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Democide: Causes And The Way Forward

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This article is based on **How does a democracy die?** which was published in The Indian Express on 31/07/2021. It examines the causes which lead to the death of democracy in a country.

The global surveys are everywhere reporting dipping confidence in democracy and marked jumps in citizens' frustrations with government corruption and incompetence. Young people are the least satisfied with democracy — much more disaffected than previous generations at the same age.

In its **Democracy Report 2021**, Sweden's V-Dem Institute noted that India "has almost lost its status as a democracy". It ranked India below Sierra Leone, Guatemala and Hungary.

In this context, it is important to understand the true meaning and challenges the democracy in India faces.

True Meaning of Democracy

- Democracy is much more than pressing a button or marking a box on a ballot paper. It goes beyond the mathematical certitude of election results and majority rule.
- It's not reducible to lawful rule through independent courts or attending local public meetings.
- Democracy is a **whole way of life**. It is freedom from hunger, humiliation and violence.
- Democracy is saying no to every form of **human and non-human indignity**.
- It is **respect for women, tenderness with children**, and **access to jobs** that bring satisfaction and sufficient reward to live comfortably.
- In a healthy democracy, citizens are not forced to travel in buses and trains like livestock, wade through **dirty water from overrunning sewers**, or **breathe poisonous air**.
- Democracy is equal **access to decent medical care** and sympathy for those who have fallen behind.
- It's the **rejection of the dogma** that things can't be changed because they're "naturally" fixed in stone.

Causes For Death of Democracy (Democide)

- **Government Failure:** Wild rumours and talk of conspiracies flourish. Street protests and outbreaks of uncontrolled violence happen. Fears of civil unrest spread. The armed forces grow agitated.
 - As the government totters, the army moves from its barracks onto the streets to quell unrest and take control. Democracy is finally buried in a grave it slowly dug for itself.
 - The military coup d'états against the elected governments of Egypt (2013), Thailand (2014), **Myanmar** and Tunisia (2021) are some of the examples.
- **Weak Institutions:** When the judiciary becomes vulnerable to cynicism, political meddling and state capture, threat to democratic values and constitutional morals emerges.
- **Social Emergencies:** When social fabric weakens, the threat to democracy emerges. Democracy suffers a slow-motion social death.

When a constitution promises its citizens justice, liberty and equality, the division among and shattering of social life induce a sense of legal powerlessness among citizens.
- **Inequality in the Society:** Massive imbalances of wealth, chronic violence, famine and unevenly distributed life chances also make a mockery of the ethical principle that in a democracy people can live as citizen partners of equal social worth.
- **Unavailability of Basic Amenities:** Domestic violence, rotten health care, widespread feelings of social unhappiness, and daily shortages of food and housing destroy people's dignity. It kills the spirit and substance of democracy.
- **Vulnerable Remain Unheard:** Citizens' ability to strike back, to deliver millions of mutinies against the rich and powerful, is inherent in a democracy.

But the brute fact is social indignity undermines citizens' capacity to take an active interest in public affairs, and to check and humble the powerful.
- **Demagoguery:** When democratically elected governments cease to be held accountable by a society weakened by poor health, low morale, and joblessness, **demagogues** are prone to blindness and ineptitude.
 - They make careless, foolish, and incompetent decisions that reinforce social inequities.
 - Those who exercise power in government ministries, corporations, and public/private projects aren't subject to democratic rules of public accountability.

Demagoguery

It is political activity or practices that seek support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational argument.

Ineffective Redistribution: In the absence of redistributive public welfare policies that guarantee sufficient food, shelter, security, education, and health care to the downtrodden, the ideal of democracy weakens among citizens.

- Democracy begins to resemble a fancy mask worn by wealthy political predators.
- Society is subordinated to the state. People are expected to behave as loyal subjects, or else suffer the consequences.

Way Forward

- **Constitutional Renaissance:** It refers to the process of **constant repair and renewal of “constitutionalism”** as a function of adjudication.

It includes the following:

- Obeisance to the constitutional spirit, vision and letter.
 - The interpretation of the constitution by the judiciary in a way that glorifies its democratic spirit and reflects a ‘reverence’ towards the constitution.
 - **Protection of “rights of all**, which means that people are true sovereign and they should not be treated as just ‘subjects’ and all forms of public power should be placed at the service of constitutional ends.
- **Constitutional Morality:** It specifies norms for institutions to survive and an expectation of behaviour that will meet not just the text but the soul of the Constitution. It also makes the governing institutions and representatives accountable.
 - **Purposive Interpretation:** This refers to the interpretation of the constitution by the judiciary in light of the interest of the people of India and maintaining institutional integrity.
 - **Good Governance:** The ultimate motive of constitution-related judicial articulation and government schemes and programmes should be enabling a good governance system.
 - **Voices Should be Heard:** The Government should hear criticism rather than rejecting it outrightly. Suggestions on eroding democratic values need a thoughtful, and respectful response.
 - **Checks on Executive Powers:** The press and the judiciary, which are considered the pillars of India’s Democracy, require it to be independent of any executive interference to enable auditing of the
 - **Need For Strong Opposition:** Strong democracy requires strong opposition. Without an alternative choice, the very objective of election to provide a check on arbitrary power gets defeated.
 - **Social Equality:** If redistributive public welfare policies are effective, the inequality in the society would be reduced. Thus, it must be the priority of the government to maintain social and economic equality and inclusive growth.

Conclusion

The institutionalization of constitutional democracy has helped the people of India realize the importance of democracy and inculcate democratic sensibilities among them. At the same time, it is important that all the government organs work in harmony to uphold the trust people of the country have held in them and ensure objectives of true democracy..

Drishti Mains Question

'Democracy is very important for human development.' In the light of the statement discuss the challenges democracy is facing today.
