

Global Capital, Compliant Nation-States and Totalitarian Communities
Three Formidable Barriers to the Advance of Democracy

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I must begin by expressing my gratitude to the organizers of this Convention and to this Forum for the opportunity and the honor you have given me by letting me address this impressive assembly. Also, I must congratulate you for choosing a theme that articulates, perhaps, the central challenge confronting all peoples and all nations of the world and more so for the peoples and the nations on the subcontinent. We are all witness to and victims of the times characterized by monstrous brutalities of war and deep scars of deprivations, inequities and oppressions. We live under a world order wherein those who brought, for example, untold tragedy and destruction to Iraq will never be brought to justice because they are the global hegemon. They will not be questioned about the hundreds of thousands of dead and maimed Iraqi men, women and children; they will not be questioned about the thousands of dead and decapitated American soldiers; they will not be questioned about the trillions of dollars spent on the war and further trillions destroyed by the war; and they will not be questioned about the kind of Iraq they are leaving behind.

We on the subcontinent, too, have suffered grievously and felt the heat from far too close. Afghanistan is a continuing saga of tragedy; Pakistan has been made to pay too heavy a price; and India too has not managed to steer clear of the catastrophe. And we know very well that when we count the countries that have suffered, the loss is borne invariably by the people and not by their rulers. But can we – the witness, the victims, the people – escape all responsibility?

It is true that we have not elected the hegemon and it is not by choice that we live under the present world order. It is also true that the systems under which we live in our respective countries are not designed by us, nor is it the case that we can overthrow them the moment we realize that they are not in our favor. The world order and the economic and political systems through which it operates have all had a long history and the people, even though they do make history in the long run, cannot remake it according to their wishes and desires and at every moment of their choice. The blame, therefore, lies principally with the systems and with the history. But can we claim that there is no element of willingness and complicity on our part when it comes to the functioning and the survival of this order? Can we claim that we are free from all traits that may be deployed in the service of the systems we live under? If by magic the hegemon is made to disappear and the systems it presides over are made to crumble, do we have all that it takes to realize the revolutionary and the democratic potential?

Movements and revolutions in past did not need to ask these questions. In a colonial, feudal and despotic world one did not need to preach democracy to the people, nor did

one need to test their credentials on this count. But the world today is not as simple. Today, those who take upon themselves to bring 'democracy' to the far corners of the world, bring it with fire and sword, just as they did when they brought 'civilization' to the hapless lesser peoples in the colonial era. One just has to look at an Iraq or an Afghanistan where they have undertaken strenuous exertions to bring democracy. How wedded are they to the universalization of the democratic ideal can also be measured by their discerning wisdom – while the goddess of democracy needs to drink the Colonel's blood in Libya, the Sheikh of Saudi Arabia does not need to lose his sleep over the threat of the goddess knocking at his door.

That is not all. This mode of establishing democracy also makes strange bed-fellows. Let us not forget that three decades ago when Afghanistan needed to be rid of the infidel totalitarians of the Soviet kind, the magic wand of the global prophets of democracy brought to life such Djinns as the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Now the prophets are fighting their own creations so that they can finally deliver democracy to the Afghans. All through this, the Afghan people have continued to pay a heavy price – forced to make offerings of life and liberty both at the altars of the prophets as well as of the Djinns. In good measure the same can be said of Pakistan too.

To come back to the question, however – if the prophets are chased away, will the Djinns too disappear? Or do they have their roots in our own soil? Do not the people carry some measure of responsibility in nurturing undemocratic structures, cultures and practices? Asking such a question may have amounted to blasphemy in the revolutionary movements of the previous century, but it can no longer be ignored today and certainly not by the movements of tomorrow.

Before I move on to spell out the three main barriers to democracy, let me clarify one thing. Through the examples I have given so far, it is not my intention to paint India in a better light than everyone else on the subcontinent. We too are afflicted by similar Djinns. I do not need to count all the riots and carnages that have taken place on this land of the prophet of non-violence. To remind ourselves of the two major ones in recent times, Gujarat carnage of 2002 and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 each took thousands of lives – in one case Muslims were butchered and in the other Sikhs. We can hardly put the blame for this at the door of the global hegemony. Also, explaining these only on the basis of the malignancies of the electoral politics is only a half-baked explanation if not worse. The cultural-civilizational make-up of this society has deeply buried seeds of such brutalities. The way this glorious civilization has treated its women, its Dalits, its tribals and its religious minorities inspires little confidence that the genetic code of this culture will flower naturally into a democratic paradise. The way the democratically constituted State in India has, on the other hand, crushed the democratic rights of people in Kashmir or in the North-East under the boots of the 'Indian Nation', inspires little confidence that electoral processes are enough in this society for nurturing democracy and protecting democratic rights.

If we survey the global scenario through a bird's eye view, we can easily make out three formidable barriers to the advance of democracy and to the realization of democratic

rights. I would count them as **Global Capital, Compliant Nation-States** and **Totalitarian Communities**. Each one of them would require a bit of explaining.

No form of hegemon-ism exists on its own count and for its own sake. Power must serve some interest. Global hegemon-ism today emerges out of the needs and the interests of the Global Capital. Global Capital does not mean only the globally mobile capital. Nor does it mean only the capital from a given hegemonic country. It is capital in the era of globalization. This is not a tautology or a play upon words. Globalization of capital is the new modus operandi of capitalism in a postcolonial world. It is the new global strategy of capital to deal with and operate through the international framework of independent nation-states which are increasingly constituted through some or the other form of political democracy. In the era of colonial imperialism such a strategy was not needed and had not been fashioned. In those days the imperialist capital acted as a barrier to capitalist development in the colonized countries. That is why even the newly emerging capitalists in the colonies often stood and sometimes fought for national liberation. In a postcolonial world of nation-states which are formally and in most cases largely sovereign, capital had to find new ways to serve its interest and protect its system. This is what has given rise to Global Capital. Capitals from all countries – even from the non-hegemonic ones – are partners in this new international system of capitalism. All partners are not equal. That hardly happens in any partnership. The main point is that capital from a given nation or country has its allegiance first and foremost to this global system of capitalism and only later to the idea of nationalism. This was not the case in the times of colonial imperialism.

One may ask, what does all this have to do with the question of democracy and democratic rights? The answer is – everything! Democracy at its most operational and explicit level is a political issue. The political system is tailored to suite the interest of the dominant classes. In today's world the political systems in all countries, and the world order encompassing the entire globe, are tailored to the interests of the capitalist class. Nation-States are by and large sovereign but only to the extent they comply with the interests of Global Capital. The interests of the Global Capital may still be various but they are no longer divided fundamentally according to the national origins of capital. The capital in and from any country, therefore, is not wedded to and confined by the given nation-state. It is getting increasingly unhinged from the nation-state. That is why the power of the nation-state over capital is diminishing across the world. This is true even of the globally hegemonic nation-state.

This brings us to the phenomenon of **Compliant Nation-States**. These comply not so much with the wishes of the global hegemon as with the interests of the Global Capital. Today's wars, by and large, do not arise from the conflicts among the imperialists. They arise more often from the need to punish the recalcitrant nation-states – ones that for some reason or the other refuse to comply with the wishes of the Global Capital. In a system of independent nation-states, hegemony and hegemons are needed for meting out such punishments and for keeping the world order intact.

The most striking feature of the compliant nation-states is the following: they are constituted through and operate within the framework of political democracy, but they serve the interests of the capital. This invariably means that they do not serve the interests of the people. And it often means that they do not serve the democratic interests. This is the contradiction that lies at the heart of the existing political framework of democracy. *States are democratically constituted but they do not serve democratic interests.*

How do they manage to do that? If they are democratically constituted, they should be compelled to serve democratic interests. This is where the power of Global Capital is on full display. And this power is effective not only in the so-called third world. It is equally effective even in the advanced capitalist countries including the present hegemon. In simple terms, the Global Capital tells the nation-state – *if you do not act according to my wish, I will ruin the economy. I will go elsewhere; will not come to you; will make you suffer by making the people suffer. In a ruined economy where hardships increase and prosperity disappears, the people who constitute you will turn against you.* The nation-state then has to tell the people that democracy must operate within the boundaries of capital, although it never tells them in an honest and plain language. People can elect whoever they want to, but the elected must act according to the rules of capital.

Today's wars, financial and economic crises, public subsidies and private bonuses to those banking sultans and captains of the industry who plunder, misappropriate and bring about disasters, forcible acquisitions of land and other resources from the people, reductions in the public succor to the poor and retreat of the so-called welfare state, amassing of wealth while generating debilitating poverty through widespread unemployment and reduced wages, in general the entire gamut of the neo-liberal ideology and practice, – all these point towards this unholy nexus between the Global Capital and the Compliant Nation-States.

Reduction in the powers of the nation-state in face of the naked power of capital may not be in the long-term interest of capital. Capitalism is not safe in the market and it requires the protection of the state. But these times are characterized nevertheless by the neoliberal dominance. For now it works because there are emerging economies that can shelter, deploy, protect and enhance capital. Vast expanses of the planet can still absorb capital and billions of people are still to be uprooted from traditional occupations and hired in the service of capital. When capital has still frontiers to conquer, it always does it through raw power. Champions of democracy never practice democracy when their economic and political frontiers are to be expanded.

Believe it or not, the fight for democracy would still be easy if it were to be fought only against the capital and the state. Both are largely external to the people and imposed on them often against their will. But there are factors internal to the people which too go against democracy and smother democratic rights. I have deliberately put them under the heading – **Totalitarian Communities**. We may remember that this adjective was reserved for the socialist states of the twentieth century which, ostensibly, sought to take every aspect of life under their grip. It may require a separate debate to determine the extent to which such an allegation was justified or motivated. But I have no doubt that

there are cultures and communities that are unabashedly totalitarian. Such totalitarianism resides within the sections and groups of people and it cannot be blamed exclusively, not even mainly, on the hegemon and the capitalists. If there is large popular support to acts of violence against people who live differently, love differently and worship differently, the blame does not go to the economic, political and ideological structures of modernity. It is largely the doing of cultures, beliefs and practices of the traditional communities that are totally intolerant of other ways of life.

We in India have our *Khap Panchayats* which punish young people, at times with death, if they dare to marry across the caste and communal boundaries. We have intolerance built into our cultural make up towards religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities; our traditional cultures have invariably treated women and Dalits in brutally inhuman ways; our social structures, especially in the villages, have been openly oppressive and discriminatory across the caste, gender and religious lines. Elsewhere on the subcontinent we have mob courts punishing women by stoning them to death for supposed adultery; where small thieves may be punished by cutting off their hands while big thieves go scot-free or even rule the country; where assassins are extolled as heroes if they kill a liberal and progressive Muslim. Democracy is not something that should reside only in the abodes of the government. Nor are the democratic rights the preserve of political structures. Cultures and communities are often the more important places where democratic rights are protected or extinguished.

This makes the fight for democratic rights truly challenging. Hegemon and their tyrant cronies are well-identified enemies of democracy. In the fight against them, however, our interests may not be best served if we mobilize our forces on the basis of traditional identities and solidarities. Of course, the choice of strategy may not be fully in our hands. There would not be any controversy about the need to overthrow something like the regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi, but how democratic is the Iranian society under the Islamic dispensation of the Ayatollah variety is another matter. Tomorrow the Egyptians may be confronted with a similar predicament.

Many in the left and progressive movements think that interrogating the traditional cultures and communities from a modern democratic viewpoint is not among our immediate tasks. We are supposed to mobilize people, the way they are, in the fight against the capital and the state. This is a dangerous trend as it brings only temporary victories and long-lasting defeats. The fight for democracy in today's world cannot make progress without fighting against the global capital and against the compliant and essentially undemocratic states, but it also cannot make any progress without challenging the totalitarian cultures and communities.

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