

Prospects for democracy: A new view from the past

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Introduction

Concerns about the global prospects for democracy continue to intensify. For a number of years, various academics, journalists, politicians and others have detected growing threats from tendencies such as populism and backsliding. Their analysis found in various countries a deterioration in some of the key aspects of a democratic system, such as:

- Free and fair elections;
- An independent judiciary upholding the rule of law;
- Independent legislatures;
- Legal, political and ethical limitations on executives;
- Willingness by states to abide by international norms and standards;
- Protections for human rights;
- Reliable information in the public domain to provide a basis for decision making by members of the public; and
- Effective safeguards against corruption among public office holders.

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Adding to this prevailing despondency is a perception that these problems have afflicted supposedly established democracies, alongside states that had only lately moved towards this form of governance, or were of longstanding authoritarian character. The UK has itself been a subject of concern, particularly under the Conservative administration that lost office last July. It had, for instance, shown concerted disparagement towards the courts and legal professionals; had introduced measures removing rights from refugees; had restricted the ability of members of the public to engage in protest; and had at times shown disregard for international law and treaty obligations. Following the changeover to a Labour government, apprehension has not entirely disappeared. The riots of summer 2024 and the rise of Reform UK, combined with external pressures from the East and West, are a source of alarm. Moreover, the Keir Starmer government is not entirely above seeking to mobilise populist forces in areas such as immigration policy, despite the risks involved in doing so.

Elsewhere in the world, following the return to power of Donald Trump in January 2025, already bleak scenarios have worsened significantly. Under his presidency, there are clear signs of a desire to pursue illiberal agendas internally; while on the international stage, he and his associates have deliberately promoted causes detrimental to democracy and generally destabilised the international rule of law. For the US to have taken on this authoritarian orientation constitutes a practical, psychological and historic wound to the values of which it was once regarded as perhaps the key (albeit imperfect) guarantor. Internationally, the number of states yet to have succumbed to these kind of populist or backsliding tendencies is dwindling. Furthermore, how far the members of this shrinking group are willing and able to resist these forces, individually and collectively, is unclear.

Perspectives from history

Things look bad. But how bad? The best way of placing a global tendency in perspective is by looking to the past, to identify precedents, patterns, and differences against which we can assess present conditions. In this regard, there are some significant ongoing developments in the work of historians. There is a growing tendency to take a wider and longer view of democracy than was traditionally the case. The standard position has been to focus on Ancient Greece as a point of origin, with some reference to earlier less

sophisticated arrangements, followed by Rome and a succession of examples from Europe or European colonies. However, historic accounts of democracy now look to examples of collective decision-making of various kinds drawn from beyond Europe, that predated and ran in parallel with what were previously depicted as isolated, pathbreaking experiments.

We have engaged in an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) project that builds on this scholarship. Our particular focus has been on examples of participatory decision-making and the existence of norms and standards applying to senior office holders in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia during the Bronze Age (c. 3100-1100BCE). We do not claim that these societies functioned along the lines of contemporary democracies. But we can show that perceptions of wholly authoritarian rule, particularly surrounding the Egyptian Pharaonic system, are prone to caricature (as well as subjective interpretation rooted in the Bible and Judeo-Christian theology, which views Egypt as an arch-oppressor and which is not necessarily grounded in historically verifiable evidence).

As a counterbalance to this, we argue that the idea of wider participation in decisions as a source of legitimacy has been less confined to particular times and places than might be assumed; and that the same applies to political leaders being subject to rules. This message is perhaps a hopeful one. While it may be experiencing difficulties at present, democracy arises from underlying human urges that have proved persistent over millennia, and can be expected to continue to assert themselves. However, there is also a less palatable conclusion to be drawn from our research. A tendency towards more exclusive, oppressive rule can also be detected in both our subjects of study, and can similarly be regarded as likely to reappear indefinitely. Moreover, the same principle which might give rise to democratic outcomes can be contorted to the opposite effect. We now discuss some of our specific findings in this area.

Specific findings

In Egypt and Mesopotamia, there were essentially two fundamental sources from which rulers could obtain authority – gods and (in some way) the people (what a Pharaoh might term “conquering by love”, as expressed in one of the classics of Ancient Egyptian literature, the *Tale of Sinuhe*). Clearly, the former leans towards autocracy and the latter in a more democratic direction. Successful governance was supposed to incorporate

both: channelling the power of the gods to act in a way supported by the people.

The divine element of rule can be seen as representing “the way things are” - established order and precedent. While this might reinforce the position of the leader, in this sense contributing to autocratic rule, it also implied that they could not simply behave in an arbitrary way. Pharaoh being a god, or a Mesopotamian king exercising a divine office, did not give them a *carte blanche* to do whatever they wanted (as shown by various works criticising “arbitrary” kings in both traditions) but it did give them a mandate to uphold the world order in line with the prevailing expectations of the established religion (as interpreted by the monarch). This did not require them to consult the people, but did implicitly allow the people (and particularly members of the literate classes and priesthood) to come to a moral judgment regarding how a given sovereign was performing. So while this is authoritarianism of a kind, in practical terms it did impose some constraints on what rulers could do and often made their actions relatively predictable. Unprecedented action warranted a pushback – as for example shown by the failed attempts of Pharaoh Akhenaten to overhaul the Egyptian state and temple administration in the 14th Century BCE. Here, Pharaoh attempted to move the capital city and impose a new religion on the country, but the country resisted it. Such principles of resisting arbitrary decision-making have been elaborated and augmented into the rule of law concept that exists today.

As for authority derived from the people, there are many examples of consultation exercises and assemblies of various kinds in both societies. In Ancient Egypt, bodies like the *qnbt* and *ḏḏḏt* served as local councils, where legal and administrative issues could be discussed by a collective of decision-makers. While the exact mechanism for returning these decision-makers to office is not altogether clear, and certainly did not involve elections in the modern sense of the word, participants were nonetheless broadly representative of a range of societal groups (ranging from senior scribes and priests to workmen and field labourers). In Mesopotamia, an institution called the *puḫru* served as an assembly with similar functions, often drawing on community elders as a source of authority. While rulers were not obliged to follow the popular will, wisdom literature in both Egypt and Mesopotamia does say that they were effectively obliged to listen to that will. It could be ignored, but it did have to be heard. Indeed, in Ancient Egypt, there existed a special term – *spr* –

which referred to the act of petitioning higher authority for redress of grievance. In some cases, consistent ignoring of such grievances could lead to forms of resistance like protest marches and strike action, as for instance illustrated in the 12th Century BCE Turin Strike Papyrus from Deir el-Medina. This text describes how workmen engaged in the construction of royal tombs downed tools due to a pay dispute with the state. Their activities, which were technically aimed at righting specific localised wrongs rather than seeking to depose the Crown, seem to have been entirely legal. Indeed, the workmen were partly successful in negotiating better pay in a dispute which had marked similarities to modern industrial action.

Implications

What are the implications for our understanding of contemporary difficulties? Insofar as democracy is about power being derived from below and wide involvement in decision making, it clearly has a long past. It is not about to simply be extinguished forever in the current environment, however challenging it may be. At the same time, it does not necessarily follow that those who exercise power on behalf of the people – or claim to do so – will behave in a way that is respectful of rights and good practice in ways that democratic principles suggest they should. Furthermore, while authority derived from divine sources – potentially unaccountable though it was – could also bring with it inbuilt constraints, these do not necessarily apply today. Trump claims to pursue the cause of Christianity but the extent of his personal commitment is highly questionable; while Putin now claims to be orthodox Christian, his background is as an atheist Communist. In this sense, these autocratic but non-ideological people are more dangerous than a Pharaoh or an Assyrian Emperor, whose autocracy rested on a tightly defined religious office steeped in precedent (and who it is reasonable to conclude were for the most part genuinely committed to upholding their faith, having been raised that way since early childhood). Devotion to an ideology or cause can, of course, bring with it immense problems; but so can the absence of such commitment. The context is important.

As well as this intellectual difference, there is the obvious factor of lived experience – Egypt and Mesopotamia had local assemblies and the institutionalised practice of petitioning local officials, rather than (often quite dislocated) voting every 4-5 years and little in between. The wisdom literature of these earlier societies made it clear to local officials and

royal representatives that they had to make it look like they were listening – and if they did not, a petitioner could petition to the next level of officialdom for redress relatively quickly. Of course, this was by no means a perfect system, especially because many officials were either corrupt or simply hard to access, especially for people in remote areas with relatively poor transport links. But there is an important point regarding the empowering of local communities. The system could at least encourage people to feel as though they were able regularly to do things to influence the administration of the area they lived in, and not as though they had no influence at all beyond one-off electoral events sending some figure personally unknown to them to some distant legislature.

Having participatory institutions close to those affected was valuable then and should be perceived as such now. Coupled with this need, the history of Egypt and Mesopotamia suggests the importance of interactions at a higher level – between states. There is strong evidence of cultural cross-fertilisation between the two polities, including over their ideas about how their societies should be governed. From the mid-second millennium BCE onwards, elements of Mesopotamian law and modes of punishment started to become prominent in Egyptian thought, while Mesopotamian rulers typically looked up to Egypt as an example of political stability, strength and wealth. Such interactions were shared by the adoption of a common diplomatic language, Akkadian, backed up by scribes capable of writing and deciphering it in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian cities.

The past, therefore, tells us of a deep human need that can create demand for arrangements of a democratic nature, but which competes with other tendencies, and which can be manipulated. It also suggests that different cultures can benefit from the sharing of good practice, or at least learn from the experience of others. Meaningful international cooperation is a prime target for authoritarians today, and is essential to any effort at defeating this threat.