on democracy, he took a swipe on Plato's Philosopher King notion of leadership that is factored on an individual believed to be sanctimonious and possessing the credentials and training befitting of a leader. However, the Platonic conception of and defense of the philosopher King both triggers and leave some questions unanswered. These include; would leadership fulfill the goal of attaining the flourishing of the human society when left solely on the shoulders of a single individual (Philosopher King) believed to possessing the credentials and capacity to ensure the attainment of the common good? If so, what are the assurances that this seemingly sanctimonious leader would not fail? If he does fail since he is human and fallible by nature, what happens? What process is in place to replace a failed leader? Shouldn't it be wise to envisage from the beginning the possibility of ending up with a bad government? And as such, having a clear reflection as to how to manage political leadership that eventually degenerates?

It is in response to and an attempt to proffer answers to the above questions that Karl Raimund Popper, one of the outstanding philosophers of the 20th century on his part, advanced arguments that elevated the democratic regime as the best system of government that provides institutional checks that ensures public accountability and probity in the political administration of state affairs. As a political system therefore, democracy anticipates the possibility of leadership

degeneration as such puts in place a political template for leadership replacement.

It is instructive to note that, Popper did not accept democracy simply because the voice of the people represented the voice of God (*Vox populi vox dei*) but fundamentally because democracy through its established principles allows the people the latitude to get rid of bad leaders before they cause much damage. It is rather fascinating to read with delight the professorial sagacity with which Karl Raimund Popper in his celebrated work *The Open Society and its Enemies* downplayed the Platonic emphasis on personality in leadership as totalitarian and elevated the consciousness of situating governance on sound institutional framework that ensures checks and balances for greater accountability in political stewardship. As a vigorous defender of liberal democracy, Popper singularly advocated for a structural democratic system designed in such a way that it possesses the inherent capacity to prevent proven bad leaders from externalising their dubious tendencies in leadership and replacing them quickly and seamlessly through the electoral process devoid of rancor and bloodshed.

It is against this backdrop and the need to articulate and realize a truly democratic culture and political atmosphere that this study seeks to engage as well as interrogate the Popperian conception of democracy with the intent of bringing to the fore its implications for the strengthening of democratic practice in modern states.

Democracy: A conceptual analysis

Since its invention from the Ancient Greco-Roman world democracy has earlier noted above have been variously conceived and it has been practiced differently though always anchored on its original and globally recognized operational principles. According to Agundu, “democracy is globally recognised as the best form of government owing chiefly to its inherent dividends and basic operational principles that are capable of guaranteeing the basic goods of human flourishing”². It is also on record however, that most of the elements of modern democracy which have their origin from the socio-political activities of the ancient Greek city state of Athens have endured to this day. Hence, etymologically, the term democracy is derived from two words of Greek origin “*demos*” which means “people” and “*kratein*” which means “rule of or by”.

² Agundu O. T . *Social and Political Philosophy in the Age of Globalisation*. Abuja: DonAfrique Publishers. 2019.p.285

Therefore democracy or *Demokratia* from its Greek antecedence literally means “rule by the people”³.

The central political institutions in Athens at the inception of the democratic practice during the 5th century B.C were the Assembly, the Council of 500 and the Peoples Court. The Assembly was the highest democratic institution of the state and by simple majority vote, the Assembly could decide on virtually all societal issues without any legal restrictions. Most remarkable and worthy of mention was the fact that “the leaders of the Athenian Assembly were not elected but chosen by lot, as the Athenians believed that any citizen was capable of holding public office”⁴. It is important to note that, the Athenian democracy was a direct democracy. This is because all adult male gathered together and collectively participated in the decision making process of the society. That is, they met together regularly to formulate, adjudicates and implement the decisions of the state. Hence, there was often a direct participation of all adult male in the decision making process of the state where all enjoyed equal rights, liberties and opportunities.

The longest serving democratic leader in the history of Athenian democracy is Pericles. However, after his death, the Athenian democracy was twice briefly interrupted by Oligarchic revolutions towards the end of the Peloponnesian war. It is instructive at this juncture to make reference to Pericles’ conceptualization of democracy in its true and original form. According to him;

Our constitution is called democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability, which a man possesses. No one, so long as he has in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty... we are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect.⁵

³ Enemuo F.C “Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law”. *Element of Politics*. Anifowose R. and Enemuo F (ed). Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd. 1999. P.141

⁴ Cincotta H. US Department of State: Office of International Programe. “*What Is Democracy*” Web. Retrieved 1st Aug. 2017.P. 7

⁵ Ome E.M “Philosophy, Democracy and African Development: The Relevance of Nyerere’s Political Philosophy” In *Philosophy, Democracy and Conflicts*. Ike Odimegwu (ed). Awka: FAB Educational Books. 2007.P.142

Based on the above, democracy is considered a system of government where governance is of the people, for the people and by the people; to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln's description as captured in his Gettysburg address of 1863. Democracy embodies certain uncompromising principles such as equality of men, individual rights, consensus or majority rule, separation of power, the rule of law, system of periodic election and judicial autonomy⁶.

On his part Appadorai defines democracy as:

A system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representatives periodically elected by themselves to govern. This means that, a state may in political science be termed a democracy if it provides institutions for the expression and, in the last analysis, the supremacy of the popular will on basic questions of social direction and policy⁷.

The above definition thus opens us to the idea of possible types of democracy that is; the direct and indirect democracy. In light of the above, Leeds posits that, "the direct democracy occurs where it is possible for all citizens to meet together in one place to govern the state as it was in the ancient small Greek city states, while the indirect or representative democracy occurs when the population and the area to be govern has grown, hence the citizens choose representatives ⁸who would govern on their behalf and according to the wishes of the majority⁹.

It is instructive to note that, democracy in the ancient Greek city states meant a direct and active participation of all adult male citizens in the political affairs of the polis (city states). Worthy of note is the fact that the city states had the unique advantage of a small number since women, children, slaves and resident aliens were completely exempted from the active political activities of the Greek polis. Thus, in ancient Greece, all free born adult male met at designated venues and periods to collectively legislate, adjudicate and collectively execute the political decisions of the polis. In advancing the above position, Held clearly explained the participatory workings of one of the earliest democracies in Athens as he posits:

⁶ Ome E.M "Philosophy, Democracy and African Development: The Relevance of Nyerere's Political Philosophy" In *Philosophy, Democracy and Conflicts*. Ike Odimegwu (ed.P.142

⁷ Appadorai A. *The Substance of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.P.137

⁹ Leeds, C.A. *Political Studies* 2nd edition. London: Macdonald and Evans Limited. 1975.P. 89

The Athenian city state, ruled as it was by citizen governors, did not differentiate between state and society. In ancient Athens, citizens were at one and the same time subjects of political authority and the creators of public rules and regulations. The people (demos) engaged in legislative and judicial functions, for the Athenian concept of citizens entailed their taking a share in these functions, participating directly in the affairs of the state. The Athenian democracy required a general commitment to the principle of civic virtue: dedication to the republican city state and the subordination of private life to public affairs and the common good¹⁰.

The above represent the political reality of the ancient Greek city states (especially Athens) with significantly very little population hence direct participation in the administration of their cities was possible.

The reality of the modern era with relatively large unrestrictive population where women are also actively incorporated and participate in political affairs, democratic activities are indirectly carried out through representatives duly elected by the majority of the people. This is the reality of the modern and contemporary era that has informed an elaborate comprehension of the democratic system of government. Held's appreciation of democracy is apt in this regard as he views liberal democracy in its contemporary form as a cluster of rules and institutions permitting the broader participation of the majority of citizens in the selection of representatives who alone can make political decisions for the wellbeing and generality of the people". In more specific terms, Held explains thus;

This cluster includes elected government; free and fair elections in which every citizen's vote has an equal weight; a suffrage which embraces all citizens irrespective of distinctions of race, religion, class, sex and so on; freedom of conscience, information and expression on all public matters broadly defined; the right of all adult to oppose their government and stand for office; and associational autonomy – the right to form independent associations including social movements, interest groups and political parties¹¹.

In further defense of the democratic regime, Eboh argues;

¹⁰ Held, D. (ed) *Prospects for Democracy*.. P.16

¹¹ Held, D. (ed) *Prospects for Democracy*.. PP20-21

Democracy calls for imaginative leadership. A leadership characterized by infallible power of vision; and a none autocratic political system characterized by the absence of personal power and a system that hinges on the principle that no one can proclaim himself ruler or hold power irrevocable in his own name. The government by consent, where the government has popular support, its policies and actions meets with popular acceptance or reflects the nations feelings and sentiments...supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them or their lawfully elected agents; a government that caters for the taste of, or serves the interest of the masses and is characterized by the principles of political and social equality for all¹².

Democracy is therefore an all-inclusive system of government that safeguards the fundamental rights of the people, ensuring greater participation in the administration of the society by permitting equal opportunities to both economic and political power, and ensuring an institutionalized change of leadership (government) through the democratic instrument of periodic elections. Democracy forbids any form of absolutism with regards to political power. Its beauty lies in the fact that no one person can boast of monopolising the powers of the government; as political powers in a democratic regime is politically decentralised and administratively shared among three arms of government which constitutionally possess the powers to act as checks through over sight on the powers of each other.

Karl Popper and his Conceptualisation of Democracy

Karl Raimund Popper is an Austrian born British philosopher, academic and social commentator. He is generally regarded as one of the most outstanding philosophers of the 20th century. He had a distinguished intellectual life that ran between 1902 and 1994. Notwithstanding the glaring fact that Karl Popper is best known for his contributions to the philosophy of science and epistemology, he is however also a social and political thinker of great standing having made enduring contributions in the area of social and political philosophy. This is because his reflections and political works have continued to stimulate enormous influence, shaping politics and philosophical debates even in the 21st century of intellectual discourse.

¹² Eboh, S.O. *Human Right and Democratisation in Africa*. Enugu: Snaap Press Limited. 2003.P.66

In social - political discourse, Popper is reckoned for his vigorous defense of liberal democracy and the principle of social criticism that he believed makes a flourishing open society possible. His political philosophy embraces ideas from all major democratic political ideologies; socialism, social democracy, libertarianism, conservatism and attempt to reconcile them. Popper's celebrated works include the following: *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* 1934; *The Poverty of Historicism* 1936; *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Vol. 1 & 2, 1945; *Conjectures and Refutation: the Growth of Scientific Knowledge* 1963; *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* 1972; *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* 1976. Popper died of complications of cancer, pneumonia and kidney failure in Kenley at the age of 92 on the 17th of September 1994. He was cremated and buried close to his wife at Lainzer cemetery in Vienna.

One of Popper's most striking contributions to contemporary political thought is found in his conception of democracy and what he defines as "open society". The idea of the open society operates in Popper's thought as both a reflection of a minimalist ideal to be sought after and as a celebration of the achievement of modern rationality and liberal democracy. Much of its appeal lies in its apparent capacity to limit the impact of our inevitable errors and to contain potentially harmful social and political tendencies. In light of the above, Popper advanced an empirical, pragmatic and operational defense of what he termed "An Open Society". In his celebrated work *The Open Society and its Enemies* Popper contrasted between both societies; closed and open. A close society in Popper's thought is marked by the presence of considerable oppression and an excessive reliance on traditions and customs. These societies according to O'Hear's submission are;

Often tribal societies dominated by tradition, irrational prejudice, xenophobia and rule by hereditary groups of oligarchies. Or they may be more modern types of dictatorship, run by rulers who claim superior (or even infallible) insights into history and society, and who claim on the basis of this knowledge to be able to produce a good (or better) life for everyone"¹³.

Therefore, a closed society is a rigid one where established systems and structures are often blindly obeyed without questioning and everyone simply has to submit to the superior authority without reservation and resistance. In

¹³ O'Hear A. "The Open Society Revisited". *Karl Popper: Critical Appraisals*. Philip Catton and Graham Macdonald (Eds) London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. 2004.P.189

light of the above, there appears to be significant dictatorial possibilities in closed societies occasioned significantly by fear and the presence of organized systems and structures which are clearly above reproach. These were very much in Popper's mind when he attacked closed societies in the 1940s.

The open society on the other hand and by contrast is a society in which everything; policies, institutions, traditions and rulers are open to criticism from everyone in the society. In this sense, anyone may offer useful criticism in an open society especially those directly affected by a given policy. Suffice to mention that, in an open society therefore, policies and institutions are modified by continual monitoring of their effects, and in the light of their ability to solve the problems they are supposed to solve. Importantly, rulers in an open society do not attempt to impose blueprints for the good life on the society. Instead they seek to rectify obvious problems and abuses through 'Piecemeal social engineering', and the continual monitoring of effects. The spirit of the open society is the one that listens to the other fellow's point of view; where differences are resolved and decisions are reached through the process of rational discussions and the spirit of compromise and cooperation.

Instructively, the open society is Popper's conception of democracy, as democracy aims to promote criticism and diversity of thoughts without succumbing either to violence or irreconcilable social division. As a system of government, democracy produces the sort of atmosphere most conducive for discussion and consultation that are characteristically associated with open societies. Worthy of mention is the fact that, Popper's theory of democracy grew out of his fervent criticism of other approaches to governance and leadership. Alas, in his celebrated work *The Open Society and its Enemies*, he took a swipe on Plato and his 'Philosopher King' postulation as the genuine solution to the leadership question in the society. Thus, advancing his thoughts, Popper fundamentally opposed the conception that the guiding principle of state politics should be determined by answers given to the question "who should rule"; but instead, according to Popper we should ask "How can we so organise political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?"¹⁴; which is followed closely by another fundamental question "How can we get of bad rulers without violence and bloodshed?" For Popper, these are fundamentally questions that hinges on institutional design; that is the

¹⁴ Popper K.R. *The Open Society and Its Enemies Vol. 1. The Spell of Plato*. London: Routledge & Paul Ltd. 1966.P.121

consciousness to build an enduring structure that would act as check and continually guard against leadership degeneration in any given political space.

In light of the above, Popper argues that democracy should be founded upon the theory of 'checks and balances'. This is owing to the fact that failure is an attribute of man; as such even the best and most sanctimonious leaders can fail (since they are humans and share in the fallibility of the human nature). So, this theory relies on institutional means for curbing the unruly powers of leaders. The major check in this regard is provided by periodic elections that enable the people to oust their government without using violent means. This shows the difference between a democratic government and its opposite, tyranny; a government where the ruled cannot get rid of their leaders except by way of a successful revolution that is rarely peaceful and mostly characterized by sustained and wide spread violence, bloodshed and deaths.

For Popper therefore, the beauty and value of democracy does not reside in the essentialist notion that the people are sovereign as a result they rule because power resides with them. He disagrees with this stance and argues that the people do not rule anywhere, it is always the governments that rules; as such there is a need to find a way to institutionally control leaders and get them to be responsive to the wishes and aspirations of the people. Popper thus, defends democracy principally on pragmatic and empirical grounds, not on the essentialist view that democracy by definition is rule by the majority of the people. In Popper's thought, Democracy should be flexible and operationalised in such a fashion that her institutions act swiftly with the intent of preventing leaders from degenerating into and constituting public disasters in public offices.

For him therefore, democracies must seek institutional control of the rulers by balancing their power against other powers. In this light, Popper explicitly rejected the popular saying *Vox Populi vox dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of God) as a classical myth when he argued in his work *Conjectures and Refutations* that "we are democrats not because the majority is always right, but because democratic traditions are the least evil ones of which we know"¹⁵. Least evil in the sense that it is a political system not driven by the thought and machination of any single individual (ruler), but a product of collective participation grounded by the oversight function of institutionalised checks that

¹⁵ Popper K.R. *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Vol. 1. *The Spell of Plato*. London: Routledge & Paul Ltd. 1966.P351

has the capacity of forestalling the execution of public policies that are detrimental to public good, expectation and flourishing.

Thus, Popper's notion of a democratic society is one that represents his idea of an open society where traditions, policies, institutions, and rulers are open to constant criticisms. Here, leaders do not attempt to impose themselves and their policies on the society and her people. Democratic governance is not about the supremacy of a particular person (ruler), his choices and desires. Rather an aggregation of the wishes and desires of the whole in the formulation of societal policies for the greater good and the flourishing of all. Hence, government is institutionalised and acts as check via criticisms and critical scrutiny of the process of decision making and governance in the society. This is therefore evident in the operations of the democratic structures now evident in most countries across the globe.

Conclusion

In this paper we have looked basically at Karl Popper's notion of democracy as a system of government. In doing so we highlighted the centrality of political leadership in the society and the desire to advance the sort of leadership that will be directly responsive to the basic goods of human flourishing in any given society especially in the contemporary times. We have also noted that in as much as there exist an obvious nexus between leadership, individual flourishing and societal advancement; it is regrettable to observe that in most countries of the world and especially the 'third world' democratic leadership especially is not sufficiently insulated from the immediate dangers of unproductive and misguided leaders. This reality has resulted in the situation where the wishes and expectations of the people are mostly treated with levity and reckless abandon. The consequence is that the supposed basic goods imperative for human flourishing that should necessarily come with insightful and productive leadership remains a mirage.

Unfortunately, despites obvious incapacities often demonstrated by these leadership in delivering on the demands of their positions getting rid of them in most cases becomes a herculean task basically as a result of weaker institutions and sit-tight mentality of many leaders. As such the imperative of ensuring deep rooted democratic structures that guarantees checks and balances makes Karl Popper's perspective on democracy relevant in this context. This is because for Karl Popper, this sort of leadership would only be gotten in a democratic government that derives legitimacy from the mandate freely given by the people

and through democratic instruments the people retains the power to moderate extreme tendencies and the power to withdraw their mandate. The democratic government according to Popper will offer the people of any political space two fundamental rights; the right to open criticism on a one hand and control of their government through leadership engagement and dismissal via periodic elections on the other hand. The implication of the above is that, the people will continue to have a say in the government that concerns them and in the event of leadership degeneration, the people will oust and change such a government quickly and seamlessly without recourse to rancor, violence and bloodshed. This is chiefly hinged on the consciousness of the fact that the basic goods that will ensure delivery of democratic dividends needed for human flourishing can only come about when leaders are made to be accountable and responsible to the people.

Therefore, for Popper, the possibility of ending up with a bad and unproductive leadership presupposes the need to have an institutionalised design that will continually act as check and balances on leadership performance in the public sphere. When leaders are found wanting in the discharge of their duties, the people reserve the right to seamlessly rejuvenate the political sphere by sacking failed leaders and replacing same with people whom they believe possess the capacity to deliver on their wishes and expectations. This process continues unabated until the people get the leaders they desire. This flexible process of leadership selection and dismissal inherent in the democratic tradition tends to over time build the consciousness of politicians (leaders) to always endeavour to live up to the mandate of their positions by pursuing agendas, policies, programs and projects that are people oriented and that will ensure the attainment of the basic goods of human flourishing in the society.