

ch. 2 - What is Democracy? Why Democracy?

1. Definition

Democracy is a form of government in which the rulers are elected by the people.

2. Features of Democracy :-

i) In a democracy the final decision-making power must rest with those elected by the people.

Case Study - Pakistan

General Pervez Musharraf led a military coup in October 1999. He declared himself 'Chief Executive' and later became President. In August 2002 he issued a 'Legal Framework Order' giving power to President to dismiss the assemblies. The work of the civilian cabinet is supervised by a National Security Council which is dominated by military officers. So though the elections were conducted, the final power rests with military officers. Other examples are role of the USSR in communist Poland and that of the US in contemporary Iraq.

ii) A democracy must be based on a free and fair election where those currently in power have a fair chance of losing.

Case Study - China & Mexico

The National People's Congress of China has the power to appoint the President. Its members ~~also~~ need the approval of the Chinese Communist Party. So the government is always formed by the Communist Party.

In Mexico, every election is won by a party called PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) because of dirty tricks.

⇒ All those who were employed in government offices had to attend its party meetings.

⇒ Teachers of government schools used to force parents to vote for the PRI.

- ⇒ Media largely ignored the activities of opposition political parties.
- ⇒ Sometimes the polling booths were shifted in the last minute.
- ⇒ The PRI spent a large sum of money in the campaign for its candidates.

iii) In a democracy, each adult citizen must have one vote and each vote must have one value.

Case Studies

- ⇒ In Saudi Arabia women do not have the right to vote.
 - ⇒ Estonia has made its citizenship rules so that Russian minority do not get the right to vote.
 - ⇒ In Fiji, vote of an indigenous Fiji has more value than that of an Indian-Fijian.
- iv) A democratic government rules within limits set by constitutional law and citizens' rights.

Case Study - Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe attained independence from white minority rule in 1980. Since then the country has been ruled by ZANU-PF with the leader Robert Mugabe. President Mugabe is popular but uses unfair practices:-

- ⇒ Government has changed the constitution several times to increase the powers of the President and make him less accountable.
- ⇒ Opposition party workers are harassed and their meetings disrupted.
- ⇒ Public protests and demonstrations are declared illegal.
- ⇒ There is a law that limits the right to criticise the President.
- ⇒ Television and radio are controlled by the government.
- ⇒ Government harasses those independent newspaper's journalists who go against it.
- ⇒ The government has ignored some court judgements and has pressurised judges.

5. Arguments against democracy

- i) Leaders keep changing in a democracy. This leads to instability.
- ii) Democracy is all about political competition and power play; there is no scope for morality.
- iii) So many people have to be consulted in a democracy that it leads to delays.
- iv) Elected leaders do not know the best interest of the people. It leads to bad decisions.
- v) Democracy leads to corruption for it is based on electoral competition.
- vi) Ordinary people don't know what is good for them; they should not decide anything.

6. Arguments for democracy

- i) A democratic government is a better government because it is a more accountable form of government.

Case study - China

China faced famine in 1958-1961. Nearly 3 crore people died.

The existence of democracy in India made the Indian government respond to food scarcity in a better way. No large-scale famine has ever taken place in an independent and democratic country. Democracy is better than any other form of government in responding to the needs of the people.

- ii) Democracy improves the quality of decision making
A democratic decision always involves many persons, discussions and meetings. This takes time but reduces the chance of rash or irresponsible decisions.
- iii) Democracy provides a method to deal with differences and conflicts
Differences in society leads to conflicts. The conflict can be solved by brutal power. But that would lead to resentment and unhappiness. Democracy provides the only peaceful solution to this problem. In democracy, no one is a permanent winner and no one is permanent loser.

iv) Democracy enhances the dignity of citizens
Democracy is based on the principle of political equality, on recognising that the poorest and the least educated has the same status as the rich and educated. People are the rulers and if they make mistakes, they are responsible for their conduct.

v) Democracy allows us to correct its own mistakes.
There is a space for public discussion on the mistakes. And there is a room for correction. Either the rulers have to change their decisions, or the rulers can be changed.

5. Broader meanings of democracy
The majority of people rule through their elected representatives.

This becomes necessary because:

⇒ Modern democracies involve such a large number of people that it is physically impossible for them to sit together and take a collective decision.

⇒ Even if they could, the citizen does not have the time, the desire or the skills to take part in all the decisions.

Other aspects to which the word democracy relates to are:

i) A democratic decision involves consultation with and consent of all those who are affected by that decision. This can apply to a government or a family or any other organisation. Thus democracy is also a principle that can be applied to any sphere of life.

ii) Sometimes we use the word democracy not to describe any existing government but to set up an ideal standard that all democracies must aim to become.

No country is a perfect democracy. Every democracy has to try to realise the ideals of a democratic decision-making. This requires a constant effort by government as well as citizens.

This is the strength and the weakness of democracy: the fate of the country depends not just on what the rulers do, but mainly on what citizens do. This is what distinguished democracy from other governments.