

The deficiencies of electoral democracy: democracy for whom?

Democracy is often presented by mainstream democratic and development discourse as an unproblematic concept ubiquitously associated with political competition between rival parties or candidates. Simply put, it's about people's ability to elect a political regime or leaders of their choice.

Such a neutral definition of democracy obscures issues of power and interests inherent in this concept. Consequently, many of Africa's indigenous political elite have been perpetuating the same client-patron model of politics of their colonial predecessors, resulting into widespread tendencies of corruption, opaque policy-making processes and unaccountable governance on the continent. This type of politics has enabled easy access for those with wealth and political connection to the citadels of power. Democracy thus becomes a vehicle for the maintenance of elite dominance.

In South Africa, the pre-1994 transitional process was embodied by a so-called democratic pact between the government in waiting and the white government at the time. Whilst this process ended with a political result, mainstream analysts tend to discard the class compromises or economic concessions that were linked to the political negotiations. Interestingly, the details of the negotiations remain opaque. Christi van der Westhuizen cogently makes the point in her seminal writing "*White Power & the Rise and Fall of the National Party*" that the pre-1994 negotiations was not only about creating the parameters for a Government of National Unity, but it was also, at least from the side of the NP, to embed white economic power for the foreseeable future. For example, she points out that F.W. De Klerk emphasised that the NP had contributed to the formulation of GEAR and supported its final approval because it reflected NP economic thinking.

The outcome has been a liberal democratic constitution with an economic policy vision laced with a programme of economic liberalisation, which disproportionately entrenched the mutual class interests of both the white and emerging black bourgeoisie. The upshot of this scenario is that it may lead to a form of democracy that has very little relevance to and implications for the majority of citizens. This is particularly so because democracy as a political system cannot be treated separately from the socio-economic structures of society. As a matter of fact, citizens cannot realise their right to political and civil liberties without a measure of economic resources, most notably time, money and education that are distributed unevenly between different sections of the population. For example, poor people suffering the scourge of unemployment, hunger and disease have very little chance of exercising voice to articulate their rights in public spaces. Hence, their ability to influence decision-making processes remains slim. Thus the "democratic game" tends to be reduced by the power of entrenched elites, and what is acceptable to these elites frequently provides the boundaries of democratic politics.

On this score, it's unsurprising that the current "elite" electricity crisis is ubiquitously referred to as a national emergency, whilst many of the country's poor has been without electricity since the advent of our democratic order. It's also not difficult to comprehend the vile justice meted out to Mr. Phineas Johnson and his wife, Mrs. Maria Mnisi, by safety and security officials of the Soshanguve police station – reported in the City Press of 23 March, 2008. They were charged together with Mr. Fanie Hyman, who evicted them from his farm

after the couple suffered multiple abuses, for exhuming their baby's body. Hyman got released on R1000 bail and Johnson and Mnisi had to remain in custody because they could not pay bail of R200 each. Their ordeal is indicative of a democratic system of justice that tends to capitulate to those with money and power, whilst being callous to the poor.

Democracy is thus inherently about power and interest. For example, those with superior economic resources are most likely to influence the holders of state power as well as setting the agenda because of their economic strength and higher levels of education, and whilst electoral democracy does create the platform for poor people to demand rights, realising them is inconceivable in an environment of economic inequalities and asymmetries of power.

The total sum of my argument is that democracy is a contested concept rooted in entrenched class contradiction. The main fault line of procedural approaches to democracy is that it obscures the influences of power and interest on meanings of democracy. Meanwhile, whilst they concerned with equal legal or formal rights, they tend to underplay the extent to which these rights can be realised.

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