Logic of ‘Developmental Democracy’ and the Developmental State

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Prelude

I was recently reading a book in which a big question captivated my attentions: which democracy?\(^1\) The question came as part of the search by the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Council for working out what it calls a ‘Universal Declaration of Basic Principles of Democracy’. Fortunately, the document avoids any reference to any ideological backgrounds of ‘democracy’ understood and ironed out by the Council for application to all human societies. Unfortunately, the document skips away the descriptive (positivist) side of democracy. It simply jumps on to its prescription, where it exposes 27 values of universal applicability, probably the easiest intellectual undertaking without pain. Nonetheless, it soon brings several challenges of concept and practice into light in the ensuing internationalization of the so-called ‘Universal Principles’. Amongst these, ‘which democracy?’, is by far the most vibrant one.\(^2\)

This quizzical phrase, which democracy?, has been the consequence of unconscious or unconscious insights into the particularities of global societies in face of the prescribed ‘universal values of democracy’. A list of scholars behind this project theoretically tested the 27 values against real-politick of past and present generation of states. They found out quickly that, however, some philosophical and political observations by some people of big name stand rather as universally valid values than any intellectual idealization of democracy. I out rightly accept, Aristotle, when he said millenniums ago: In democracy, liberty is to be supposed; for it is commonly held that no man is free in any government. The meaning is clear: democracy is a relative notion. Democracy does never ever refer to the Utopian understanding of some people as a political system without restraints on freedom, which the reason d’être the state as inalienable institution to human social organization.

Winston Churchill of Britain went far deeper and straighter forward than Aristotle in his description of democracy as follows:

Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-lies. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

By this Churchill, the distant very offshoot of John Lock, the father of liberal democracy, admitted that democracy has always had its own limitations except that it is better than other systems. It is also noteworthy that Churchill described democracy never as a dogma but as a dynamic system ever in the search for the batter one. In other words, the

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\(^1\)Universal declaration on democracy, adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Council at its 161st session, (Cairo, 16 September 1997).

\(^2\)DEMOCRACY: ITS PRINCIPLES AND ACHIEVEMENT, Publication prepared and edited by the Inter-Parliamentary Union Texts contributed by: Cherif Bassiouni (General Rapporteur), Inter-Parliamentary Union Geneva 1998
door always remains open for the systematic discovery of a better and more relevant concept and exercise of democracy in tune with each and particular socio-cultural reality. Sharpening the teeth of democracy is therefore making it more look like the background social and cultural map rather than living in a fantasy in its developed functioning elsewhere. This general convention, assumed as a generally accepted argument, has led to the birth of such concepts like ‘democratization, institutionalization, liberalization, etc,’ all denoting that democracy is rather universally relative and a basket of varieties.

In recent years, we have been observing a great shift from doubts of liberal democracy as a relevant value to the realities of developing states to serious attempts to parcel a more particularistic notion and practice of democracy, ironically largely by western scholars. ‘Developmental democracy’, the focus of this paper comes top of the list in this project underway now.

1. Developmental Democracy: Critics and Criticisms

The concept ‘developmental democracy’ is surely an odd terminology evidently absent in the rubrics of liberal democracy and its various brands and branches. There have been recent attempts going on by scholars in the global South to conceptualize and limit the meanings and borders of ‘developmental democracy’. Unfortunately, no one may find an Ethiopian name in this attempt. Ironically, there is a large pile of scholarly literatures from both inside and outside dismissing academic projects, which strive at explaining ‘developmental democracy’. However, most critical arguments about the ‘anomalous nature’ of developmental democracy have so far been largely inconsistent and far from being to the point. The success of developmental states in rapid socio-economic advancement picks up the largest credit to turn these critics even at a loss of systematized criticism.

A close examination of these critics reveals the following general trends among the leading scholars:

A. The ‘Impossibility’ thesis

Flat rejection of the possibility in the conceptual growth and functioning of ‘developmental democracy’ is the first and commonplace trend. Scholars of this category argue that academia or political ideologues could hardly invent and cultivate a differently novice brand of democracy out of the existing ones, which have had originated in the Western philosophical landscape. For these scholars, a discovery of third path in democracy is almost impossible for a set of reasons.

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3 According to Cherrif Basssoni, one of the sources of this intellectual and political confusion is the fact that the term democracy is often used interchangeably and without distinction with respect to three different concepts for which the term is employed. They are: 1. Democracy as a process, with all that which it comports of mechanisms, procedures and formalities — from political organization to elections. 2. Democracy as a state, or condition, (un etat, the French equivalent, which more aptly conveys this meaning than its English counterpart), with all which this condition implies for given civil society and its governance, including the processes of democracy and maybe also democratic outcomes. 3. Democracy as an outcome, is putting into effect policies and practices which are generally agreed upon by the governed. Such an outcome may or may not be the result of a condition or state, and it may or may not be the product of democratic processes.
Firstly, liberal democracy has already proven a success story not only as a path of socio-economic advancement but also as a victorious ideology overall others, pronounced and orchestrated hitherto. This argument poses empirical and theoretical justifications from liberal democracy as a historically tested and unchallenged human civilization superseding all other conceptual projects to the opposite;

Secondly, any search for a third path of democracy is impossible because liberal democracy stands as a dynamic option with inherent capacity to absorb the conceptual and epistemological justifications of all other attempts. So far, there might be such attempts, according to this argument, as democracy in favor of collective rights, state involvement in democratization and so on, but liberal democracy surely engulfs all these making open venues for any other alternative historically and academically closed.

B. The ‘procedural universality’ thesis

Most straightforward critics within this line of thought rather capitalize on ‘procedural democracy’ as the ultimate panacea for treating the sick politics of developing societies in the South. The message is clear: the ordinary voter people are ignorant. They understand simple procedures of democracy more easily and clearly than the complex and elitist jargons of substantive democracy. From this, these scholars progress to argue that emphasis on substantive democracy by the state is a smokescreen to shield embedded authoritarianism.

In tune with these arguments, a long list of ruling and opposition parties in Africa and other developing states have named themselves after such nomenclatures like ‘social, liberal, neoliberal democracy,’ etc,. For this group of thinkers and actors, democracy in developing states should not be a scarce and manipulated commodity from above or from below and the charity of elites. One should access ‘democracy’ at the market as freely as one finds other products of human labor. Making the right decision is up to the individual, and never the worry of any state or political actor. For these scholars and politicians, no human being is so much ignorant as failing to play the right rules of the game in procedural democracy if the state levels the field and disengages from the practical conduct of the competition.

This line of argument understands and describes the state as a neutral body to democracy and competition where it should only arbitrate the game like a referee in a football field. Western scholars of the classical age, on their part, paint this typology of the state as an ‘umpire state’ or the ‘neutral institution’ in the fashion of John Locke’s liberal design of the post-1688 British state. These scholars and politicians scarcely doubt the applicability of ‘procedural democracy’ in Africa with this interpretation in the actual exercise of politics. They out rightly mention, for example, peaceful government changes in Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, South Africa, and others through free and fair, periodic and procedural elections.

I remember an Eritrean critic in the web probably living in the United States, who went as far as ranking ‘democracies’ in Eastern Africa from the best to the worst by procedural criteria—Kenya, Ethiopia and Eritrea in respective order. This critic openly expressed

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4 David Lipson, Great Issues of Politics, Chicago, 1974, argues that how much the state should involve in matter that could fall within the domain of the individual citizen is determined not by dreaming but by a combination of objective and subjective factors that call for its doing or undoing.
deeper satisfaction when he saw that the former Kenyan President, Kibaki, admitted his loss instantly, and transferred his office readily to the incumbent president, from which Ethiopia and Eritrea have to learn and learn. I also remember intellectual oppositions in Ethiopia during the 2005 election stressing and guiding the course of the election debate onto ‘procedural democracy’ as a real test to the authoritarianism.

This argument sounds, in some particular sense, a positive view of democracy, at least, at face value. Nonetheless, it is equally dangerous to argue flatly, grossly, and arbitrarily that procedural democracy is unmistakable option left for developing societies. Why? We will return to the point promptly.

C. The ‘mere growth’ thesis

This is an argument that greatly reduces parcels of ‘developmental democracy’ or any other similar brand as a Chinese political philosophy expressed as an ‘obsession with material growth’. Some go further associating non-liberal tracks and marks of democracy or any such attempt in developing states as ‘state priority of the belly over the mind’. This is common in countries where the developmental state has recorded unexpected, even miraculous, proportion of a broad based socio-economic development. The commonplace saying in reducing possibilities of developmental democracy in this case is this: it is true that there is impressive development; the problem is that this has come at the expense of freedom and democracy. I came across recently with this line of bitter criticism against almost all developmental states from Botswana in Africa to Singapore in Asia.

This thesis also makes its appearances at the press and official releases and communiqués of international civil societies in various self-appointed intervention areas. One such communiqué once describes Ethiopia and China comparatively as states of ‘democratic deficits’ in the cover of the need and priority for ‘bread surpluses’. For this line of thought, there are always ingredients of authoritarianism behind any attempt to doubt and constrain the free ride of liberal democracy in the fashion of its Western brand.

It is against this background that this paper tries to parcel the logic and grammar of developmental democracy.

2. Logic of Developmental Democracy

Firstly, if I am not excessively reductionist, democracy in any of its definitions is nothing but a value system, institutional network and legal framework for the free exercise of guaranteed rights recognized and protected by the civilized community. This implies that the exercise of basic rights by citizens as a constituent realm of modern democracy needs an adequate level of civic capacity. What is civic capacity? Civic capacity is what citizens of the Global North have while those of the Global South severely lack, not as individuals but as a society at large—rugged individualism, economic autonomy from the state, urban social base, industrial source of livelihood, infrastructures, literacy, information, free market enterprise, etc. These societal necessaries are never, however, gifts from the heaven or earthly blessings but evolutionary outgrowths within temporally and spatially bounded objective and subjective processes;
Secondly, as a consequence to the above, all these requirements of liberal democracy are a meager possibility in developing states, as history never repeats itself in any manner. In other words, the triumph of capitalism in the global north meant the persistence and further entrenchments of pre-capitalist structures in the Global South. The poor mass of agrarian societies has no any appetite for liberal democracy for the fact that they have been structurally an oddity to individualistic, market-led, civil, urban, and literate social norms of western liberalism. As such, liberal democracy is the gravest value vacuum in poor states for that fact that it seriously lacks the appropriate socio-economic basis. As the western saying goes to nail, a starved man knows no reason. In clearest terms also from the Ethiopian proverb, liberal democracy in illiberal societies is like a search for the dung where there were no cows;

Thirdly, imposing liberal democracy among illiberal societies has never been something practically untested. A dozen of African and Latin American states attempted at the liberal project under the auspices of Western liberal value entrepreneurs but the explicit and handy reward were a domino of mass unrests and a chain of revolutionary overthrows of a regime after regime for almost more than half a century. Worse than this, as Frank once commented, some politicians thought what he calls a ‘mockery of history’ in their naïve attempts to undertake a top down artificial bourgeoisie revolution in the 1950s’ Brazil to initiate a bottom-up growth of a liberal capitalist class in a manner like what happened in France and Britain centuries ago. This was, of course, not only a desperate but also a utopian project where these leaders and scholars fruitlessly tried to control and subject the independent march of history to manmade interests and demands;

Fourthly, though the above generally explain the structural truths of liberal democracy among illiberal societies (modernist liberal democracy), this does not mean that every society everywhere has been a uniform socio-economic and cultural map. Societies of the global south are essentially pre-capitalist, agrarian and pastoralist communities in demographic terms but with several pockets of urban centers and urbanites. These two categories of social establishments could never entertain similar and uniform tests and demands about democracy. Urbanites tend naturally to crave for western model of liberal democracy for the simple reason that they share some attributes with western liberal societies but without significant majority backup. Conversely, western societies are significantly urban but with some vestiges of agrarian and differently defined pastoral communities. This demographic parcel is important because it marks the distinction between two social groups within one single structure but with differing tests of democracy.

In our case, therefore, while tastes of liberal democracy go to be the domains of the extremely minority urban social group, there must be another brand of democracy for the vast majority of illiberal agrarian and pastoralist society as well as urban poor communities.

3. Operations of ‘Developmental Democracy’

The approaches by the United Nations and its agencies have worried about the transplantable possibility of liberal democracy into the very different structures of pre-capitalist societies of the South. This led them to invent new methods of measuring

socio-economic performances, for instance, in poor states, other than GDP, through what they call ‘Human Development Index’, despite a lip service by western liberal leaderships and scholarships alike. If this is the case in the socio-economic sphere, what is its equivalent in the democratic sphere? Here lies the fundamental question of 64,000 dollars’ worth. The insurance and protection of first and second-generation rights, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, and democratic rights, have a social surrogate and sanctuary in the West represented by the emergence and consolidation of the liberal capitalist class. This class assumed leadership through an effective bottom-up revolutionary action and forged ahead to nurture liberalism and liberal democracy as broad-based social consciousness.

A. Positive state engagements

The logic of ‘developmental democracy’ is relatively, if not reductively, a simple calculus once we may agree on the above structural truths. The three generations of rights had better explain the matter. The first generation of rights, civil rights and civil liberties, in Western Europe and the United States followed by the second generation of rights, democratic, rights have obviously fallen behind automatic applications to developing states in the Global South. For developing states, the domain of democracy is not, therefore, any exception to the economic, social and cultural domains in that all of these projects are a practical impossibility without adequate and top-down state sponsorship and intervention.

Democracy is a task, unfortunately, going to the state in developing societies simply because the social structure of developing societies did not have a liberally competent social class capable of overtaking this mission, unlike the case in the West. Developmental democracy is never a blind restriction on the exercise of civil rights and civil liberties of social groups in urban centers. These social groups are free in the field to play the game of democracy not by state blessing but because of their socio-economic standing as independent citizens from state sponsorship. Most private presses, civil societies, opposition leaders, ardent critics and so on are well informed, better capable, self-sufficient and self-sponsoring that the state assumes that they could play the game without necessarily violating the rules. Developmental democracy is therefore a condition for them to play freely but social elevation of their targets, the poor mass, to grow capable to understand them.

The conflict however arises when these urbanite actors fantasize that the state should prim its leveraging hands in the advantages of the majority for the exclusive benefits of the minority. Developmental democracy, like liberal democracy, has established borders where these urban actors must absorb. They are under duty, for example, to obey rules against violence, havoc and so on. These actors may contribute positively their own share in empowering the masses but under duty not to obstruct or unwarrantedly replace the state in its emancipative project of the latter.

B. End of marginalization

This is exactly the very location for the birth of the third generation of rights as worked out by the United Nations Agencies. These rights have dominated the pens and papers of progressive scholars, even within western university systems, simply because the emphasis on the first and second generation of rights, the essences of liberal democracy, greatly obscure the prior and basic demands of agrarian, pastoralist and poor urbanite
societies in the South. In the guise of free market rules and limited government, liberal democracy pushed mercilessly these communities further to the periphery while a few elites at the center were able to reap the trickle down fruits. Capitalist penetration into these non-capitalist communities systematically rendered them out of the game where they gradually lost their economic, social, cultural, and environmental guarantees, just as human beings. Under such systems, the skillful urban minority at the Center expands adrift to the periphery to devour on the marginalized majority, not to assist them to play according to the liberal rules of the game.

Developmental democracy is by no means hostile to these urban-based liberally oriented actors. It is rather the protector of their right to growth at their own efforts and never at the destruction of the poor majority. Developmental democracy achieves this by more of socially empowering the formerly marginalized mass and by less of sanctioning the market freedom of the few urbanites. In that sense, developmental democracy is the right of the mass to develop and undertake a well informed, a state assisted and guaranteed, equality-based and freely opted bargaining terms and powers in their socio-economic and cultural decisions in their relations with other actors of differing interests. Thus, not a mere end of marginalization of the masses but also assisting them to come and join the mainstream of the center is the very essence of developmental democracy while liberal democracy is only guarding the free field so that actors play by their own.

C. Protection of human dignity

Developmental democracy is, therefore, a committed loyalty to those at the periphery through the insurance and protection of third generation rights without sacrificing first and second generation of rights for those capable of exercising them at urban centers. Thus, developmental democracy is the provision, insurance, and protection of all generations of rights at the same time but as per the fragmented demands of its communities. This is quite different from the practice in the mainstream liberal democracy. Developed states, generally speaking, are so named because they do not have communities demanding for the exercise of third generation rights, as they are socio-economically self-sufficient, urban-based and culturally and socially individualistic. In that sense, developmental democracy is a recognition, provision, and protection of, primarily, human dignity of the vast majority.

It aligns with these communities and assists them to release and exploit their inner human potentials, which were sapped to their bloods to the sole advantages of urban capitalist claws. While the rewards of these preferential treatment is the benefit of all citizens, the coalition with these social groups is the guarantee of the developmental state to win consecutive, free and fair elections by all international standards. The state relies on its protection of human dignity as the ultimate energy source of not only its continued existence but also its attainments of development goals in a world where injustice characterizes the global wealth distribution.

D. All round and same-time provision of rights

Developmental democracy, as compared to liberal democracy, suffers the extreme urgencies of time and space. Time wise, developmental democracy cannot postpone the recognition of first and second generation of rights for the urbanite majority with almost all attributes of liberal democracy while it engages itself in uplifting the majority to the level where they become able to join the democratic enterprise in the liberal model. This
implies that developmental democracy is busy with the duty to recognize and provide all generations of right now and to all according to their demands and social positions. Developmental democracy works diligently to democratize the state through social empowerments of its society, while modernist liberal democracy prefers democratizing the society through a non-existent free market. Developmental democracy is never the cancellation of one priority over another but a systematic production of all priorities within the same period and everywhere.

Developmental democracy is an engagement to ensure collective as well as individualistic, private and public, procedural and substantive, distributive and retributive, etc, justices and rights of its society, all together and at the same time. It does not delay cultural rights or democratic rights, for example, until the society insures socio-economic development or vice versa. It starts and proceeds just with the existing profile of citizens, communities, and societies and never wait hands folded until a new generation of literate society emerges. Developmental democracy at this point is a continued process of democratization not simply and exclusively a few elites understand and exercise democracy, in general, but as how the majority on the ground it interprets and uses it. In developmental democracy, like in liberal democracy, number matters in that the active and free participation and dialogue finally leads to motion.

E. Global in thought, Local in action

As a multipurpose and all rounded project, developmental democracy is a continuous systemization, adaptation, and utilization of all progressive and human-centered values from any source but primarily for home consumption and permanent benefits. In that sense, developmental democracy is a nationalist commitment refusing internal and external uninvited pressures against its basic pillars. It respects all international norms and prescriptions to the advantages of both the national and global communities. It generously furnishes all venues of liberal democratic values to the extent that they never falsely obscure and override the distinct democratic demands of the vast majority. In clear phraseology, it allows the bigger fish to swim freely as far as it does not swallow the smaller fish in the name of free competition and free market rules.

However, developmental democracy is never an antithesis to the general rules of competition in both internal provision and utilization of human produces or in the global battle for accessing the better and the right share of national interests within the limits of human capacity. Midst this, it is a committed quest for friendly and mutually beneficial relations with all states of the world in fair and equal terms.

F. Democracy as a means and a goal

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6 Cherry Bassouni, editor of the ‘democracy: argues that conceptually, there are three basic paradigms which are addressed by contemporary commentators. They are: (i) the universality or relativity of democracy; (ii) democracy as a process or a condition; and (iii) democracy as methods and modalities or as substance and substantive outcomes. Historical experience reveals, however, that all these paradigms are equally valid because democracy can be all of the above.

7 InIWONO JDARSONO argues that this plea for understanding of the difficulties that the Southeast Asian nations face is one that critics across the world must take into account and appreciate. No amount of foreign assistance, of investment inflow or of private sector loans can make up for decades of torpor, inertia, and poverty. The worst thing that outsiders can do is to be insistently patronizing.
Unlike liberal and modernist liberal democracies, developmental democracy knows no limitations on the positive roles of the state and the freedom of citizens to release their potentialities. It believes that a politically oppressed and controlled people cannot have an economic or cultural freedom to contribute innovatively for themselves and the entire state. Developmental democracy is, therefore, lasting glue binding diverse interests and demands together pumping into a channel that integrates fragmented energies and efforts for combined common result. Developmental democracy is the supply of all best remedies to social conflicts at the expenses of violence and unpredictable government behavior and actions. Developmental democracy, in short, is a means to attain a higher goal, that is, both spiritual and material emancipation.

G. Participation as compensation for inexperience

Mass participation in policy matters is the pillar of developmental democracy, not simply because it is a right deserving formal protection. Participation goes far beyond this to fit exceptionally the political realities of developing societies for four additional key reasons.

Firstly, participation as a default route for lack of adequate liberal experience in the exercise of democracy compensates for lack of information and communication deficit among poorly informed and inexperienced majority. Secondly, participation generates a concerted power and influence of a poor mass over the state by compensating for lack of unified and positively oriented opposition parties. Thirdly, participation helps to insulate unpractical liberal fantasies to make their headways into illiberal communities to elite advantages by creating and establishing actual venues to the exposition of indigenous and localized wisdom as inputs to the policy process. Fourthly, participation is a conduit for rapid development of ‘social citizenship’, the very meaning of developmental democracy, by compensating the infantile growth level of politically and legally conscious ‘individualistic and civic citizenship’, which is inherent to capitalistic structure but a product, which, an agrarian social structure could not produce.

Conclusions

It is somehow expected and natural to read and hear severe criticism against the behaviors and operations of the developmental state and its brand of democracy in a world dominated by a dominant liberal information and communication machine. Ironically, criticisms tend to be harsher within developing states mostly as the result of urban temptation to modernity, which, ironically again, a number of western scholars seriously warn as ‘politically suicidal’.