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Democracy in Conceptual Crisis: A Genealogical Study of a Definitional Failure

Abstract

This paper qualitatively examines the conceptual and definitional chaos of the existing popular democracy. The existing model of liberal democracy is assumed to be originated from the ancient Greek political system. Having its meaning and spirit of people's rule, it has replaced the old autocratic monarchy. The investigation revolves around the basic question, whether modern representative democracy stands true to its real concept, or is the only manifestation of mistranslation of the narrative of 'people's rule'. An in-depth analysis of the fact shows that real democracy has not taken its place; it remains a goal to be achieved, and a dream to be realized. No doubt that some achievements of modern democratic theory and practice have blessed the European, but still the Third World remains in a phase of political chaos. The fact behind the fiction seems to be a failure of definition and addition of misleading concepts about democracy. The confusion is about the clear-cut definition of democracy, that has aggravated the situation to the extent that the concept of general will remains technically impossible to be realized. The present study, employing a qualitative, genealogical-conceptual method traces the contemporary practical crisis of democracy to a documented chain of mistranslations running from the Greek *demos-kratos* through William of Moerbeke's Latin *democratia* to the modern electoral state.

Keywords: democracy; essentially contested concepts; *demokratia*; conceptual genealogy; democratic backsliding;

Introduction

The history of civilization stands testimony to the fact that, public governance and administration of the masses have been managed through power and tyranny of the powerful and resourceful individuals among different communities during the 'state of nature'. The rule of one upon many, is the epitome of this whole story. After several centuries of thirst, the modern world has evolved a system of governance in the name of people's rule. Since Western Renaissance, a modern theory of state has shaped itself, especially in Europe, after in the light of so-called Enlightenment Age.

Reaching to the nineteenth century, a certain form of Representative Democracy, have evolved amongst European Monarchal nation-states. Though as yet, a century of its age has not been completed, the Western Liberal Democracy has become a dream-model for many countries and nations of the world. The reason behind the fact is a long leading role of European Nations, though for the many valid reasons, but is a product of their hegemony upon the globe, for the last four centuries.

But the grim picture of the democratic discourse is that only five per cent of democracies have aged close to a century (V-Dem Institute, 2025). Only 6.6 per cent of the world's population lives in a true democracy, 39 per cent under authoritarian rule, and 15 per cent in "hybrid regimes" that combine electoral democracy with authoritarian tendencies; thirty-five countries have working democracies, while others carry hybrid regimes, deficient democracies, or closed autocracies (Democracy Matrix, 2025). Keeping in mind these crude facts, many contemporary political thinkers estimate even to the extent that real democracy does not and cannot come into existence (Burnheim, 1985; Hoppe, 2001).

The Background

According to Western political scientists, the political thought that shaped the modern arena of the political world begins with the Greeks (Barker, 1918, pp. 2, 39). Therefore, Keith puts forward that democracy was the name of a type of political regime first durably established in the Greek city-state of Athens (Keith, 1986, p. 1). The Greeks probably invented the use of formal voting procedures to legitimate decisions (Held, 1987, p. 21); they also discovered the idea of representation, which solved the problem of

democratic government in large communities, and stressed the concept of authority as a trust (Soltau, 1948, pp. 61, 163).

On the other side, contemporary political thinkers have raised questions upon the early vague association of Western democracy with the Greek models. One can see medieval democracy struggling in the Roman Empire through observations such as the following: the caricature of Athens as a model of democratic reflectiveness is as unhelpful as that of Rome as an uncritical oligarchy; viewed together, the concepts we associate with participatory communities emerge from practices deeply embedded in history and experience, linked to formal and informal relations and structures of power that sustain, limit, and at times undermine the participatory goals of these communities (Hammer, 2015, p. 503).

About the medieval model of democracy, one should remain clear that the thirteenth century was the era when the promotion of democratic institutions was taking place in Europe itself (Soltau, 1948). The evolution of these institutions had a blend of Greek and Roman forms of government; in the beginning, these institutions had not yet completely rid themselves of the traditional monarchy prevailing in the nation-states of Europe.

The Development of Western Liberal Democracy

One can see the political and social background of the existing democracy if the political developments of the last three to four centuries are studied thoroughly. The following major changes occurred in the post-Renaissance European societies, having direct impact on democratic theory and practice:

- The first change was the ideology of Economic Freedom (Liberalism), which brought about a revolution in the economic systems, leading European nations out of the grip of medieval feudalism and colonial mercantilism into modern capitalism and the post-modern free-market economy.
- The second change was the ideal concept of Individual Autonomy, which stirred up political and social life, introducing Western societies to the modern system of politics and governance; moving beyond political absolutism, and leading to an e-media-driven hierarchical pluralism.

These changes have brought up and carried forward the twin sisters of capitalism and democracy. Therefore, Heywood points it out quite positively

with an implied negativity: liberal democracy and capitalism are bound to one another because economic development enhances the conditions of individual autonomy (Heywood, 2013 p. 107). The reason has been probed by Dunn: freedom cannot be realized if freedom means first and foremost the freedom of capital (Dunn, 1989, p. 73). Therefore, Heywood observes that the liberal model of representative government combined with market-based economics, which has dominated political and social development in the West since the nineteenth century, is spreading remorselessly throughout the globe (Heywood, 2013, p. 62).

The Research Question

There is no doubt that the modern democratic system is achieving success in the context of people's rule. The dominant political structures in the form of hundred-per-cent autocracies have decreased within the last three centuries to twenty-five per cent at global levels (V-Dem Institute, 2025). But alongside these attainments, some unrealized dreams and incomplete interpretations are also perpetuating. Only 6.6 per cent of the human population lives in a true democracy, 39 per cent under authoritarian rule (Democracy Matrix, 2025). Therefore, the basic question to be explored is that why does the chaos of assumed real democracy not ending; whether the fault lies in the philosophy of the democracy, that has resulted out of misinterpretations of the real concept, or in the practical manifestations of democracy, evolved through misleading developments.

Review of Literature and the Research Gap

These piercing questions have not gone unnoticed, an enormous corpus of literature has emerged. This corpus runs along three parallel streams that seldom converge, and it is precisely at their point of non-convergence that the present research finds its justification.

The first stream is the conceptual one. As Gallie's (1956) thesis of "essentially contested concepts" was applied to democracy, the political theorists have acknowledged that the term lacks any settled definition. Collier et al. (2006), half a century later, demonstrate that democracy is appraisee, internally complex, variously describable, and open in character. Therefore, it satisfies the criteria of an essentially contested concept par excellence.

Hidalgo (2008) surveys the concept from ancient times to the present and concludes that no unequivocal definition is possible, because the concept harbors irreducible paradoxes: popular sovereignty against representation, the individual against the collective, liberty against equality. Wiesner (2025) shows that liberal democracy has always been contested as a concept and remains contested today in theory, in practice, and in historical perspective. Dryzek (2016) delivers that because democracy is the paradigm essentially contested concept, even a “human right to democracy” cannot specify what it would be a right *to*; the right can only be a right to join the contestation itself.

The second stream is the empirical one. The students of comparative politics have documented, with statistical sophistication, the phenomena of democratic backsliding, executive failure, and the proliferation of hybrid regimes that blend electoral form with authoritarian substance. Waldner and Lust (2018) observe that the challenge of backsliding is first of all a challenge of *definition and measurement*. The hybrid-regime literature carries the argument forward. Huber and Pisciotta (2022), comparing Hungary and Tunisia, show how populist polarization corrodes the social trust upon which democratic acceptance rests; Györfy and Martin (2022) trace the internal dynamics of hybrid regimes through a downward spiral of corruption, manipulated elections, and degenerating legitimacy.

The third stream is the civilizational one. A growing body of work in comparative political theory has examined the relationship between democracy and Islamic political concepts, particularly *shūrā*, the Caliphate, and *siyāsah shar‘īyyah*.

The present author’s earlier work belongs to the foundations of this stream: The Comparative Study of the Caliphate and Democracy (Alvi, 2003) stands among the earlier systematic attempts in Pakistani scholarship to place the two systems in rigorous comparison rather than apologetic equation. In the genealogical excavation of the term democracy (Alvi, 2022b) traces the chain of mistranslation that the present article develops; and the critique of Post-orientalism (Alvi, 2023) exposes the inherited interpretive patterns through which Western scholarship continues to read Islamic political texts.

Quite interestingly, this empirical result vindicates the conceptual claim: if the masses of the Muslim world attach no fixed institutional meaning to democracy, they are living testimony to its essential

contestability — and simultaneously testimony that the operative political demand of the Third World is justice, not procedure.

Read together, the three streams form an incomplete syllogism. The conceptual literature proves that democracy has no settled definition; the empirical literature proves that democratic practice is degenerating through the its very; the comparative-civilizational literature proves that the Islamic tradition possesses an autonomous vocabulary of consultative, justice-centered governance.

Herein lies the research gap. No study has synthesized the three streams into a single genealogical-cum-comparative argument demonstrating that the contemporary crisis of democratic practice — above all in the Third World — is, at root, a crisis of definition inherited from the West's own mistranslations; and that the Islamic socio-political tradition, far from being a passive recipient of this confused concept, offers an independent analytical standpoint from which the confusion itself becomes visible. The present study undertakes that task.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The nature of the problem dictates the method of its investigation. A definitional crisis cannot be diagnosed by quantitative schemes, for the schemes themselves presuppose the very definition that stands in question. The present study, therefore, adopts a **qualitative, genealogical-conceptual method**, situated in the tradition of conceptual history and combined with the techniques of comparative political theory.

Three analytical instruments are employed.

1. The first is **textual and philological analysis** of the primary sources through which the concept of democracy was transmitted: Aristotle's *Politics* in the rendering of Jowett (Aristotle, 1885/trans.), the thirteenth-century Latin translation of William of Moerbeke, (13th Century) the Renaissance vocabulary of Bruni and Machiavelli, (15th -16th Century) and al-Farabi's *Ārā' Ahl al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* (al-Farabi, 20th). The object of this analysis is to identify, at each link of the chain, what was translated, what was substituted, and what was lost.

2. The second instrument is the **comparative-civilizational standpoint**. The Islamic political tradition is not being focused as an object to be measured

against a Western yardstick; that is imbued with the orientalist scheme whose weaknesses the author has examined elsewhere (Alvi, 2023).

3. The third instrument is the framework of **essentially contested concepts** which supplies the diagnostic criterion: democracy is a concept that has structural contest rather than incidental; that means, it cannot be repaired by further definition; it can only be understood by analyzing the history of its development and variability.

The argument proceeds, accordingly, in three steps: first, the genealogical reconstruction of the mistranslations; second, the discussion of the contemporary practical crisis — the election as industry, the manufactured public opinion — is the institutional offspring of that defective genealogy; and third, the synthesis, in which the external standpoint completes the syllogism that the existing literature has left unfinished.

The Real Meaning Crisis

This is the first difficulty encountered in understanding democracy. As far as the literal meanings of the word are concerned, there are no clear disagreements, although some misconceptions appear problematic. The whole issue revolves around the terminological definition and the philosophical background of democracy.

1. The First Misconception: The word democracy entered the English language during the sixteenth century from French. Originally, it is derived from the Greek words; *demos* (meaning people) and *kratos* (meaning power). Democracy means a form of government in which, in contradiction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule (Held, 1987, p. 2). It means that the term democracy has been used in the meaning of the power or rule of the masses; in the literal meaning of this word, the emphasis is more on the Power of Rule than on the Form of Government. Here, some difficulties arise.

Conceptually, democracy is linked to Greece. Western thinkers claim that, according to recorded human history, a vague glimpse of democracy is seen only in the ancient Greek city-states (Barker, 1918, pp. 30–32; Keith, 1986, p. 1). The concept reflects itself in modern times as well — for example, in the title of the book by the American historian Eric W. Robinson, *The First Democracies: Early Popular Government Outside Athens* (1997).

A. It means that the first misconception lies in borrowing ‘democracy’ as a system of government from Greece, whereas the Greek thinkers themselves had no favour for democracy. From the very outset it was rejected by Aristotle (1885, Book III, ch. 7, p. 139). The fact is that not a single notable philosopher is found to be a proponent of the concept of the sovereignty of the public.

B. Had they accepted it as a form of government, the common term would have been *demarchy* instead of democracy; because the Greek terms used to denote a form of government carried the suffix *-archy*, as is clear from terms like monarchy and oligarchy. The suffix *-archy* has been derived from *arkhia*, meaning rule or government, and *arkhos/arkhon*, meaning chief or ruler (Martin, 1995).

C. Quite interestingly, the term *demarchy* exists in political science and is used for a democracy in which there is no election or vote (Burnheim, 1985). If any kind of democracy existed in ancient Greece, it was without election; not an electoral democracy.

2. The Root-Cause: Dunn elaborates the reason behind the use of the term democracy in the West, giving a clue to an implied misconception. He writes that the terminology only became central to European political discourse after William of Moerbeke, translating Aristotle’s *Politics* into Latin for the first time in the middle of the thirteenth century, chose the word *democratia* to translate Aristotle’s term in Book III for the rule of the people (Dunn, 1989, p. 59).

It means that the mistaken idea of equating Greek with Western democracy began in the thirteenth century, when the word democracy was used to explain the political system of the ancient city-states — especially that which, according to Aristotle, was a degenerated form of government (Aristotle, 1885, Book III, p. 139).

A. In terms of thought and philosophy, the European societies were under Greek influence, but politically and legally these states were another form of Roman culture. With this background in mind, William of Moerbeke (1215–1286) translated or substituted Aristotle’s term into Latin as *democratia* (De Wulf, 1912; Dunn, 1989, p. 59). The same word later became popular and widespread in the English language as the equal of Democracy.

B. Firstly, the term *demokratia* was used for the specific government of the city-state of Athens during the fifth century BC, in which all male citizens aged thirty — hardly one fourth of the population — could participate in decision-making, while women and slaves (three quarters of the population) were not entitled to be citizens and thus were ineligible to participate in state affairs (Dunn, 1989).

C. Secondly, the model of governance was based on an assumed public participation (a selected one fourth of the population) without any elections. The popular sovereignty that used to emerge as a reaction to anarchy was a different kind of governance, miles away from the modern elected democratic government established with the consent of the people.

D. Thirdly, the word democracy does not suit as a substitute for *demokratia*. As per Greek tradition, *demarchy* might have been the more proper word for the Athenian way of public governance with citizens' participation. But it is a paradoxical reality that almost all notable political thinkers of the West have translated *demokratia* as democracy (Cuttica, 2022). That ultimately created the misconception that the modern democratic system is similar to the ancient Greek democracy.

3. Another mistaken understanding relates to Plato and Aristotle's view about popular government. It is no hidden fact that the Greek thinkers were never in favor of democracy; rather, they opposed the concept of the rule of the masses, considering it 'mob rule'.

A. The modernist political thinker Sabine stated that according to Aristotle's political philosophy there are three types of good government: Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Polity (*Politeia*), which he considered the highest and most ideal. According to Aristotle's analysis, as these three degenerates, Monarchy changes into Tyranny, Aristocracy into Oligarchy, and Polity changes into the rule of the mob, that is, democracy (Aristotle, 1885, Book III; Sabine, 1981, p. 110).

B. This means that in Aristotle's view, if the people's participation is based on the principle of representation, it will be a good form of government; but if this principle is violated, the power of the masses can convert into an anarchical state.

C. It should be remembered that Aristotle was describing the good and bad forms of government in terms of their constitutional and legal status.

According to his view, if the constitution does not work, the people step forward and take power into their own hands; it will be named democracy (people's power), but it will not be an ideal form from Aristotle's perspective — he considers the collective monopoly of power by the masses to be a degenerate government (Cuttica, 2022).

D. Quite interestingly, William of Moerbeke himself, whose translation made a wrong meaning common, when using the word *demokratia* for popular government, was not looking at a democratic government but at a government that safeguarded the interests of the poor (De Wulf, 1912; Dunn, 1989).

In other words, in Aristotle's view the constitutional status of the government was more important, while in William's view its practical utility was the important one. That is why he defined *demokratia* as a form of government which is conducted for the benefit of the poor rather than in the public interest (Bobbio, 1987, p. 140; Dunn, 1989, p. 59). It should be remembered that considering democracy as the government of the poor is mentioned only in William's definition and is not found in the works of any other ancient or modern political thinker. Thus, this concept creates confusion in the definition of democracy.

4. A similar misunderstanding arose from using Democracy and Republic in the same sense. These two words were used as Latin and English equivalents of Plato's term *Politeia* at the time of the revival of Greek political discourses in Renaissance Europe. The word Republic in English is taken from the Latin *res publica*, which means the affairs of the people.

A. The term Republic refers today to a form of government based on the concept of public participation in power, in contrast to absolute monarchy. Machiavelli (1469–1527) used this word in the same sense in *The Prince*. However, the key role in popularizing this word in Western political thought belongs to the Italian historian and humanist Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444), who used it as an alternative to the Greek term *politeia* while translating the books of Plato and Aristotle.

B. Bruni in fact adopted the concept of similarity between these two words from the Roman thinker Cicero of the first century BC, who first used the Greek word *politeia* as a synonym for the Latin *res publica*. In this way, another ambiguity was added to the concept of Western democracy.

C. The fact remains that the Republic is essentially a political unit or city-state in which the headship belongs to one individual, but his sovereignty is not absolute like a king's; instead, the government operates through a council of citizens. Whereas the Greek term *politeia* was used for a political unit or city-state in which the citizens had their own constitutionally organized government (Strauss, 1987).

It means that *politeia* has been a government in which citizens participate directly in decisions and the constitution is supreme, while Republic is used for a state having public governance under a single authority. Obviously, treating both terms as synonyms in this situation was a misconception.

D. A greater mistake occurred when Republic was considered a substitute for Democracy, although in their literal and terminological meanings both words are different. One can see vividly the confusing use of this word in the official name of China as the 'People's Republic' and in the 'Republic of India'; the difference in the forms of government in these two large states seems opposite to each other.

The Crisis of True Spirit

The renowned Muslim social thinker al-Farabi (870–950) names a society democratic if its individuals are endowed with the freedom of will and choice. He defines a democratic state (*Madīnah al-Jamā'īyah*) as the one whose people intend to be free, where every one of them does as they please (al-Farabi, 1959, p. 110).

Considering the context of a true democracy here would mean a city-state where the system of government is in the hands of its community. But to necessarily interpret this concept as Democracy creates confusion; especially because Plato opposed a democracy established on the basis of public power, and al-Farabi is known as the interpreter of Plato's political philosophy.

1. *Madīnah al-Jamā'īyah*, the phrase used by al-Farabi, literally stands for a city-state run by a community. As a term, it represents *politeia* rather than a democracy in the modern context. The confusion might be credited to the British orientalist Rosenthal (1904–1991), who took this term as synonymous with Democracy, by writing that: democracy (*Madina*

Jamā'īya) is marked by the freedom of its citizens to do as they please (Rosenthal, 1958, p. 136).

A. The reason for this misconception was his pre-existing notion that modern Western democracy reflects ancient Greek democracy. Therefore, Rosenthal equated Plato's term *politeia* with Democracy, thereby introducing two different meanings into one definition. As everybody knows, Plato's book *Politeia* was not related to current democracy, nor was Plato ever an advocate of such a kind of government.

B. Thucydides (460–404 BC), Plato (428–348 BC), and especially Aristotle (384–322 BC) considered democracy to be the rule of the mob, the ignorant, and the incompetent. According to them, a form of government where leadership and sovereignty rest with the common people is essentially a government of the poor and the masses, which defines democracy as another name for anarchy and chaos.

Dunn clarifies this: they found Athenian democracy, both in theory and in practice, to be vengeful, impolitic in war and peace, unstable and mean-spirited in its internal affairs (Dunn, 1989, p. 59).

C. It might make sense that, as democracy passed through its evolutionary stages, its different definitions and names were created based on those references. But besides, it confirms that the journey of democracy's evolution itself caused changes in the meaning of democracy. The socio-economic conditions of different nations led to the adoption of a system of public participation according to the specific temperament of each society, which was called democracy of their own; thus, contributing to the mis-interpretation of the meaning and construction of new meaning through hybridity. Consequently, even today, when one attempts to frame a comprehensive definition of democracy, many reflections appear in the mind.

2. For the same reasons, some political thinkers seem justified in believing that, like liberty, equality, and justice, democracy is also a word whose precise definition is very difficult. It is a collection of mythical ideas free from any axis or objective: democracy, like liberty, equality, and justice, is hard to define; it is a symbol that stands for certain myths, independent of objective content (Burns & Peltason, 1953, pp. 33–34).

A. The American modernist historian, Carl Becker (1873–1945) had been of the opinion that democracy is such a bag of conceptual bits and pieces that almost all social facts can be accommodated in it with a little change in its arrangement and organization, according to one’s desires (Becker, 1941, p. 4).

B. The contemporary Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori (1924–2017) has gone to the extent of saying that we characteristically live in an age of confused democracy: that ‘democracy’ obtains several meanings is something we can live with; but if ‘democracy’ can mean just anything, that is too much (Sartori, 1987, p. 6).

C. One of the most influential contemporary American political theorists, Robert Dahl (1915–2014), goes further than this: if a term has no fixed meaning, the term is meaningless. This is the state of democracy, which is devoid of any fixed and specific meaning; it is just a vague idea that has become common, and nothing more (Dahl, 1989, p. 2).

Just to summarize, one can conclude that for the last several centuries democracy has been adopted as a style of politics and government in the West and the East, but it has taken different forms in every time and space of its location. Even today, the variety of local politics in different regions molds democracy into a new model. In some places, it acts as a bridge between the public and the king, while in others it remains imprisoned in the clutches of the elite. The veto powers in the United Nations are the best global example of a discrepancy of this kind.

The Conclusions

The present study has shown that how the mistranslated understanding of concept about the Western democracy, travels within the developing and under developing countries of the world. A lexical history of the rendering of ‘democracy’ in Urdu and Arabic political vocabulary, as a southern counterpart to the Western Democracy, need to be worked on.

The present author has already initiated. The study of the Welfare State in Muslim political thought (Alvi, 2022a) demonstrates that the classical Muslim thinkers conceived public governance in terms of substantive justice and welfare rather than procedural mechanics. In the genealogical excavation of the term democracy (Alvi, 2022b) traces the chain of mistranslation that the present article develops; and the critique of Post-

orientalism (Alvi, 2023) exposes the inherited interpretive patterns through which Western scholarship continues to read Islamic political texts.

The present study set out to determine whether the fault of democracy lies in its philosophy or in the practical manifestations of the principle ‘rule of the people’. The answer can now be stated: the fault lies first in the philosophy — more precisely, in the philology — and the practice has only inherited it. The following conclusions can be drawn:

A. First, the concept of democracy in circulation today is genealogically counterfeit: it descends not from a transmitted definition but from a chain of documented substitutions — Moerbeke’s *democratia* for Aristotle’s term of disapproval, Bruni’s welding of *politeia* to *res publica*, and Rosenthal’s orientalist projection of the composite onto al-Farabi.

B. Second, because the word possesses no settled definition, the electoral procedure was able to annex its prestige; and the election, having become an industry, delivers power with mechanical regularity to the wealthy minority, while the contemporary backsliding is executed through the very institutions that were to guarantee popular rule.

D. Third, the mediated manufacture of public opinion has dissolved the anthropological assumption — the autonomous voter — upon which the entire representative edifice rests.

E. Fourth, the Islamic socio-political tradition, with its justice-centred vocabulary of *shūrā* and accountability, supplies the external standpoint from which the whole confusion becomes visible; and the instrumental attitude of the Muslim publics confirms that the operative demand of the Third World is justice, not procedure.

Recommendations

The recommendations of the study as follow:

A. The political science should not treat ‘democracy’ and ‘electoral government’ as synonyms and should teach the genealogy of the term as part of the discipline’s self-knowledge.

B. The political regimes should be ranked by substantive measures of justice, welfare, and accountability. Only procedurally correct but substantively predatory government, will not serve the purpose.

C. The vocabularies of governance in different cultures, should be developed in their cultures. The governance should be judged upon the basic principles of justices and transparency, rather than on the Western democracy yardstick.

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