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DEMOCRACY IN INDIA, TO AVOID 'A MILLION MUTINIES'

Miguel Angel Lara Otaola¹

Abstract: This essay will evaluate democracy's success both by democracy in its own right- according to its minimum definition- and, given India's particular context, by democracy as instrumental for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and for holding the country together. When evaluated by democracy's minimum definition and procedural conditions Indian democracy is successful. However, fulfilling these procedural conditions is not enough for measuring the general success of Indian democracy. Given India's particular context as a country with many languages, cultures, religions and social structures with tensions between them, an evaluation of democracy as an instrument for conflict prevention and resolution is a must. In this respect, democracy, as a system of rights that protects, incorporates and respects minorities, allows expression and is responsive to citizen's demands, is effectively instrumental, and thus successful, for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. However, Indian democracy still has many challenges. When democracy stops listening and responding to people's demands, starts going against freedoms and rights, and doesn't respect minorities, conflicts arise. Therefore, for preventing these conflicts and avoid 'a million mutinies' (Naipaul, 1990), democracy has to work. It is in the combination of these two features (democracy measured by its definition and as instrumental) where Indian democracy's success lies.

Keywords

Political liberalism, democracy, India, rule of law, accountability, comparative study

"It is hard to imagine that if India's multicultural diversity was to be organized as an enduring single state, it could be organized as anything else but a (...) democratic polity"
(Kohli, 2001: 18)

This essay will evaluate democracy's success both by democracy in its own right- according to its minimum definition- and, given India's particular context, by democracy as instrumental for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and for holding the country together. Both of these evaluations will be positive and determine that Indian democracy is successful; however, this doesn't mean that Indian democracy is without challenges for its consolidation. In India democracy has worked properly when measured in its own right. When evaluated by democracy's minimum definition and procedural conditions (as outlined by Bobbio, 2008; Dahl, 2000; Schmitter and Karl, 1996) - as a system with free, fair and frequent elections, universal suffrage and that guarantees certain freedoms and rights to its citizens - Indian democracy is successful. However, fulfilling these procedural conditions is not enough for measuring the general success of Indian democracy. Given India's particular context as a country with many languages, cultures, religions and social structures with tensions between them, an evaluation of democracy as an instrument for conflict prevention and resolution is a must. In this respect, democracy, as a system of rights that protects, incorporates and respects minorities, allows expression and is responsive to citizen's demands, is effectively instrumental, and thus successful, for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. However, Indian democracy still has many challenges, especially at the sub-national level. When democracy stops listening and responding to people's demands, starts going against freedoms and rights, and doesn't respect minorities, conflicts arise. Therefore, for preventing these conflicts and avoid 'a million mutinies' (Naipaul, 1990), democracy has to work. Consequently, if India wants to overcome its conflicts and prevent others from happening it should expand the success of its model. It is in the combination of these two features (democracy measured by its definition and as instrumental) where Indian democracy's success lies.

I. Success of democracy in its own right

A. Democracy and its minimal conditions

Democracy is a competitive system with free, fair and regular elections and universal suffrage where citizens are guaranteed their main freedom rights (Bobbio, 2008). For complementing this basic definition, democracy needs certain procedures for it to work. In this respect Robert Dahl (Dahl, 2000: 84-85) has outlined several procedural minimal conditions that enable modern representative democratic government. These are the following “elected officials; free, fair, and frequent elections; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; associational autonomy and; inclusive citizenship” (Dahl, 2000:85; (Schmitter and Karl, 1996:55). It is against this definition and conditions that Indian democracy will be evaluated.

B. India's minimal conditions for democracy

When measured against democracy's minimal definition and procedural conditions (Dahl, 2000:84-85), Indian democracy is and has been a success. Since its independence in 1947 and the 1950 Constitution, and except for an eighteen month period between 1975 and 1977, India at the national level has met these basic indicators of democracy. Since the first competitive general election in 1952 (Randall, 2000: 196) India has had 15 further general elections that have witnessed the coming and going of different ruling parties. The same has been true for most of state elections (Desai, 2005:14). In general these elections have been held at regular intervals (Gill, 1998:165) in which all political offices are contested (Kohli, 2001:3), and in which there's universal male suffrage (Page, 2005:5). Furthermore, these elections have been free; “those who govern do so because the voters choose them” (Gill, 1988:166) and fair “Indian voters regularly overthrowing incumbent parties, chief ministers and prime ministers through peaceful elections” (Gill, 1998: 166). Also, Indian democracy has been successful as well in regards to freedom of expression and association and the existence of alternative sources of information. India enjoys “considerable scope to express political dissent and protest” (Kohli, 2001: 3) as well as “one of the world's freest presses and electronic media” (Desai, 2005: 62), with the press remaining “vigorous, free, and unafraid to challenge the government” (Varshney, 1998:1). Plus, India has an “important associational life” (Randall, 1997:207) and an “active civil society” (Page, 2005: 63) integrated by groups so different as language movements, Dalit movements and student

movements, amongst others. However, this record of democratic conditions in India was absent between 1975 and 1977 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared 'Emergency rule'. During this period, Indira Gandhi bypassed institutions (Ganguly, 2003:15), damaged civil liberties and arrested and removed opposition leaders (Ganguly, 2003:15; Mishra, 2000:7). Paradoxically, this episode serves to confirm the character of India's democracy; when elections were resumed in 1977, and due to the abuses committed during the 'Emergency', Indira Gandhi's Congress Party was peacefully ousted from power by the citizens. However, fulfilling the procedural conditions of democracy is not sufficient to judge its general success. Democracy, specifically in the Indian case has to be evaluated as instrumental for resolving conflicts and holding the country together.

II. Success of democracy as instrumental

A. Diversity and tensions

India is a very plural country with many different social, religious, cultural and linguistic expressions. In relation to this, throughout its history and until today, India has suffered of constant religious, caste and regional tensions that have made it difficult both to administer and hold together. India has an immense diversity; India has almost as many ethnic groups as the entire African continent (LOC, 2004:7); has at least 114 languages (LOC, 2004:7); "is a religiously plural society" (Brown, 1985:17) where even its main religions, Hinduism and Islam, have variations within themselves; and is made up of many different castes and sub castes. In some cases this ethnic diversity and social structure has led to tensions and conflict throughout the country. Examples of this are the Hindu-Sikh problems in Punjab (Varshney, 1998:3), the violence related to caste inequalities in the Hindi heartland (Kohli, 2001:15), the tribal insurgencies in Telengala and Maharashtra, the increasing activism of the so-called backward castes (Kohli, 2001:15), the violent protests of the 'sons-of-the-soil' movements in Assam (Bhaumik, 2007: 1), the presence of Maoist rebels in Chattisgarh (Mohammed Ali, 2006:1), and of course the Hindu-Muslim conflict, marked by wars with Pakistan, Muslim separatist groups in Kashmir, etc. Naturally, this has led many to believe that democracy is against the odds in India and that it is a miracle by itself that the country is still together. However, these conflicts, although relevant, are not representative of India as a whole.

In fact, it is precisely democracy that has prevented many conflicts and thus a ‘million mutinies’ from exploding in India.

B. Democracy as a system for peaceful resolution of conflicts.

“What makes India survive and thrive is the willingness of people to talk to each other, to take advantage of the ballot box and to tell their rulers frequently where the limits of their tolerance and patient non-violent conduct are located” (Desai, 2005:9)

In spite of the many tensions outlined before, Indian democracy has survived for a long time and has adequately dealt with ethnic, religious and social demands and has peacefully resolved most of the country’s conflicts. This is because democracy, besides its minimal definition and procedures, protects pluralism and is a ‘system of rights’ that ‘helps people to protect their own fundamental interests’ (Dahl, 2000:48) and is responsive to citizen’s and group’s demands. In India this is evidenced because of the system’s moderation, inclusiveness and its commitment and responsiveness to minorities² and their rights. In this respect, in India the democratic system has worked properly. It has been representative and inclusive (Desai, 2005:56) and has incorporated India’s multicultural diversity (Kohli, 2001:11), accommodated and negotiated regional ambitions and interests (Kohli, 2001), and respected minorities and their rights (Ganguly, 2003:13; Lijphart, 1996:260, Varshney, 1998:3). Examples of this are the accommodation of rival elites (Kohli, 2001:7), the incorporation of India’s lower castes into the democratic system (Kohli, 2001: 16), giving political power to Indians who speak different languages (Kohli, 2001: 19), the Indian constitution’s recognition of the rights of religious minorities and the fact that it didn’t privilege the majority Hindu system of custom and belief (Ganguly, 2003:13) the existence of personal laws for all religious communities and their right to establish their own autonomous schools (Lijphart, 1996: 260), and enabling groups and movements to successfully press their demands (Kohli, 2001:11) at the same time as responding to them, among others. Democracy is a system that allows citizens to voice their concerns, to protect their interests and defend their rights, all this in a framework of equality and respect for pluralism. Therefore, given India’s culture and its ethnic, religious and social diversity it is difficult to avoid building an effective system other than democracy for solving its many tensions. In fact, India’s motto “unity in diversity” seems only to work, for the reasons outlined above, in a democratic context.

III. Democracy's challenges

In India, “many discontents are manageable precisely because there is a democratic framework” (Page, 2005:69), however, this doesn't mean that democracy has permanently become ‘the only game in town’. There are still a number of challenges for democracy and its consolidation. In particular, the analysis done above focuses on India at the national level; at the state level the same things can't be said about democracy. Some states in India have had periods of authoritarianism where “the central government has taken over their administration, elections have been suspended, citizens have been denied their basic civil and political rights and independent associations and organizations were carefully watched and in some cases brutally suspended” (Potter, 1999: 7) It is here, where democracy stops working, when conflicts are not peacefully resolved and violent separatist movements and religious conflicts emerge. When the system is not excluded and people don't have the chance to express their demands and these are not dealt with, when their rights are trampled and pluralism is suffocated, they look for other alternatives for advancing their interests. When this happens, events such as the Gujarat train incident and the following revenge by Hindu mobs (Ganguly, 2003:11) start to occur. These types of events must be regarded not as a ‘Crisis in Indian secularism’ (Ganguly, 2003) but as a crisis in Indian democracy, which is more worrisome. Therefore, for preventing these conflicts and overcome these challenges democracy has to work as it should: both as system with free, fair and regular elections where citizens enjoy their main freedom rights (in its own right - minimal definition) and as an inclusive system of rights that is committed to minorities and responsive to citizen's demands (as instrumental for conflict prevention and resolution).

IV. Conclusions

Indian democracy has been a success when assessed in its own right -according to its definition- and when evaluated as an instrumental value for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Both features have to be taken together and viewed as one. Democracy in India has been a success since it has an inclusive citizenship, elected officials, holds free, fair and frequent elections and allows freedom of expression, access to alternative sources of information and associational autonomy. On the other hand, democracy has been successful in India at the national level for peacefully preventing and resolving conflicts. This has been achieved since democracy it is an inclusive system of rights that recognises and respects minorities, tolerates pluralism and diversity, and allows for the

expression of citizen's and group's concerns and demands and is responsive to them by negotiation, accommodation and delivery. However, democracy in India faces a major challenge, when democracy stops working, demands are not heard, rights are not respected, associations are crushed and freedom of expression is silenced the ghost of 'a million mutinies' appears in the horizon. Therefore, for overcoming this, Indian democracy has to be successful both in its own right and as instrumental for conflict prevention and resolution. If India is to truly live its motto and avoid having 'a million mutinies', 'a million voices' i.e. democracy, are needed.

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² In India even Hindus could be considered as a minority since even amongst them there are many cultural, linguistic, social and even religious variations, differences and divisions.