

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Aristotle's Portrayal of Democracy as a Mob Rule: A Take

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Abstract:

The paper carefully analyses the reasons for and effects of Aristotle's depiction of democracy as a 'mob rule.' The paper utilises the Democratic Correlates Prism as its theoretical lens and employs the qualitative, documentary method as its tool for data collection. The findings of the paper include, democracy is a mere mob rule because it is planned and led by the largely unorganised and often uneducated masses; democracy could not facilitate even development because of the shambolic nature of the atmosphere that it is operated; democracy could not guarantee sound human and physical security because it is often hijacked by the corrupt elements in society, who only promote their selfish interests at the expense of the needed public good or interest. These findings have implications for the growth, popularity, continuity and future of democracy as a system of government.

Keywords: Democracy, mob rule, Aristotle, analysis

1. Introduction

Democracy is regarded the world over as the best form or system of government that promotes popular participation and overall human and socioeconomic development of the people. This is so, following the fact that a true democracy is characterized by equality, sovereignty of the people, respect for human life, the rule of law, which has within it three basic elements of equality before the law, supremacy of the law and protection of individual liberty or the inalienable rights of the citizens, such as right to life, right to liberty, right to freedom of speech and expression, right to own property and so on (Heater, as cited in Enemuo and Anifowose, 1999).

The paper examines the basis/reasons and impacts of Aristotle's portrayal of the world's most popular system of government as a 'mob rule.'

Furthermore, democratic equality implies one man, one vote regardless of differences in wealth, religion, intelligence, ethnic background and so on. It also connotes the equal right and opportunity of all citizens to hold political office. Based on the element of political equality of all is the principle of popular sovereignty, the notion that ultimate political power or sovereignty rests with mass of people. In practice, popular sovereignty is expressed through the representation and majority rule. It is through their representatives that the people express their will. The representatives decide what, in their opinion, the people or electorates want, and if their judgement is faulty, the people can express their disapproval at the next election by voting them out (Held, 1993).

According to Heater, respect for the dignity and worth of the human body and mind, is a basic ingredient and requirement for democracy to endure. It is also necessary, he notes, that government be based, as far as possible, on an 'impersonal law, rather than on the unpredictable whims of men.' In other words, a democratic government should be based on the rule of law. A democratic regime should also respect certain basic freedoms for its citizens, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of conscience, freedom of assembly and freedom from arbitrary arrest.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Correlates of Democracy

One useful way to gauge or measure a developing state or country's potential to achieve democracy is to focus on "democratic correlates". Where these correlates exist in the greatest number and measure, the probability of democracy is greater in number and measure; conversely, where they are largely absent, democracy has the smallest chance of succeeding. They are:

- Economic Correlates:

National wealth,
A market or mixed economy and
A middle class.

- Political Correlates:

Freedom of communication,
A stable party system,
Civilian control over the military,

A strong, independent judiciary and
Political and social pluralism.

- Cultural Correlates:

Tolerance of individual and group differences and
Pervasive belief in democracy.

- Historical and geographic Correlates:

Previous democratic experience and
Existence of democratic neighbours (Magstadt, 2009).

3. Aristotle's Philosophical Justifications for Portraying Democracy as a Mob Rule

But, for the Father of Politics and Political Science, Aristotle (354-322 BCE), democracy does not represent the best form or system of government. For him, it is a 'mob rule', that is a rule or system of government by the shambolic or unorganised masses or people, as democracy gives them the ultimate political power or sovereignty. In fact, this is visibly clear in his tripartite typology of political systems, where on one hand, he sees only Aristocracy, Monarchy and Constitutional government or Polity as the good or best systems of government because they strive to advance or promote the common good or happiness of their subjects or citizens. But, on the other hand, he sees Tyranny, Oligarchy and Democracy as the bad or perverted governments, as they only advance or promote the selfish interests of their rulers, as opposed to the common good or happiness of their subjects or citizens (Dye, 1996).

Borrowing from Plato (428-347/470-399 BCE), part of the reason for Aristotle's description of Democracy as a 'mob rule' is related to the fact that the majority of the masses who are the rulers or leaders in a democracy are largely and naturally unintelligent, peevish and unorganised, in fact most of them (80 to 90%) are not literate. For this, they belong to the class of farmers dominated by the biological drive of eating (appetite/abdomen), as opposed to the philosopher-kings who are dominated and illuminated by the spirit of reasoning and continuous learning for a better and more united and egalitarian society, state and the world (Lintott, 1992).

It is also instructive to learn or note that intelligence is crucial to the highly challenging and demanding task of governing, leading or ruling. Aristotle's contention or argument in this context is that, democracy is largely operated by people who lack this necessary ingredient, which is intelligence. As such, for him, how would they effectively and efficiently lead, rule or govern a state and in turn, lead such a state to the Promised Land of prosperity, wealth, full employment and overall human and societal development, as opposed to the prevailing squalor, grinding poverty, serious socioeconomic crises and anomie seen in most democracies of the world today, including that of Nigeria.

4. Conclusion

Democracy may remain the most popular system of government for many, because of the almost unfettered latitude or freedom it gives to people or the voting public. But, sincerely speaking, there is much to be desired from the type of democracy that is currently being practised in the world, especially in the Third world states, including African states, such as Nigeria. There is a sense of intellectualism in Aristotle's description of the world's most popular system of government as a 'mob rule'. But, I conclude by asking this question: How could Aristocracy, Monarchy and Polity serve as the best alternatives or substitutes for democracy in contemporary national and international politics? Hence, the need for further research in this regard.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are given:

- There is the urgent need to have a rethink on those that operate democracy.
- The democratic platform should be made much more organised and less chaotic in order to pave way for a sustainable society and national development and ensure human and physical security for all.
- Effective mechanisms should be put in place to prevent corrupt people in society from gaining access to the democratic platform.
- Future research could be conducted on the best and most secure alternative system of government to democracy.

➤ Note:

This paper is an improved version of the one I presented at the 3rd International Conference on Elections and Democracy (E & D 2017) with the main theme: '**Does Democracy Have a Future**' from 19th – 20th April, 2017, Grand Margherita Hotel, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia.

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