

Expansion of Democracy



In an earlier chapter, you read about the many democratic revolutions which established democratic forms of government in Europe. Establishing forms of government which are in accordance with the wishes and requirements of the people, in which all people are able to participate freely and fully, in which all kinds of people find respectable space, is a dream for which people are still striving all over the world.

Let us look at the example of two countries where the people have been struggling for democracy in recent times. These are Libya and Myanmar.

- Locate Libya and Myanmar in the world map. Which continents are they located on?



Fig. 17.1: Peoples' protest

Libya

Libya is a poor country in North Africa which had been colonised by Italy for a long time and became free after a long struggle in 1951. When Libya became independent, Italy transferred power to King Idris who ruled the country with the help of a few rich and powerful families.

The people mostly belonged to different tribes which depended upon agriculture and animal rearing in the deserts. These tribes were dominated by families of traditional tribal chiefs. In 1959, vast reserves of petroleum were found in Libya and a lot of wealth poured into the country from the sale of petroleum oil. The King and a few powerful families cornered most of this new wealth. Around this time, a new wave of nationalism was sweeping in Northern Africa – the young people wanted to establish a modern state that was not subservient to the interests of colonial powers and which worked for the welfare of the people. They also wanted to reform their country – end the oppression of women and the constant warfare among tribes

and establish unity and peace. They also wanted to ensure that the new wealth from oil was distributed more equitably to all. Many people in Libya were also inspired by these ideas.

In the year 1969, Muammar Gaddafi and a group of 70 young army officers took over the control of the Kingdom of Libya. This group of officers called themselves Free Officers Movement. King Idris I fled the country, monarchy was abolished and the country was declared a the 'Socialist Libyan Arab Republic'. The army completely supported this take over. The movement was carried out under the leadership of a Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) consisting of 12 members from the military. This new leadership wanted to develop Libya as a modern egalitarian country and at the same time, follow the basic tenets of Islam, which was the religion of majority of the people.

As we read above, Libyan society was initially tribal led by the families of tribal chiefs. People were more concerned about their own tribe and its honour

- What kind of problems do you think the given conditions pose for establishing a democratic government?

than about the welfare of all people. Most people were poor nomadic animal herders who were also illiterate. Women were confined to purdah (veil) and were not allowed to participate in public activities.

The new regime instituted several reforms which led to the rapid growth of Libya – nationalisation of oil resources; a programme for extension of cultivation giving irrigated lands to poor workers in order to end nomadism; free universal education for all including women; free medical care for all; distribution of share of oil profits among all citizens; development of highly subsidised housing schemes for all. A major reform undertaken was to ensure freedom and equal status to women. Women were now allowed to have property and business, and take up jobs in the government. As a result of all these, Libya was able to achieve the highest levels of social welfare in the whole of Africa. Average life expectancy increased from under 50 years to 77 years. Literacy rate for both men and women is over 90% today.

It was difficult to encourage bringing democratic participation of all people in Libya due to conditions of tribalism, nomadism, illiteracy and restrictions on women was difficult. The new Libyan leadership tried to encourage participation of common people in public affairs by creating peoples councils and elected People's Assembly in the centre. As the society rapidly changed due to development, an educated middle class emerged and began to participate in these bodies. However, the government under Gaddafi was not ready to trust these democratic bodies. Instead, it created a parallel system of leadership of 'Revolutionary Councils', which were appointed and closely controlled by Gaddafi and the RCC. The democratic bodies had to implement the decisions of these non-elected leaders. As a result, people lost interest in these bodies but the government kept trying to enforce their participation. The RCC was also very intolerant of criticism and

opposition. It used brute armed force to arrest, torture and kill political opponents. There was no freedom of the press, and independent organisations like trade unions or other associations were not allowed. No political parties were allowed to function in Libya.

Such dictatorial functioning helped to consolidate the position of a few powerful families that controlled the government and the RCC and the oil companies owned by the government. They came to be hated by the people for their high-headedness but the people had no way of expressing their discontent.

Rapid development, urbanisation, emergence of new economic opportunities and jobs meant that tribal way of life was slowly getting eroded and people of different tribes began to mix up and live together in cities. Most of the new jobs were available in government sector which controlled all the oil resources, trade and industry. The new middle class emerged in Libya which was keen on taking up business and industry but such opportunities were closed due to government policies and control of the powerful families.

In the latter half of 2010, there were movements to establish democratic governments across the Arab world. It began with a small country, Tunisia, and spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria amongst others. This revolutionary wave of demonstrations, protests, and wars taking place in the Arab world that began in December 2010 is now famous as the 'Arab Spring'.



Fig. 17.2: A street painting in Egypt, another country where democratic movement occurred during this decade.

Change in Libya

In cities like Benghazi, the civic amenities were deplorable. A large number of its citizens were unemployed, and many families did not have a stable income. People from across the country began to interact through internet and mobile phones to share their misery. However, state owned media refused to report them. In early January 2011, a group of people began to protest over delay in the building of houses and political corruption in the city of Bayda in the north eastern part of the country. It began with peaceful street marches. There were attempts by police to crush it down. These protests spread to other cities.

By February, the protests began to take a violent turn. In the city of Benghazi, people marched against the police, there was firing and people were injured. A section of people also began to get arms and weapons for themselves. These rebels included a group of professional soldiers who had left the government's army, but

the majority were ordinary people: lawyers, workers, engineers, teachers, students etc. A coalition of all groups that opposed Gaddafi government came together. The security forces fired at the people. Protesters attacked government buildings. They also captured the local radio station. People demanded different things, from renewing earlier constitution to establishing multi-party democracy. The Gaddafi government also tried to gather its supporters and stage demonstrations in support of him. In the days that followed, there was a major civil war. Ordinary people armed themselves, while some army members also joined the people. Gaddafi used his army and air force against the people to crush down the protests and many people were killed.

Many powerful countries of the world like the United States were keen to intervene and end the Gaddafi rule and install governments that were more favourable to them. These countries did so because of the desire to control the large oil reserves of Libya. These countries also supported sections of the rebels and pushed Libya into civil war. The United Nations Organisation also intervened in support of the rebels by declaring Libya to be a 'no fly zone' – in order to prevent the government from using air bombing against the rebels. However, since the government continued the air strikes, France, US, Britain etc. jointly used their air force to

Civil War : A war within a country among different people, parties or regions.

bombard Libyan government positions. Libyan people eventually succeeded in overthrowing the Gaddafi regime.

A new government was established and sworn in on 14th Nov 2012 as a result of free and fair elections in which over 100 political parties participated and 200 representatives were elected. They have also formulated an Interim Constitution. There is possibility and hope for a democratic government in Libya even in the future. The international community is watching Libya to see if democracy will be a success in Libya and if it will be able to survive and strengthen its democratic processes or not.

- Even though the people had benefitted much from the Gaddafi government, why do you think they rose in rebellion against it?
- Even though the Gaddafi government claimed to be a democratic government, what aspects of democracy were absent? What aspects of democratic government were present in it?
- Why are civil liberties important for democracy? Explain in the context of Libyan experience.
- Dictators try to control press and TV media. Do you know other ways of sharing information and ideas between people?
- The Tunisian struggle began with the death of one trader. The struggle gained strength largely through the use of social networking websites like Facebook. Why do you think is it not easy for governments to control them?

Myanmar (Burma)

Locate Burma (modern name – Myanmar) in the world map. India shares borders with this country. Burma, like India, was a colony of the British. It was a major supplier of teak wood, food crop like rice and minerals like tin and precious stones like rubies and sapphires. Burma also became independent just 5 months after Indian Independence. They established a parliament with two houses like India. There were elections in 1951, 1956 and 1960 in which different political parties contested. It appeared at that time that Burma too would emerge as a democratic republic like India. However, the Burmese did not have a united political party to lead them at that time.

You may remember that, in 1947, India had a large number of princely states like the Hyderabad state and it took a few years to weld all of them into one Republic. Similarly, Burma too consisted of a large number of small states and ethnic-linguistic regions.

In 1947, Aung San, a leader of the Burman ethnic group, who had led the country to independence (He was also the father of current opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi), and leaders of the many ethnic minorities negotiated an agreement which would guarantee ethnic rights and self-determination, and the inclusion of minorities in the democratic process. However, Aung San was assassinated. Soon after, the Burmese military began its slow advance into the ethnic states to rule by force. Many ethnic groups took up arms to protect their states from Burman rule, demanding autonomy, ethnic rights and an inclusive democracy. As the ethnic strife became complex in 1962, the elected government was overthrown by a coup and army General Ne Win took charge of the country. He tried to nationalise all industries and mineral resources. Free public health and education system were established. Between 1962 and 1965, important laws against landlords and usury were adopted. They aimed at protecting peasants' rights to have land and property and to rent the land. These measures included the law abolishing rents on land in order to help the poor peasants.

Autonomy : The freedom for a country, a region or an organisation to govern itself independently.

The army generals have been ruling the country since then. The rulers claimed they were following socialist policies. This only placed the major resources of the country in the hands of the army generals. Unlike Libya, where the army rule

led to development and welfare activities, Burma did not see any development and became an impoverished country where peasants were forced to sell their children to the army and work in the mines in semi-servile conditions. The Generals who ruled Burma are accused of gross human rights abuses, forcible relocation of civilians and widespread use of forced labour, including that of the children.

Students usually took the lead in staging protest against the military rule but all such protests were suppressed by the army. In 1988, a major protest against the army rule broke out and was brutally suppressed by killing thousands of demonstrators. A new military council took over the power in the following year promising elections. It was around this time that Aung San Suu Kyi (pronounced Su Chi) began to fight for reforms in Burma. Suu Kyi has since been a central figure in the protests and the struggle for the establishment of democracy in Burma.



Aung San Suu Kyi: A poster from Myanmar supporting Democracy.

The rulers declared elections in 1990. In this election, a new political party National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Suu Kyi won majority (80%) of the seats even though Suu Kyi was in prison. But the military refused to hand over power or even release Suu Kyi. She was kept under house arrest. She remained a prisoner in her house without permission to move around and interact with people. She wasn't even able to attend the funeral of her husband or meet her two sons.

There is also international pressure created through economic sanctions. This disallowed trade between Burma and those countries. As a result, Burma is not able to export its products or get necessary imports. This puts great pressure on the economy. Even though this ultimately

harms the common people of that country, 'economic sanctions' are used to bring pressure on the rulers. Over the years, there has been worldwide pressure on the military government to extend civil liberty and usher in a democratic government.

Change in Burma

From the year 2008, there have been different forms of changes taking place in the country such as conducting a referendum to get a mandate for establishing democracy, changing the name of the country to a “Republic of Democracy”. However, the government continues to be formed partly through the election and partly under nomination from the military. Elections were held in 2010 under the observation of United Nations. However, Suu Kyi was barred from contesting the 2010 election and was released from her house arrest only after the election. Her party refused to contest this election. As a result, the military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party won most seats. There are allegations of malpractices during the election. The military junta was dissolved and Thein Sein became the President of the country.

- Do you think democracy can survive in Myanmar? Give reasons.
- Why do you think was democracy not established in Libya after its independence?
- How did students and youth play an important role in bringing democracy to both Libya and Burma?
- What similarities of events do you find in the description of events in Libya and Burma?
Answer this keeping in mind – Leadership; nature of struggle; process of transition.
- Underline the statements that are relating to Political Party and Voting in both Libya and Burma.
- Track the changes that you may have heard about in Libya and Burma during the year 2012 and write about them.

Some features of democracy and dictatorship

You read about two recent struggles for democracy. Even though the two countries were very different, the people wanted a form of government which had some broad similarities.

Gaddafi and the RCC worked for a welfare state in which the basic needs of all people were met. All the had an opportunity to improve their lives through education and jobs. Similarly, the Burmese junta began with some welfare measures and land reforms but went on only to increase the control of the army. The army exploited the resources and people of the country. As a result, people were subjected to extreme poverty. However, both the countries were ruled by people who got their

main support from the army. They did not allow free elections or functioning of political parties. They both did not allow elected representatives to form governments. They did not allow freedom of expression, freedom to form organisations or freedom to protest against the government.

In both the countries, people wanted a government that would be elected by the people through a free and fair process. In both the countries, people wanted freedom to express their views, freedom to organise and freedom to protest against what they think is wrong. Similarly, in both the countries people wanted many political parties to be able to function freely.

Burma was different from Libya in that it began with democratic system and slipped into army rule while Libya moved from monarchy and slipped into army rule. However, both the countries did not have favourable conditions for a democracy to flourish - they were deeply divided politically and ethnically which made it difficult to arrive at an inclusive political settlement.

The March of Democracy

Ever since the birth of modern democracy in 17th century England, there has been a gradual transformation of political systems across the world to conform to the democratic ideals. Initially, democracy helped the social classes that were opposed to feudalism and monarchies to build a new kind of social order which rejected privilege by birth and divine right to rule. Europe and America went through great revolutions during the 18th and 19th centuries to bring this about .

Industrialisation and colonialism created conditions all over the world which favoured democratic ideas. An educated middle class which was inspired by the democratic ideas emerged in most countries. Even though each country had its own distinct social system and distinct problems, democracy appeared to create the framework for just settlement of those problems. Thus, each country is evolving a model of democracy suited to its needs.

In the 20th century, democracy became the slogan of anti-colonial struggles in Asia and Africa to build independent nations. India, Sri Lanka and South Africa are some examples of this process. Some of these countries were able to attain freedom and establish stable democracies. However, many of them could not build stable democracies (as in the case of Burma or Pakistan). Military dictatorships got established. In countries like Pakistan, military dictatorship and democratic rule kept coming in cycles. In most of the countries under military dictatorship, the people are organising movements to establish democracy. We saw the examples of Libya and Burma where such changes have begun only recently.

During the 20th century, another form of political system came into being which is known as the 'Communist' system. The Communists believed that Parliamentary democracy of the type that is practised in England only helped the rich capitalists to control the country and could not represent the real interests of the poor working people. They believed that this was possible only through the establishment of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' or the workers. This dictatorship was needed to ensure that the rich and powerful landlords and capitalists did not get any power or opportunity to pursue their policies. Such political systems were established in Union of Soviet Socialist Republic or USSR (Soviet Russia) after 1917, in Eastern Europe after 1945, in China after 1949 and in Vietnam and Cuba after 1960. These countries built 'socialist' economies in which all land and factories were owned by the government and education, health and employment was ensured for all and a degree of equality was established.

However, these countries did not allow multi-party elections and one party usually ruled for several decades; they also established state control over media and did not allow people to freely form associations that opposed government policies. In short, they did not allow open criticism of the government policies or attempts to change the government. Thus, even though they claimed to be working in the interest of the poorest people and bring about genuine democracy for the poor, they ended up curtailing the freedom of the people. In 1991, the USSR broke up as people demanded freedom and democracy like other western countries like USA. Following this, many small countries of the former USSR, like Russia, Ukraine, Estonia, and other East European countries like Poland and Hungary ended the communist rule and established parliamentary democracies. Of course, this has not been easy for them and many of them too have slipped into military dictatorships and ethnic warfare.

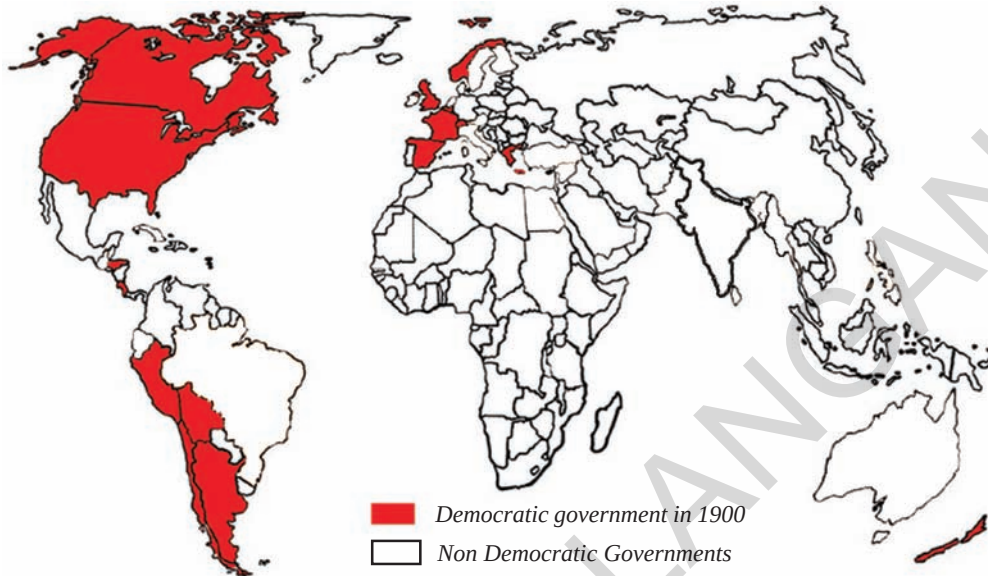
Today, it is increasingly becoming clear to the people that democracy which respects the freedom and rights of all people may be the best way to solve some of the complex problems the countries face. Today, a new kind of democracy is being forged across the world in which even the poorest and the most vulnerable people will have a voice and will be able to influence policies and ensure justice and peace for all.

Keywords

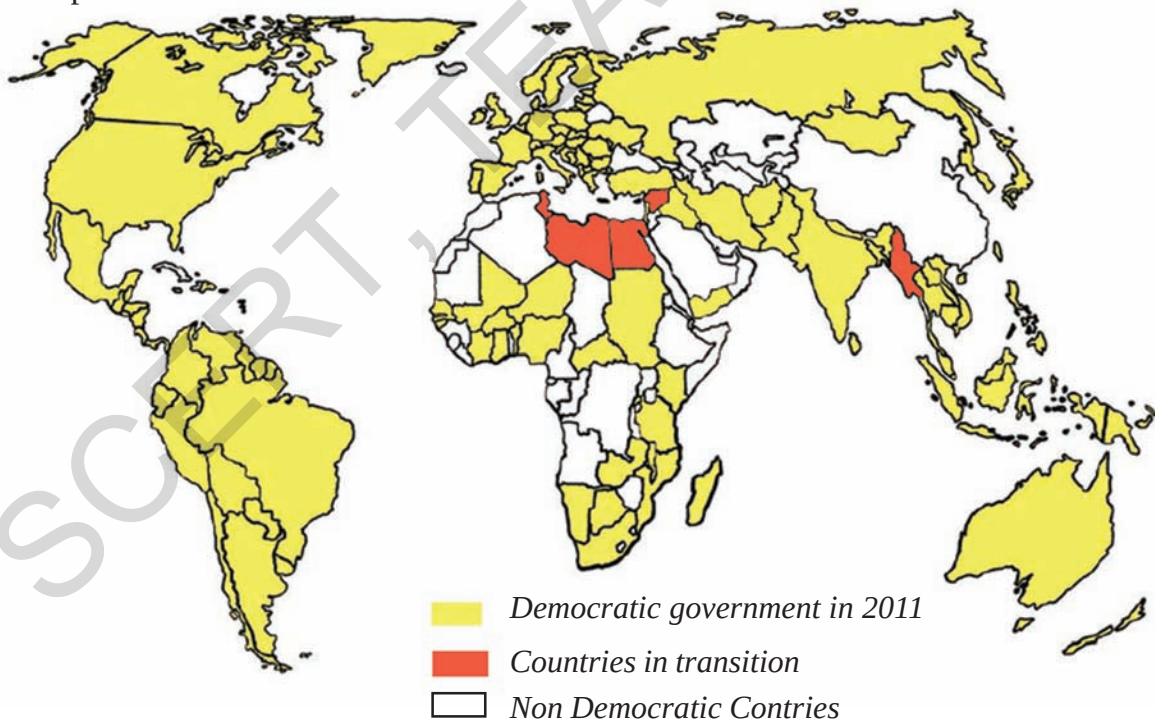
- | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Nomadic animal herders | 2. Urbanisation | 3. Political corruption |
| 4. House arrest | 5. Dictatorship | 6. Monarchy |
| 7. Feudalism | | |

Improve your learning

Map 1: Democratic Governments in 1900-1950



Map 2: Democratic Governments in 2011



1(a). On the basis of these maps, identify upto three countries (in some cases you won't find three countries) that were democratic in these continents for the given years and make a table as given on the next page.

Year	Africa	Asia	Europe	South America
1900				
2011				

- b) Identify some African countries that practised democracy in 2011.
- c) Make a list of big countries that were not democratic in 2011.
2. Most countries often claim themselves to be democratic by conducting elections. How did this happen in the context of Myanmar and Libya?
3. Why do you think do the rulers try to control the media? Do you know how is media controlled in your area?
4. Write an imaginary dialogue between a person from Libya and Myanmar comparing the events and struggle for democracy in their respective countries.
5. How do literacy and mass education help for the functioning of democracy?
6. What is the difference between democracy and dictatorship?
7. What is the role played by Aung San Suu Kyi in fighting for democracy in Myanmar?
8. Read the last paragraph of this chapter and answer the question :
What is a new kind of democracy?

Project

Read the newspapers and note down any news related to the struggle for democracy in Libya or Egypt or any other country. Prepare a file of such news clippings and display in the class room.