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Views on Democracy in Different Cultures

Introduction to Democracy

The commonly known source of word democracy is a combination of two Greek words – demos means “the people”, and kratein means “to rule” – so the outcome demokratia means “rule by people” literally. Democracy is the institutional arrangement of the state’s achievement as political decisions to ensure its inhabitants’ will by their elected rulers.¹ Theoretically, all states’ inhabitants transfer their ruling power to their representatives whom are elected as state’s rulers to rule the state. The people rule the state through those representatives.

Deepening to the clear definition of democracy, Joseph A. Schumpeter has defined democracy as “*institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote*”,² while Robert Alan Dahl has defined that democracy is an ideal system in which the state’s inhabitants run politic activities jointly, and their government gets close to them.³ In other words, democracy is a common perspective of people in freedom and equality, and by this ground creating a government system which people rule the state directly or via their representatives.⁴ Democracy is a political system that all crucial issues are included precisely in public policy as the common decisions being made by the whole people.⁵

The term democracy is commonly used as a freedom and equality of ruling power applying to the whole people in the state. The people govern their state either by themselves or through their elected representatives aiming for achieving their common will. Democracy is, or should be referred to, a political system that all states inhabitants are served equally and without any restriction. A majority rule is accepted as a good norm for democracy direction. In many cases, the political decisions could not be concluded by the consensus but the majority. Every inhabitant has different willingness, it seems impossible

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¹ SCHUMPETER, Joseph (ed.): *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1976. 250.

² Ibid. 269.

³ DAHL, Robert: *Democracy and its critics*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989. 18.

⁴ *Democracy Meaning*. In: Cambridge English Dictionary, 2018.

⁵ OUTHWAITE, William (ed.): *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*. 2nd eds. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2006. 147.

to reach the consensus decision making in order to serve the whole equally. Though, in order for governing a state continuously, a public policy has to be made by accepting the majority decision.

To this point of view, a crucial question needs to be raised to consider whether a state is or is not democratic. Are there any criteria to identify a democratic state? The answer to this is surely yes, there are fundamental institutions to be used as basic standards for democratic recognition which will be clearly determined hereafter. Nevertheless, these bases are theoretical ideals for identifying democratic in the general view. Every democratic state should have but not limited to them. It may occur that having either more or less or another basis to concern in different perspectives depends on ideal preferences of each state.

Fundamental Institutions to Democracy

In order to recognize a democratic state, fundamental institutions should have been referred. A state fulfilling these institutions must be considered as a very perfect democracy, yet there is not such a state existed in our recent world because it is very hard to fully reach but being targeted by most states. Practically, to these fundamental institutions as basis, reaching more bases means being more democratic. The most important political scientist of the twentieth century Robert A. Dahl has been placed six political institutions that a democratic state has or should have. The government in a democratic state requires these six political institutions. They are elected officials, free-fair-and-frequent elections, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information, associational autonomy and inclusive citizenship.⁶

Elected officials are representatives of the state inhabitants. The government works should be controlled by these elected officials in order to ensure that the whole will of the state inhabitants are concerned and to prove that the state is governed by the people through their representatives which it is an entity of democratic system. The less elected officials attending in the government works the loose democratic system are shown.⁷

In the large scale of political system as a state, it is very hard to call for attending from the whole state's inhabitants due to the time, the place and the budget issues. Listening to all participants' opinions is a need for democratic decision making. Yet, more participants cost more time. The representative option is a good solution to this issue instead of getting all opinions from each inhabitant. If it does not so, a single democratic decision might take years to be made. Bringing this same logic to issues of place and budget, without representatives, the democratic decision making may take a huge place and budget to be reached. Even though it does work in direct democracy system which people can directly submit their personal opinions in order to be concerned at the same time period via direct democratic tools like manual or online voting, both the collecting and the final concerning those direct opinions need to be processed by elected officials still.

Free, fair, and frequent elections are the main requirements for democratic election. In order for what being democratic, all elected officials should come from democratic elections. In democratic election, the state inhabitants can freely elect their representatives

⁶ DAHL, Robert: *On Democracy*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998. 85-86.

⁷ Ibid.

based on their personal thoughts without any outside influence, and elected officials should be chosen in fair and frequent elections.⁸

Freedom of expression is a basic right of a democratic state's inhabitants. Every inhabitant should be allowed to express their opinion freely without any fear of being punished. This mentioned expression includes political criticism reflecting to the government works whether it is suitable for the current situation in their personal views. The government works of elected officials will get the advantage on approving a suitable public policy to achieve the will of people that they represent. Due to the elected officials are representatives of state's inhabitants, they need to run the government's works in the name of their people who transfer the ruling power to them democratically. If there is such obstacle to express people's personal opinions, the government's works will not be able to guarantee people's interests and it is not considered as a democratic state.

Alternative sources of information are effectively protected by law and they work independently from the control of the government. It means they are independent media under the law. The state's inhabitants should have right to access to these independent sources so that they can get various information for their consideration. They will get chances to open their views and monitor their government's works. This is an oversight tool for enhancing people's ruling power over their elected officials, which it is a must in democratic system.

Associational autonomy is a well-known freedom to association. It is a basic right, an ability of the state's inhabitants to organize a lawful group protecting their interests. They are, for instance, associations, organizations, interest groups and political parties. The people should have a right to form their interest protecting association whenever they feel unprotected by existed associations. This opportunity strengthens both the ruling power of people over the state and the government's works running by elected officials. It is a proof of which the state is ruled by people and for serving people's interests. It also improves governments works by reviewing their previous works and becoming more competitive association against newcomers. Thus, this basic right has been listed as a fundamental institution for a democratic state.

Inclusive citizenship is a big last thing to be mainly placed in a democratic state. It is crucial when all adult state's inhabitants are equally served all five abovementioned fundamental institutions without any discrimination. These freedoms and equalities are provided in a democratic state for each citizen regardless gender, religion, race, ethnic, career, class, caste, social or economic status and other discriminations. It is, of course, almost impossible to achieve this point because it is very hard to do so.⁹ For example, only a right to vote alone is given to adult citizens but limited in every state; even in a country which, more or less, is considered democratic as United States of America (USA) where women are excluded from national political life completely; moreover, a republican government, or a group of people who claim to advocate democratic, deny the suffrage of numbers of men who could not meet literacy or property requirements.¹⁰ For Hungary, even though the right of ethnic minorities to form self-governing bodies and the right to vote for special minority lists in elections of the national assembly are protected by the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ DAHL, 1998. 89.

Fundamental Law of Hungary, they are later cut out from general party list voting and secured no seat in 2014, for instance.¹¹

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Regarding those mentioned fundamental institutions for recognizing a democratic state, it is precisely shown that most of countries are more or less but uncompleted democratic, or at least willing to reach it. Looking at a very well-known country, the USA where those fundamental institutions are existed mostly, but some of them are not quite well seen. For example, it does have associational autonomy, or a so-called right to association, but there are only two most influent political parties – the Democratic and the Republican – control over its political system; in addition, a sixth fundamental institution – inclusive citizenship – is not fully existed. Nevertheless, the USA is considered more or less as a democratic country.¹²

Considering another country in central Europe – Hungary, there is the National Assembly where all representatives of Hungarian inhabitants are sitting for oversighting the government's works, and, at the same time, the government has accountability to the National Assembly. Hungary has constitutionally guaranteed the free and fair elections of members of the national assembly being held every four years, of local government representatives and mayors being held every five years, and of members of the European parliament being held every five years. The Fundamental Law of Hungary guarantees the right to freedom of expression and freedom to association for its citizens providing the right to peaceful assembly, the right to establish and join organizations, the right to form and operate political parties, and the right to form trade unions and other interest representation organizations.¹³ Although, a fundamental institution of alternative sources of information is weak because the critical media in opposition to the government is still working under pressure and influence of officials.¹⁴ In addition to this weakness, a hard reaching fundamental institution – inclusive citizenship – for every state is unfulfilling in Hungary as well. However, Hungary is thus considered more or less as a democratic state.

Turning to a very small country – Laos, where a one-party system does exist, there are first four fundamental institutions because it has the National Assembly where elected representatives take seats, these elected officials are chosen democratically, freedom of expression and right to access to alternative sources of information are protected by the constitution and laws. Though the right to association is limited to having only one political party, it is guaranteed in other forms such as right to organize or participate in associations, organizations, civil organizations, mass organizations and interest groups which could more or less influence the policy making of the country.¹⁵ As same as every country, the sixth

¹¹ Freedomhouse.org: Freedom in the World 2018. Hungary. 2018. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/hungary> (04. 06. 2018.)

¹² Whitehouse.gov: Presidents. 2018. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/> (07. 06. 2018.)

¹³ The Fundamental Law of Hungary. FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY Art. VIII., IX., XXIII. & The STATE Art. 2.

¹⁴ Freedomhouse.org: Freedom of the Press 2017. Hungary. 2017. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/hungary> (04. 06. 2018.)

¹⁵ The Constitution of Laos. 2015. [http://www.na.gov.la/files/Constitution/Constitution%20\(2015\)%20Lao.pdf](http://www.na.gov.la/files/Constitution/Constitution%20(2015)%20Lao.pdf) (16. 03. 2018.)

fundamental institution does not fully exist in Laos, yet it is reasonable to recognize Laos as a democratic country.

Conclusion

Since democracy is a very good and suitable norm for recent political world to achieve. To be more precise, democracy has several advantages that every political system or decision-making procedure is willing to achieve. For instance, in general, it provides fundamental rights that most people are calling for. It protects the interests of people. It helps fastening the policy making which it is good for faster government's works. It produces generally accepted rules in societies. It enhances the ruling power of people over their political system. It strengthens fairness and equality in the political system.

However, pointing to an accepted majority rule of democracy, it is obvious for the will of the big group of people, meanwhile the minority is dismissed. It just because they are a small group of voice, but it does not mean that their will is not good. The opinions from minority might work better than the majority one. Thus, the minority interests and opinions should not be dismissed from decision making. It should be considered as equal as majority. An effort in showing its reasonable competitiveness should be held before concluding a decision. The majority rule of democracy shows disadvantage to this point because of dismissing minority will.

In other words, democracy is just an ideal system which being raised by political scientists, while it could not guarantee neither it is the best norm nor it is really needed by people. Since the political systems in the past, before democracy, were accepted and suitable for that time's societies and culture; in the future, it should have whatever political norm. That future norm could be more suitable for the world society and culture at time, other than democratic. It means the best political norm for everywhere and in the whole period of time does not exist in the world society.

Though democracy is not the best solution for the recent society, it has been considered as the system or ideal that can handle the complicated situation nowadays. In the democracy system, there are its advantages and disadvantages for the fairness of societies.

It may not have such a norm that can replace democracy that results in a better solution recently or brings more fairness and equality to the society. Democracy is still the suitable solution for controlling high contrast societies. Whenever there are many different interests contrasting each other seriously exist, democracy should be put in place for running societies' governance smoothly. Due to the consensus agreement cannot be waited before starting implementing policies, the more acceptable part for the larger group of the society should be run and the rest of the society should follow. This basis is known as democracy.

Democracy is one of the famous terms in political science. Several political scientists have given its definitions and basic principles. For instance, Joseph A. Schumpeter has defined democracy as "*institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.*"¹⁶ In *Democracy and Its Critics*, Robert Alan Dahl has mentioned that democracy is an ideal system in which the state's inhabitants run politic activities jointly, and their government gets close to them. In *On Democracy*, Dahl has specified six main political institutions being required, to recognize

¹⁶ SCHUMPETER, 1976. 269.

whether the democracy is existed in a state, they are elected officials, free-fair-and-frequent elections, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information, associational autonomy and inclusive citizenship.

Regarding those six main institutions, this research aims to answer a question whether or not the democracy is existed in a one-party state like Laos. Though it is not fully democratic, it would have shown how much democracy there are. Moreover, by using a comparative method, the two well-known democratic political systems – USA and Hungary – will be analysed and compared to Laos. The level of democracy in Laos's political systems will be finalized.

Though there are defined meanings and basic principles of democracy, it has difference perspectives and practices varying from countries to others and based on situations or culture. A famous political scientist, Dahl R., has shown that democracy has not fixed standard, but it depends on different set of limits and opportunities of each country in a certain time. The democracy should not be considered only in political basis but also in cultural basis. The differences of cultures might affect people's views in democracy, and only the acceptable democracy for those people could last longer in a specific culture.

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(Summary)

This paper is going to provide some general bases and some specified entities on democracy in different cultures, namely the USA, Hungary and Laos; through three different parts – introduction to democracy, fundamental institutions to democratic and views on democracy in different cultures. This paper ends with summarized information and some authors opinions. Since Laos has constitutionally declared itself as a democratic state, it should have certain democratic institutions out of those mentioned six main institutions, and which have been influenced by its culture.