

Jakub Polit 

Jagiellonian University

jakub.polit@uj.edu.pl

THE FRAGILITY OF DEMOCRACY AND ITS DOUBLE-EDGED NATURE¹

ABSTRACT: This article argues that ‘democracy’ has become a largely unquestioned legitimizing principle in contemporary politics, while anti-democratic projects increasingly operate through democratic labels (e.g., ‘people’s’, ‘Islamic’, ‘guided’, ‘true’ democracy). It traces how technological change (especially the internet) reopens the question of direct versus representative rule, intensifying tensions between popular sovereignty, expertise, and accountability. The paper also highlights institutional distortions (party convergence, judicial overreach, blurred separation of powers) and the growing gap between democracy’s liberal and majoritarian components. Finally, it compares non-Western reinterpretations of democracy (Islamic, Hindutva, Confucian / ‘Asian values’) and assesses how media ecosystems and AI may further amplify manipulation, oligarchic drift, or authoritarian capture.

Keywords: democracy, representation, separation of powers, political legitimacy, non-Western political thought

INTRODUCTION

There is no dispute that democracy plays, in the contemporary world – at least one that declaratively refers to the ideals of Western civilization – the role of an indisputably accepted factor regulating all areas of social life. It performs a function similar to

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that of Christianity in medieval Europe – in the sense that those who openly question this principle are considered to be committing an assault on values shared by the entire society. A medieval ruler could consider whether he was sufficiently Christian, but never whether he should be a Christian. This comparison can be extended. In the Middle Ages, all manifestations of opposition to the existing socio-political order took the form of Christian heresies.² In the 20th and 21st centuries, actions attacking democracy were (and are) undertaken under the banner of ‘people’s’, ‘Islamic’, ‘functional’,³ ‘guided’,⁴ or simply ‘true’ democracy.

Even in the 1920s and 1930s, it was believed that *we are witnessing a crisis of the democratic idea*, which was in retreat.⁵ In Europe, only the sparsely populated Scandinavian countries and the small countries of the future Benelux admitted to it without reservation. French democracy, shaken by the events of 1934, survived mainly due to the lack of a charismatic candidate for dictator. Crippled after Munich, democratic Czechoslovakia during the ephemeral Second Republic (1938–1939) began to lean toward authoritarianism. Switzerland was considered a political fossil, cultivating solutions possible only there. However, the defeat of the Axis powers in World War II was universally recognized as a triumph of democracy over its enemies and discredited all other forms of government. Admittedly, communist totalitarianism became a serious challenge. However, during the Cold War, the communist camp, opposed to democracy, described itself precisely as democratic, with a fondness for referring to such instruments as referenda and universal elections. Although this was a fiction, the dictatorships supported by Moscow or Beijing stubbornly employed democratic phraseology with a persistence worthy of a better cause. This reinforced the belief in the non-alternativeness of democracy as such. A peculiar *signum temporis* became the efforts aimed at democratizing the Catholic Church – contradicting its hierarchical nature and understanding the Church as an institution erected only by man and purely temporal.⁶ The leaders of independence movements in former colonies – Jawaharlal Nehru, Sukarno, Kwame Nkrumah – accused the former metropolises of denying their possessions not only independence, but also ‘democratic freedoms’. Admittedly, many of these leaders, once they assumed power, often proved unable to govern democratically. This was, however, attributed to the character flaws of those politicians.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the consensus on this issue was shaken. On the one hand, the consequences of various phenomena – for example, the information

² L. Kołakowski, *Herezja*, Kraków 2010.

³ The political system of Bolivia was referred to as a “functional democracy” by the country’s president, Germán Busch Becerra, who held office from 1937 to 1939. See also M. Kula, *Anatomia rewolucji narodowej (Boliwia w XX wieku)*, Wrocław 1999, pp. 32-33.

⁴ Indonesia’s president Sukarno described his dictatorship in the years 1957–1965 as a “guided democracy,” presenting himself as the embodiment of the “good king” (*ratu adil*). See also Ł. Bonczol, *Zrozumieć Indonezję. Nowy Ład generała Suharto*, Warszawa 2012, s. 68-7.

⁵ B. Wasiutynski, *Kryzys demokratyzmu. Wybór pism*, introd. P. Koryś, Kraków 2024, p. 167. Bohdan Wasiutyński (1882-1940) was a lawyer and a senator of the Second Polish Republic.

⁶ Cf. E. Voegelin, *Lud Boży*, trans. M. Umińska, Kraków 1994.

revolution – called into question many of the Western world's previous assumptions about democracy. On the other hand, the increasing marginalization of the Western world, including demographic marginalization, led to the questioning of Western constitutional concepts by former colonial countries.

The spread of the Internet became a challenge to the representative system, which had previously been accepted as indisputable. Let us recall that democracy originated in the small-sized Athenian *polis*. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was perplexed by what he considered an obvious contradiction between the vast territorial size of the Polish–Lithuanian state and its system as a free republic; as a remedy, he proposed a loose federation, with *as many governments as there are voivodeships*.⁷ The United States of America, territorially vast and established at the same time, was perceived by many as precisely such a federation of thirteen states. The dispute over the scope of the federal government's prerogatives was to lead to one of the most brutal civil wars in history. It is difficult to deny that the system of representation, today considered without alternative, inevitably means that a selected minority governs the majority that elected it. In this way, *the legal fiction of representation is best externalized, as it turns out that the voter himself cannot effectively exercise his rights to govern and can only do so through his representative*.⁸

Meanwhile, the Internet made it conceivable to refer directly to the will of the sovereign people on a number of issues, thus returning to direct democracy (its previous functioning in the Swiss cantons was treated by French encyclopedists in the 18th century as an uncopyable peculiarity). However, it was not without reason that this possibility was treated not as an opportunity, but as a solution causing embarrassment, if not outright fear. Those in power, although it is inappropriate for them to articulate this openly, are aware of the fact that the nominal sovereign has little understanding of the principles of the state system. As a result, they may make random, unpredictable, or even harmful decisions.

If an ancient Athenian, living under conditions of direct democracy, voted for war, he knew that he would almost certainly have to take part in it. Meanwhile, in the United States – a country often compared to Athens by those writing about the so-called ‘Thucydides trap’⁹ – the majority of those opting to send troops to, for example, the Persian Gulf region do not know where that gulf is located.¹⁰ In other words, in modern

⁷ J.J. Rousseau, *Rozważania o rządzie polskim i jego zamierzonej reformie*, trans and ed. A. Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, Warszawa 2023, p. 62.

⁸ J. Szymanek, “Współczesne rozumienie pojęcia reprezentacji politycznej (zarys problemu),” *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, vol. 67, no. 2 (2005), p. 225, at <https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/e1417a7f-07f5-428d-8c4f-ef40e54cc872/content>, 4 December 2025.

⁹ E.g. E. Haliżak, “Stosunki USA–Chiny. Falsyfikacja hipotezy ‘pułapki Tukidydesa’” *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2016), pp. 9-31. The comparison between the United States and Athens refers to the fact that both states, culturally dominant within their respective civilizations, were at the same time regarded as highly aggressive.

¹⁰ An example cited by Paul Kennedy (*U progu XXI wieku. Przymiarka do przyszłości*, London 1994 [orig. ed. 1993], pp. 348-349). According to Kennedy, in 1988, 75% of Americans were unable to locate the Persian Gulf on a map; at the same time, most of them approved sending aircraft carriers there.

democracy – let alone ‘internet’ democracy – the connection between one’s own actions and their consequences is disappearing. The assassin of President Lincoln was easy to punish. It was impossible to punish the judicial murder, voted through by the Athenian *demos*, of the strategoi who had previously won the Battle of Arginusae; this soon led to Athens’ defeat in the Peloponnesian War. Assurances that such a threat is temporary, because *after a period of enthusiasm for direct power through online voting, the pendulum will swing back again, and voters will begin to have greater respect for authority and be more willing to leave decisions to experts*,¹¹ betray excessive optimism and ignorance of human nature. Setting aside the grim examples from the French and Russian revolutions (even from their ‘moderate’ phases), it is difficult not to ask how long one would have to wait for such a ‘swing of the pendulum’ and whether the damage would be reversible.

Other objections to direct democracy (even in its most mature form, which is considered to be Swiss democracy) refer to the threat of *using this instrument to strengthen the image of political parties, promote populist slogans of xenophobia and intolerance, and stir up social unrest and divisions*.¹² These complaints, however, touch upon another issue, which can only be signaled here. It concerns the actual aversion of elites to the formal sovereign, considered (even in the case of theoretically politically sophisticated Helvetians) too unpredictable to be entrusted with decisions.

Furthermore, even the most representative parliament expresses the preferences of voters that exist only on election day. Due to the phenomenon of term limits, the composition of the chamber(s) cannot change as a result of a metamorphosis of these preferences, even if such a revision is obvious. (In Poland, the Solidarity Electoral Action, which won the elections in 1997, did not enter parliament at all after the next elections; it can therefore be assumed that it had long since ceased to represent those who had once voted for it.) Although the voter casts a vote for the party ideologically closest to them, once in power, that party may act against the will of its electorate (and in extreme cases, implement a completely different program).

Moreover, a significant objection is that the aforementioned fact does not stem from the dishonesty (‘deceptive machinations’) of party leaders. It arises from the very essence of the modern democratic system. Until the end of the 19th century (and sometimes even longer), the electorate constituted only a small percentage of the adult population. Winston Churchill, when he first entered parliament during the reign of Queen Victoria, had the opportunity, during his campaign for a seat in the House of Commons, to personally meet almost all of his voters.¹³ For the reason mentioned above, the

¹¹ D. Morris, “Direct Democracy and the Internet,” *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2001), p. 1051.

¹² E. Mysłak, “Instytucje demokracji bezpośredniej w szwajcarskim modelu demokracji konsensualnej,” *Politeja*, vol. 9, no 3 (21) (2012), p. 132. Marek Bankowicz (“System polityczny Szwajcarii, czyli przypadek jedyny w swoim rodzaju,” *Politeja*, vol. 20, no. 1 (82) (2023), pp. 5-20), perhaps values most highly in the Swiss political system precisely the elements of direct democracy; however, he emphasizes the uniqueness of this model.

¹³ W. Churchill, *Moja młodość*, trans. T. Bieroń, Poznań 2000, p. 272.

programs of the main parties were relatively precise and clearly delineated. Today, with the necessity of convincing an electorate numbering in the millions and the danger that even a small voting group may determine defeat or victory, candidates are forced to 'promise everything to everyone'. The result is a caricature of the titular phenomenon described in Leszek Kołakowski's essay *How to Be a Conservative-Liberal Socialist*.¹⁴ In most countries of Western civilization (the United Kingdom, Germany), the actual differences between the parties alternating in power are so minimal that their change at the helm does not (at least in the opinion of voters) cause any significant changes in the functioning of the state. Hence the accusation that parties have ceased to be advocates of any (distinct from one another) programs. They have simply become machines for producing successive government teams.

For the reasons described above, it is unlikely that the phenomenon described above can be remedied by establishing an 'authentic' party that 'goes beyond the existing political monopoly'. In addition, there is a fear, carefully fueled by the previously dominant groups, that a vote for new 'anti-system parties' will be a so-called 'wasted vote'. For this reason, voters do not vote for the party with which they truly identify. They vote for the party from the existing system that they consider the least bad. Not only does this perpetuate the status quo, it also means that the parliament is effectively unrepresentative from the moment it convenes.

It is not without justification that scholars point to the blurring of Montesquieu's tripartite division of powers, long regarded as one of the pillars of democratic governance. This division is undoubtedly present in the United States, where the president – except in the specific case of impeachment – is not accountable to Congress for his actions. However, the president not only lacks the authority to dissolve the legislature but cannot even convene it. In most countries, members of the executive branch, including its head, are also members of parliament and may be dismissed by it.¹⁵

A far more fundamental issue concerns the judiciary. Its representatives are, not without reason, accused of becoming not interpreters but creators of law and, consequently, of co-governing the state – often in alliance with current autocrats. A telling example is the case of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. When the parliament declared his rule illegitimate, the Supreme Court successively annulled parliamentary resolutions and later invalidated the electoral victory of Maduro's rival, Juan Guaidó. In effect, the tribunal stripped the legislature of its lawmaking powers and arrogated them to itself.¹⁶ Under such conditions, 'popular sovereignty' becomes a fiction.

¹⁴ L. Kołakowski, "Jak być konserwatywno-liberalnym socjalistą," *Aneks*, no. 20 (1979), pp. 3-6, at <https://aneks.kulturaliberalna.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/20-kolakowski-With-Watermark.pdf>, 4 December 2024.

¹⁵ In Swiss democracy, which is often considered closest to the democratic ideal, the separation of powers is effectively absent. See also M. Bankowicz, "System polityczny Szwajcarii..." s. 9-10.

¹⁶ "Guaidó vs Maduro: Who backs Venezuela's Two Presidents?," *Reuters*, 24 January 2019, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20190127205654/https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/24/reuters-america-guaido-vs-maduro-who-backs-venezuelas-two-presidents.html>, 3 December 2024; "Venezuela 'coup': Alarm Grows as Court Takes Power," *BBC News*, 31 March 2017, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/>

Increasingly visible – though marginalized and ignored – are tensions between the democratic and liberal components of democracy. Classical liberalism (which requires no extensive explanation here) was anti-egalitarian, advocating rule by elites. It accepted the principle of equality ‘as a matter of prudence’, interpreting it solely as equal political rights (one man, one vote). It viewed with suspicion both the restriction of individual liberty by ‘natural rights’ (endorsed by conservative majorities) and by ‘social and economic rights’ (championed by the socialist left), understood as equal access or even economic uniformity.

In light of this, accusations of ‘undemocratic’ governance directed at several countries – such as Hungary under Viktor Orbán – for allegedly curtailing judicial independence, press freedom, access to abortion, or the rights of sexual minorities appear peculiar. These accusations do not concern whether the majority enacting such measures came to power through genuinely free and democratic elections (i.e., matters of democracy). Rather, they pertain to liberal freedoms – both classical (freedom of speech) and libertarian (abortion, moral issues) – that are being restricted by a democratically elected majority.

The inverse of this situation – arguably more frequently observed – is the imposition of minority will upon the nominal sovereign. This is distinct from the aforementioned usurpation of legislative functions by the judiciary. It refers to cases in which political parties – sometimes holding a parliamentary majority due to elections, but often merely influential coalition partners essential for forming such a majority – push through policies they neither announced during the campaign nor formally endorsed. Occasionally, skillful propaganda leads to a post hoc shift in public opinion on the matter.

A relatively uncontroversial example, around which a European consensus had formed by 2024, is the death penalty. In many continental countries, it was abolished at a time when it still enjoyed majority support. Over time, a belief took hold – reinforced by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union – that executing a criminal is characteristic of dictatorships. Yet, the death penalty is absent in Russia and in the highly authoritarian Turkmenistan, while it remains part of the legal systems of India, Japan, and the United States.

On the other hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union – perceived by many countries in Asia and Africa as a Western state – contributed to the view that parliamentary democracy and constitutionalism are Western inventions, imposed upon the rest of the world as a consequence of a historically brief and somewhat accidental period of military dominance. This event coincided with the dramatic rise of the People’s Republic of China, which increasingly and openly rejected democracy – at least in its ‘Western’ form. China now tends to identify itself not as a country building communism, but rather as one drawing upon the Confucian tradition, which is not necessarily democratic.

Moreover, a number of works published in the West – most notably Edward Said's *Orientalism*¹⁷ – have condemned the Western perception of other cultures as hypocritical and fundamentally false, essentially serving as a veiled justification for domination. These publications – though likely not intended for this purpose – have provided intellectual ammunition for claims that democracy itself is a fabrication, and that alternative forms of governance rooted in other cultural traditions may be equally valid, or even superior, at least within those cultural contexts.

Somewhat surprisingly, the most direct attack on democracy does not come from the Muslim world, despite its often confrontational stance toward the West. The reason lies in Islam's considerable social openness (in stark contrast to its philosophical rigidity; Hinduism presents the opposite configuration). Thus, even conservatives or outright fundamentalists are capable of arguing that *what Europe calls freedom is precisely what our religion defines as justice (adl), righteousness (haqq), consultation (shura), and equality (musawat)*; that *the greatest periods of Muslim rule were those in which Islamic structural and intellectual achievements were also the most democratic*; and even that *pluralist parliamentary democracy [is] the ideal instrument for implementing the divinely ordained sharia*.¹⁸

The last of these claims, however, reveals the underlying logic: democracy is here understood – despite an important caveat – as a dictatorship of the majority. The caveat is that proponents of these views often perceive themselves (sometimes sincerely) as advocates of tolerance. Their arguments draw upon the works of Western scholars who – within a certain context, excluding deliberate falsifiers – have portrayed historical Muslim empires, such as the Arab Caliphate and the Ottoman Empire, as models of tolerant governance.

What is overlooked, however, is the obvious fact that such tolerance applied not to individuals, but to entire religious-ethnic communities, hierarchically ordered with Muslims consistently at the top. Within these communities, tolerance did not prevail. For example, Christians living autonomously under the rule of the Padishah could punish fellow believers for bigamy or apostasy – though the latter charge tended to disappear when conversion to Islam was involved.

Today, Muslims in Western societies demand 'historical reciprocity', arguing that tolerance requires their communities to be governed by *sharia* law, independently of the legal norms enacted by the respective parliaments.¹⁹ Refusal to accept this arrangement is denounced as a violation of democracy.

The treatment of democracy as a set of freedoms granted to groups – positioned within a specific hierarchical order – rather than to individuals, was starkly revealed in the failure of the much-publicized 'Arab Spring' of 2011. The uprisings against Middle

¹⁷ E. Said, *Orientalizm*, trans. M. Wyrwas-Wiśniewska, Warszawa 1991 (orig. ed. 1978)

¹⁸ Cit. in: J.O. Voll, "Islam and Democracy: Is Modernisation a Barrier?," *Religion Compass*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2007), p. 173.

¹⁹ B. Lewis, *Co się właściwie stało? O kontaktach Zachodu ze światem islamu*, trans. J. Kozłowska, Warszawa 2003, pp. 136-138. Simplifying, the ideal would be for closed groups to be mutually tolerant of the practice of intolerance within those very groups.

Eastern dictators, interpreted in the West as revolts in the name of democracy, were in fact driven by demands for social justice and economic rights. The fall of these regimes benefited political movements that understood democracy in a highly particular way. In reality, these groups were hostile to political pluralism and minority rights. The outcomes were states of emergency (Egypt), civil war (Syria), or the bloody disintegration of the state (Libya).²⁰ Moreover, it became evident that *whenever the West intervened – even for a just cause – the Arab street held a grudge against the West for decades thereafter*.²¹

In India, often referred to as ‘the world’s largest democracy’, the term itself is undergoing a reinterpretation so profound that one may question whether it still fits within the Western definition. This shift is a consequence of *Hindutva* – an ideology aimed at building a powerful India based on values derived from Hinduism. During the rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party (1999–2004, and especially since 2014), this ideology has been superficially masked by the slogan *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* (roughly: ‘development for all through collective effort’). However, the final component of this slogan is undermined by the fact that, according to *Hindutva*, true members of the nation are only adherents of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism (the second has a negligible number of followers on the subcontinent, and the third almost none). Christians are excluded, and Muslims even more so.

Muslims constitute 14.5% of India’s population – approximately 138 million people – and in some states their proportion approaches 30%. Despite the formally secular nature of the state, several states have enacted so-called anti-forced conversion laws, which in practice treat any abandonment of Hinduism as coercive. One consequence of these laws is the promotion of ‘voluntary reconversion’, sometimes interpreted as a mandate for descendants of allegedly ‘forcibly converted’ individuals to return to Hinduism. The paradox lies in the fact that Prime Minister Narendra Modi implements such policies with the support of the majority of society, with which he communicates exceptionally effectively across various segments.²²

For proponents of the caste system – which in practice persists in India in a nearly unchanged form – the inequality of individuals is self-evident. Elections, typically referred to in the West as ‘a celebration of democracy’, become battles in which not hundreds but thousands of lives are lost. The society, while formally adhering to ceremonial practices inherited from Britain, is in reality guided by an entirely different value system.²³

Due to China’s growing role in the contemporary world, the most significant questions posed to proponents of democracy now come from representatives of Confucian

²⁰ R. Khan, A. Mahmood, A. Salim, “Arab Spring Failure. A Case Study of Egypt and Syria,” *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2020), pp. 44-53.

²¹ W. Jurasz, “Co zostało po arabskiej wiosnie? Smutny bilans 10 lat,” *Onet Wiadomości*, 7 March 2021, at <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/tylko-w-onecie/co-zostalpo-arabskiej-wiosnie-smutny-bilans-10-lat-analiza/b1w0nzp>, 13 December 2024. The author is a diplomat and publicist.

²² R. Khan, A. Mahmood, A. Salim, “Arab Spring Failure...”, pp. 44-53.

²³ K. Dębnicki, *Konflikt i przemoc w systemie politycznym niepodległych Indii*, Warszawa 2015.

civilization. This civilization may be considered the principal alternative to the Western model – not only because it possesses the oldest historical lineage among existing civilizations, but also because, owing to its exclusivity, remoteness, and geographic isolation, it has had the least contact with the West.²⁴

On one hand, the extraordinarily long period of autocratic rule has led to a deeply ingrained tradition of centralized authority. As Mao Zedong (hypocritically) lamented, *It is not easy to overcome a tradition of emperor worship that spans three thousand years.*²⁵ On the other hand, the sheer size of the country, its vast population, and the collective memory of periodic, devastating episodes of disintegration mean that any proposal aimed at weakening central authority is viewed exclusively as a form of separatism, inevitably leading to chaos (*luan*).

Millennia of autocratic governance have resulted in a complete lack of experience in both holding power to account and participating in political life. The absence of public opinion has led to two phenomena: the government does not seek public support for its decisions, and the populace remains indifferent to political affairs.²⁶ At the end of the 19th century, relatively educated and affluent residents of Beijing, when asked by French missionaries which of the emperor's sons would succeed to the throne, replied: *Listen, my friend, why torment your heart and trouble your mind with such petty concerns? The mandarins are obliged to deal with matters of state; they are paid for it, so let them earn their wages. Why should we burden ourselves with what is their responsibility? It would be foolish of us to engage in politics for free.*²⁷

The lack of a tradition of the rule of law, and the tendency to equate law with morality (Confucians found it extremely difficult to distinguish between the two concepts), has led to accusations that democracy is immoral. It is argued that a majority may, within a democratic framework, make decisions that violate widely accepted ethical norms.²⁸ Whereas Western political commentators lament the insufficient connection between politics and the 'general will', Confucians criticize democracy for precisely the opposite reason – for its dependence on an often immoral electorate.²⁹ As Confucian

²⁴ K. Gawlikowski, *Chińskie metamorfozy. Cywilizacja konfucjańska a cywilizacja zachodnia*, Warszawa 2022 (Some of the author's claims are contentious).

²⁵ E. Snow, "A Conversation with Mao Tse-tung," *Life*, 30 April 1971, p. 46, at <https://blog.nixonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/LIFE-Magazine-April-30-1971.pdf>, 13 December 2024.

²⁶ On this subject F.W. Houn, *Central Government of China, 1912-1928. An Institutional Study*, Westport 1974, pp. 161-175.

²⁷ [O.M. Huc], *Cesarstwo Chińskie według współczesnych badań podróżnika O.M. Huc'a, b. misjonarza Apostolskiego w Chinach. Dzieło uwieńczone przez Akademię francuską*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1886, p. 65.

²⁸ M. Stępień, *Chińskie marzenie o konstytucjonalizmie*, Kraków 2015, s. 89.

²⁹ B. Tongdong, *Against Political Equality. The Confucian Case*, Princeton 2019, s. 54 i n. (like most Confucians – but also like many Western theorists of democracy – Bai identifies liberal freedoms with democracy as such); J. Qing, *From Mind Confucianism to Political Confucianism*, in: R. Fan E. Yu (eds), *The Renaissance of Confucianism in Contemporary China*, New York 2011, s. 34.

thinker and political scientist Bai Tongdong observes, *The true will of the people is what people ought to want.*³⁰

The conception of the state as a large family, governed by hierarchy and respect for leadership, leads to reflections that are troubling for advocates of democracy. In China – as well as in Japan – it is argued that since the citizens of these countries (much like members of companies, for instance) constitute a family, the kind of competition characteristic of democracy cannot exist among them. The belief in human inequality is as self-evident to Confucians as it is to adherents of *Hindutva*, though it stems from different premises. It concerns one's position within a 'natural hierarchy', which is topped – depending on the group in question – by the head of the family, the company CEO, the holder of the highest academic title, or a ministerial office.

Within such a framework, the proposal by Singapore's long-serving Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew becomes logically coherent: that individuals deemed more valuable to society – specifically, those aged 40–65 in child-producing marriages – should be granted more than one vote in elections. The rationale is that *people can sometimes be unpredictable (...) and in fits of recklessness vote for change for the sake of change.*³¹

Singapore itself – perhaps too hastily classified as an authoritarian rather than democratic state – may be considered a model example of 'Confucian democracy' as understood by proponents of this philosophy. This form of democracy is characterized by the following features:

1. a refusal to overestimate the importance of multiparty systems,
2. elections that are consultative rather than competitive in nature,
3. decision-making based on consensus rather than majority rule.³²

Indeed, in East and Southeast Asian countries, formal voting procedures often serve to ratify decisions previously negotiated behind the scenes. This vision of democracy aligns with 'Asian values', which, according to their advocate, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad, include social order and respect for authority.³³

In Afro-Asian countries, the democratic model of governance is often the result of foreign colonial or even occupational domination (as in the case of Japan). Under such circumstances, democracy frequently proves to be a fiction (as in many African states), or an empty shell. In the latter case, the external democratic ceremonial (*tatamae* in Japanese) serves as a façade for the actions of actual decision-makers (*honme*).³⁴ It

³⁰ B. Tongdong, *Against Political Equality...*, p. 79.

³¹ G. Allison, R.D. Blackwill, A. Wyne, *Chiny, Stany Zjednoczone i świat w oczach wielkiego mistrza Lee Kuan Yewa*, trans. H. Bińczak, Warszawa 2014, s. 139. Lee acknowledged, however, that stripping these "supervoters" of their additional votes once they reached the age of 65 would be difficult to implement.

³² M. Bankowicz, *System polityczny Singapuru. Ewolucja historyczna i teraźniejszość*, Kraków 2005, p. 224.

³³ Mahathir bin Mohamad, "Rozważania o wartościach azjatyckich," *Azja-Pacyfik*, no. 2 (1999), pp. 157-168. In the same issue, there are numerous (exclusively approving) voices on this concept.

³⁴ K. Karolczak, "Japońska demokracja – tatamae czy honne?," *Azja-Pacyfik*, no. 1 (98) (1998), pp. 67-76.

must be emphasized that – both in Japan and Singapore – this state of affairs does not stem from electoral fraud or societal intimidation. Rather, it is the result of a particular ‘apolitical’ disposition among the electorate: the belief that competent and beneficial governments should not be replaced, and that politics, being too complex for ordinary people, ought to be left to ‘professionals’.

In a context of ‘community-families’, where conflict among members is absent, the quasi-logical – though shocking from a Western perspective – phenomenon of de facto inheritance of electoral districts emerges. Only the descendants of parliamentarians possess both name recognition and a stable political base, along with the financial resources necessary for campaigning; celebrities or business figures may possess only one of these assets. As a result, it is not entirely exaggerated to claim that all postwar Japanese prime ministers were either related by blood or marriage.³⁵ It is also worth noting that in Japan, casting a valid vote requires writing the candidate’s full name and surname correctly on the ballot.

This system naturally favors well-known individuals and their descendants – who are often given simple, popular names. In cases where a politician has no son (women, in East Asian contexts, continue to be effectively marginalized), surnames are passed on to sons-in-law, who are formally adopted. This phenomenon contributes to growing political apathy among younger generations of East Asian voters. Since older citizens consistently vote for established leaders – at the very least as ‘known devils’ – this entrenches their dominance.

The transfer of Afro-Asian interpretations of democracy to the West is facilitated by multicultural policies promoted by liberal-left elites in Western societies. Operating under the framework of social justice, these policies emphasize acceptance of intra-group relations among immigrant communities. However, they abstract away from the individuals within those groups. As a result, these individuals – most often women – are treated differently, and worse, than other citizens, with the tacit approval of democratic states.³⁶

Paradoxically, growing indifference – or even hostility – toward politics is also evident among young people in democratic Western countries. The reasons are, in some sense, similar. *A voter confronted with an almost monochromatic political elite, uninterested in ideas, values, or programs, and driven by its own oligarchic interests and motivations, becomes frustrated and withdraws from public life, convinced that it makes no difference who governs.*³⁷ Claims that ordinary people have no influence over the system can, in extreme cases, devolve into the belief that all ruling groups are secretly colluding to

³⁵ K. Żakowski (ed.), “Rody polityków w Japonii,” in *Współczesna Azja Wschodnia. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Łódź 2011, pp. 217-230.

³⁶ S. Okin Moller, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, eds. J. Cohen, M. Howard, M.C. Nussbaum, Princeton 1999, pp. 12-16; M. Banaś, “Wielokulturowość a prawa kobiet. Rewizja koncepcji Susan Mollier Okin,” in M. Banaś, B. Jakimowicz-Pisarska (eds), *Kobiety w polityce. Perspektywa wieków XX i XXI*, Kraków 2023, pp. 228-231.

³⁷ M. Bankowicz, *Demokracja. Zasady, procedury, instytucje*, Kraków 2006, pp. 196. In the same place (pp. 193-197), he offers a broader perspective on the crisis of democracy.

preserve the existing order. While such views may exhibit paranoid tendencies, they nonetheless reflect a deep mistrust of elites – especially among the youth.³⁸

It is difficult not to notice that grassroots attempts to create parties outside the established framework – one of the most prominent being the ecological movement known as the Greens – have almost always ended with the incorporation of those few relatively successful groups into the existing system. Upon joining coalition governments, Germany's *die Grünen* did so at the expense of their core programmatic principles, such as pacifism and opposition to nuclear energy.

Meanwhile, informal agreements among political leaders aimed at maintaining the status quo regardless of electoral outcomes are an objective reality, even if they do not violate the formal rules of democratic systems. A historical example is the so-called *Pětka* – an informal (though public) cooperation among five parties in pre-war Czechoslovakia, patronized by the country's leading democrat, President Tomáš Masaryk. By forming a coalition irrespective of election results (which only determined the distribution of ministerial portfolios within the 'five'), the leaders effectively prevented other, even very large, parties – such as the Slovak People's Party – from gaining power.³⁹

Disillusionment with politics is increasingly intertwined with the manipulation of the electorate through the 'fourth estate' – the media. The media sphere is no longer merely penetrating the realm of politics; it is beginning to replace it. This issue warrants a separate study. More and more frequently, it is not traditional press or television, but internet platforms that steer an increasingly helpless electorate through fake news, strategically crafted opinion polls, and targeted advertising. Citizens believe they are sovereign in the state as illusorily as the manipulated voters of Rome's triumvirs – Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus – once did.

A warning – though not the first – came in December 2024, when Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the first round of presidential elections due to alleged manipulation of voter will via TikTok, a platform reportedly controlled by the Kremlin.⁴⁰ If the verdict is justified, it illustrates the political infantilism of the electorate, which may pose a threat to national security. If not, it exemplifies the previously discussed phenomenon of judicial power – unaccountable to voters – usurping political authority.

The problems outlined above are not easily resolved. Their deepening may lead, in Western societies, to the permanent transfer of power into the hands of a minority that manipulates the electorate (an oligarchy), or even to an authoritarian leader who employs democratic rhetoric. Resistance to the temptations offered by demagogues can only be ensured by a socially mature public, grounded in a commitment to certain values – just as protection from drug use is not guaranteed by even the strongest police force, but by a sufficiently strong internal motivation, such as 'I won't take it'.

³⁸ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, Kraków 2015, pp. 11-120.

³⁹ M. Bankowicz, *Demokracja według T.G. Masaryka*, Kraków 2015, pp. 146-149; J. Gruchała, *Tomasz G. Masaryk*, Wrocław 1996, pp. 179-180.

⁴⁰ "Rumunia: wyniki wyborów prezydenckich zostały unieważnione," *Rzeczpospolita*, 6 December 2024, at <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art41550091-rumunia-wyniki-wyborow-prezydenckich-zostaly-uniewaznione>, 10 December 2024.

This maturity is not synonymous with formal education levels, regardless of the crisis in university teaching across the Western world. It is worth recalling that German society in 1933 was among the most educated in Europe. It is also worth noting that during the Cold War, support for extremist groups was significantly higher among students – and their professors – than among other social groups. Many terrorist leaders were recruited from this milieu.⁴¹

It also seems evident that Western politicians and societies must come to terms with the fact that people from other cultures do not respond according to Western habits and expectations. They value harmony, social prosperity, and political integrity more than the expression of individual opinions. Insisting on ‘adherence to democratic norms’ may paradoxically lead to acts of violence aimed at breaking the autonomy of minorities by a ‘numerical majority’. One striking example is Bhutan – a country with one of the lowest levels of socio-economic development in the world, which had no constitution until 2008 and did not permit religions other than Buddhism until 2006 – yet ranks among the happiest societies globally.⁴² On the other hand, it must be remembered that attempts by the West to absorb entire communities guided by foreign values (not individuals, even numerous ones, but whole communities) must inevitably lead – at best – to ghettoization that contradicts democratic principles, and at worst, to internal conflicts that threaten paralysis or even the disintegration of the state.

The potential impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the functioning of democracy remains something of a puzzle – at least for the author of these reflections. Its influence may be multifaceted, particularly in areas such as pre-election polling and the determination of electoral outcomes, where AI could indeed play a beneficial role. However, AI is certainly not more ‘impartial’ or ‘apolitical’ than human beings. Its behavior depends on the model employed, and if that model is trained on historical data, its capacity to make decisions about new candidates in novel circumstances is inherently limited. The functioning of any model is always shaped by a specific force – which may well be a political one – and its bias (systematic distortion) is tied to the dataset on which it was trained. If living people can be manipulated, then manipulating an AI model may be even easier.⁴³

⁴¹ As the 2018 study by Łukasz Sakowski and Michał Misiak shows, the political preferences of Polish academics differ markedly from the national average, displaying a tendency to favor farleft parties. The party *Razem* enjoyed support of more than 27% among scholars, whereas its nationwide support was nine times lower (3%). Among academics, in a presidential election Robert Biedroń would outperform both Andrzej Duda and Donald Tusk. Ł. Sakowski, M. Misiak, *Raport. Poglądy polityczne, społeczne, obyczajowe, środowiskowe i gospodarcze wśród polskich naukowców w 2018 roku*, pp. 57-58 and 65-66, at <https://www.totylkoteoria.pl/poglady-naukowcow-raport/>, 11 December 2024.

⁴² K. Pąg, “Bhutan. Kraj szczęśliwych ludzi,” *Otwarty Przewodnik Krajoznawczy*, 23 March 2011, at https://www.krajoznawcy.info.pl/kraj-szczesliwych-ludzi-6702#google_vignette, 3 December 2024. One could even venture the claim that in the West, rising living standards and longer life expectancy are accompanied by a decline in well-being.

⁴³ *Certified Tester AI Testing Syllabus Version 1.0 [EN]*, at <https://edu.ittraining.pl/material/certified-tester-ai-testing-syllabus-version-1>, 20 December 2024. I thank Maria Chaniewska to bring this source into my attention.

This raises the question of who qualifies as the ‘optimal’ candidate, and whether the individual most likely to win an election is necessarily the best choice for the electorate. It is likely that Harold Wilson, an Oxford graduate in philosophy, economics, and political science, had better formal qualifications to serve as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom than Margaret Thatcher, a chemist by training who, at her husband’s urging, later completed a law degree at the relatively undistinguished University of London. Yet Thatcher entered history as a remarkable figure, while Wilson is remembered as mediocre. Nonetheless, both won elections. The electorate has the right to make mistakes. *In my country the people can do as they like*, declared Winston Churchill in 1946, *although it often happens later that they don’t like what they have done*.⁴⁴ Supporters of democracy must accept the consequences of their decisions. But they also have the right to make those decisions independently.

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⁴⁴ M. Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 8: *Never Despair*, London 1988, p. 190.

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Jakub POLIT – Professor (prof. dr hab.) at the Institute of History, Faculty of History, Jagiellonian University. He works in the Modern World History unit and researches twentiethcentury international relations, including U.S. and British policy, greatpower expansion in East Asia, China in international politics, postwar AsiaPacific relations, and the Second World War in the region, notably the SinoJapanese War (1937-1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949). His publications examine the dynamics of power and conflict in modern Asia.