

DEMOCRATIC TYRANNY  
AND  
THE ISLAMIC PARADIGM



Democratic  
Tyranny  
*and*  
The Islamic  
Paradigm

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# 'Democratic' Tyranny

**T**HE MODERN 'democratic' world lives under the delusion that the much-vaunted democratic liberal political institutions of the West, the so-called 'civilised' world, somehow provide a guarantee of man's freedom and that this is the only natural and just form of governance possible. Indeed, in the modern world, so pervasive is this assumption, that it seems almost impossible to conceive of any other 'reasonable' form of governance.

Although people are very free in their use of the word 'democracy', it is very rare that anyone actually knows what 'democracy' really is. 'Human rights', 'liberty', 'equality' and 'democracy' have become emotive slogans that are parroted without any thought for what they actually mean – 'by the people, of the people, for the people.' What does it mean? What is this democratic ideal? Their actual meaning and their origins and consequences are largely ignored and indeed forgotten. They are slogans lacking in any real content.

Certainly the democracy bandied about today has nothing to do with its generally supposed origin, the democracy of the ancient Athenians, which was a very different concept indeed, nor is it based on a spiritual equality derived from a theoretical concept of universal Christian brotherhood which would envisage all its members as spiritual brothers who are all equal on the basis of their faith. If democracy did not come from the Greeks nor from the European Judaeo-Christian tradition, then where did it come from?

It will be shown that modern 'democracy' is actually the child of liberal individualism, which in turn rose from

the ruins of the Universal Church after Luther, Calvin and Henry VIII succeeded in demolishing it. It will be seen that the Reformation, and Calvin in particular, were not only answerable for two things: the legalisation of usury and the opening of the gates to the accumulation of wealth on a previously unprecedented scale, but also for providing the model for the foundations of the modern nation-state. It was Geneva, not France, which gave birth to Rousseau. Artificial credit growth and 'democracy' are all too often to be found going hand-in-hand.

This poses many questions about the true nature of the modern political system and its relationship with the underlying economic structure. To obtain an understanding of this system that has become all pervasive, we must go back to the beginnings of Western political theory.



# The Plato Scenario

**F**IRST WE MUST examine the political origins of the West in the ancient world. When the ideas of republicanism and democracy began to be bandied about after the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the classical models were thought of as the ancient models of just government. But what did the Greeks really think? What was this original democracy?

For the ancient Greeks, governance fell basically into three fundamental categories – democracy, monarchy and oligarchy<sup>1</sup> and these were much discussed and debated. Although Athens was the propagator of democracy, almost all the Greek thinkers who have come down to us rejected democracy as an inferior form of government – no doubt based on empirical experience, and thought of monarchy as an intermediate form. This, of course, is not hereditary monarchy, but the rule of a single leader.

At its pinnacle in the time of Pericles, offices in Athens were filled by lots and the officials were directed by the decisions taken by the Assembly which included, in principle, every Athenian citizen (excluding women, slaves and foreigners). Every citizen had *isegoria*, the right to express himself regarding a decision before that decision was taken or before a war was embarked on. They would never have called modern ‘democracy’ democracy. They would have called it ‘elective oligarchy’. When was the last time a modern electorate was asked if it wanted to go to war? Furthermore, in the course of his lifetime, every citizen would inevitably participate in the administrative

branch of the government at some point. But ‘democracy’ was by no means beneficial or benevolent towards those unfortunate enough not to be Athenians, and to be at the receiving end of this ‘democracy’ was not at all pleasant (as in the case of Melos.<sup>2</sup>)

In *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, we find Thucydides describing the destruction of a political system that might well be described as Athenian enlightened self-interest. His thesis is that an individualist and democratic order releases great energy which, when directed by sound leadership as in the case of Pericles, provides security, prestige and economic gain.<sup>3</sup> However, the system is fundamentally unstable and will be ultimately destroyed. Thucydides much admired the more closed oligarchic structure of Sparta for its stability. He describes what happened to Athens after Pericles<sup>4</sup>:

Pericles, by his rank, ability and known integrity, was able to exercise an independent control over the masses – to lead them instead of being led by them; for as he never sought power by improper means, he was never compelled to flatter them...what was nominally a democracy became in his hands government by the first citizen. With his successors it was different. More on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude. This, as might have been expected in a great imperial state, produced a host of blunders. (II, 66)

Herodotus in particular pointed out that the goal of governance is stability and justice, while democracy, through its encouragement of rival cliques and its susceptibility to demagoguery, ends up as tyrannical rule. Or, on the other hand, corruption and malpractice can

lead to mutually supporting cliques until the ‘people’s champion’ arises and soon assumes absolute authority. One thing is noticeable – and that is the innate intolerance of democracy to other forms of governance – a tendency much in evidence today. Those who deviated from the norm tended to find themselves condemned to ostracism or even death – Socrates, Anaxagoras, Protagoras. You were free to express yourself, but could find yourself in trouble if you said the wrong thing or had the wrong friends.

For these men who criticised democracy, they thought that the best ruler was the monarch or single ruler who respected the natural laws which were, in the end, God-given.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Athens functioned most efficiently under Pericles who was a strong and stable leader with great respect for the laws.

Aristotle is no less critical of democracy, considering it to be wrong and degenerate, and mentions demagogues as the greatest peril:

Demagogues arise in states where the laws are not sovereign. The people then become an autocrat – a simple composite autocrat made up of many members, with the many playing the sovereign, not as individuals...A democracy of this order, being in the nature of an autocrat and not being governed by law, begins to attempt an autocracy. It grows despotic; flatterers come to be held in honour; it becomes analogous to the tyrannical form of single-person government. (*Politics*, IV, iv, 26-28)<sup>6</sup>

The ultimate political analysis is found in Plato’s *Republic*<sup>7</sup> where he analyzes all types of power and the movement to democracy which goes hand-in-hand with the decline of human society, from timocracy to oligarchy to democracy and ultimately to tyranny. Oligarchy develops from timocracy when wealth flows into the stores of certain

individuals. His description of the effects of a wealth-oriented oligarchy is as apt today as it was then:

‘...In an oligarchy, then, this neglect to curb riotous living sometimes reduces to poverty men of a not ungenerous nature. They settle down in idleness, some of them burdened with debt, some disfranchised, some both at once; and these drones are armed and can sting. Hating the men who have acquired their property and conspiring against them and the rest of society, they long for a revolution. Meanwhile the usurers, intent upon their own business, seem unaware of their existence; they are too busy planting their own stings into any fresh victim who offers them an opening to inject the poison of their money; and while they multiply their capital by usury, they are also multiplying the drones and paupers. When the danger threatens to break out, they will do nothing to quench the flames, either in the way we mentioned, by forbidding a man to do what he likes with his own, or by the next best remedy, which would be a law enforcing a respect for right conduct. If it were enacted that, in general, voluntary contracts for a loan should be made at the lender’s risk, there would be less of this shameless pursuit of wealth and a scantier crop of those evils I have just described.’ (*Republic*, Chap 31.)

It is love of wealth and the stress on the honour derived from increasing it that causes virtue to be neglected and despised. In the oligarchy, the rulers are rich and everyone else is poor. Then the oligarchs seek to become richer still through usury while they neglect the education of the young, allowing them to become licentious and idle. So when the rulers become weak, the poor rise up and overthrow them – either with foreign help or through factions among the oligarchs. This democracy is, as he says, ‘full of all freedom of action, and of speech, and of liberty,

to do in it what any one inclines.' Thus a person's appetites are many and varied. He follows one at one moment and another at another moment. As wealth was the slogan of oligarchy, so 'liberty' is the slogan of democracy. Plato gives a brilliant description of life in a democracy when he describes the democratic young man:

Knowledge, right principles, true thoughts, are not at their post; and the place lies open to the assault of false and presumptuous notions... Modesty and self-control, dishonoured and insulted as the weaknesses of an unmanly fool, are thrust out into exile; and the whole crew of unprofitable desires take a hand in banishing moderation and frugality, which, as they will have it, are nothing but churlish meanness. So they take possession of the soul which they have swept clean, as if purified for initiation into higher mysteries; and nothing remains but to marshal the great procession bringing home Insolence, Anarchy, Waste and Impudence, whose resplendent divinities are crowned with garlands, whose praises they sing under flattering names: Insolence, they call good breeding, Anarchy freedom, Waste magnificence, and Impudence a manly spirit.

... He declares that one appetite is as good as another and all must have their equal rights. So he spends his days indulging the pleasure of the moment, now intoxicated with wine and music, and then taking to a spare diet and drinking nothing but water; one day in hard training, the next doing nothing at all, the third apparently immersed in study. Every now and then he takes a part in politics, leaping to his feet to say whatever comes into his head... His life is subject to no order or restraint, and he has no wish to change an existence which he calls pleasant, free, and happy.

Then matters proceed to the next stage. Plato says, 'out

of no other republic is tyranny constituted but out of democracy, out of the most excessive liberty I imagine comes the greatest and most savage tyranny.' Eventually an adventurer and a demagogue, usually with military background, calls himself 'the friend of the people' and sets himself up as president or prime minister. Then he needs a bodyguard to protect him, thus establishing his power. Thus unrestrained liberty results in unrestrained servitude.

Certainly the description of the character of the people which ultimately leads to the despotic state is much like the situation today:

Law-abiding citizens will be insulted as nonentities who hug their chains; and all praise and honour will be bestowed on rulers who behave like subjects and subjects who behave like rulers... The parent falls into the habit of behaving like the child, and the child like the parent; the father is afraid of his sons, and they show no fear or respect for their parents, in order to assert their freedom. Citizens, resident aliens, and strangers from abroad are all on an equal footing. To descend to smaller matters, the schoolmaster timidly flatters his pupils, and the pupils make light of their masters as well as of their attendants. Generally speaking, the young copy their elders, argue with them, and will not do as they are told; while the old, anxious not to be thought disagreeable tyrants, imitate the young and condescend to enter into their jokes and amusements.

The outcome of all this excessive freedom can only be excessive subjection. The despot has not a friend in the world he can trust because he is under the dominance of his desires. He is the most miserable of men, full of fears and desires, never satisfied, never secure.

In the end of *The Republic* Plato concludes that the

polity must have governance and that the best ruler is the philosopher-king rather than the *demos* (the people), an ideal which may well be unobtainable in this world, but is nonetheless true. In *The Laws*, he states that in the absence of a moral ruler who can react to situations and implement the laws in the best possible manner, the code of laws is the best instrument of government and the rulers are the 'guardians of the laws'. No one has yet equalled Plato's succinct description of political forms and how they reflect the moral state of man.

Another point that must be noted is the Athenian double standard, for while Athens was a democracy at **home**, it was an empire abroad in relation to the rest of the known world. As Thucydides quotes Pericles in a speech:

Again, your country has a right to your services in sustaining the glories of her position. These are a common source of pride to you all, and you cannot decline the burdens of empire and still expect to share its honours. The issue is not only slavery or independence, but also loss of empire and danger from the animosities to which it has exposed you. Besides, to recede is no longer possible, if indeed any of you in the alarm of the moment has become enamoured of the honesty of such an unambitious part. What you hold is, to speak frankly, a despotism; perhaps it was wrong to take it, but to let it go is unsafe. (ii, 63)

He goes on:

If we should be forced to yield, still it will be remembered that we held rule over more Greeks than any other Greek state, that we sustained the greatest wars against their united or separate powers, and inhabited a city unrivalled by any other in resources or

magnitude. These glories may incur the censure of the slow and unambitious; but in the breast of energy they will awake emulation...’ (ii, 64)

This was an economic as well as political imperialism. Some time in the early 440’s, the Athenians passed a decree prescribing the use of Athenian currency, weights and measures throughout the Confederacy. The decree even went so far as to say: ‘If anyone proposes or votes in this matter that it is legitimate to use foreign coinage or to make a loan therein he is to be reported to the Eleven without delay. The Eleven shall pass sentence of death.’ Hardly a libertarian measure!

### Notes

1. Plato has four, including timocracy, a form of government dominated by ambition, as in Sparta, and Aristotle gives two types of each: kingship, aristocracy, polity, tyranny, oligarchy and democracy.

2. The island of Melos was conquered by Athens in 416 BC because they refused to pay tribute – whereupon all men of military age were killed and the rest of the populace imprisoned. Thucydides describes a meeting between the Athenians and the Melians in which the Athenians state that it is natural that ‘the stronger should rule the weaker’, i.e. democracy was only for the Athenians.

3. Mind you, Socrates was not averse to pointing out that these ‘great leaders’ failed abysmally to elevate those under them: ‘You praise the men who feasted the citizens and satisfied their desires and people say that they have made the city great, not seeing that the swollen and ulcerated conditions of the State is to be attributed to these elder statesmen, for they have filled the city full of harbours, docks and walls and left no room for justice and temperance.’ (Gorgias)

4. Of course, at the end of his life, the Athenians convicted Pericles of theft and nearly executed him.

5. The question of the Greek view of the God-given nature of the laws would require a lengthy discussion. In Homer, the King’s judgement of laws are called *themistes*, as originating from Themis, the embodiment of divine authority. This is reinforced by *dike*, justice which became embodied in a goddess in Hesiod. Originally *dike* was the declaration of that which is *themis*, so the two are connected. *Nomos* is more secular,



## *The Plato Scenario*

like custom or conventional usage.

6. This is like what Edmond About said about the French democrat who 'looks with pride at his face in the glass as he shaves in the morning, remembering that he is the forty-millionth part of a tyrant, and forgetting that he is the whole of a slave.'

7. The word for 'Republic' is *politeia* or polity, which really means a political constitution in general.

*The Republic* should not be taken as Plato's vision of an attainable state – it is an extreme illustration of the ultimate consequences of certain political principles when put into practice. A more attainable and pragmatic model of governance is found in *The Laws*.