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DEMOCRACY AND THE PEOPLE EMPOWERMENT
(PART 1)

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'Power to the people', a famous slogan of Democracy has become most endearing to many more in Africa. The idea of the masses, often in the majority, determining their fate whether right or wrong is considered logical and just. The modern concept of Democracy evidently has not deviated from the view of Aristotle[1] which links democratic justice with the 'application of numerical not proportionate equality'. According to him, 'whatever the majority approve must be the end and just'.

Plausible though the Concept may be 'Supremacy of the people', the majority, in Democracy remains controversial. For one thing, it is misleading to conclude that the majority attain sovereignty by raising their hands in support of a decision or policy, or by thumbprinting in an election.

Various experiments in Democracy, both ancient and modern lend no support to the notion of 'morality of right' rather to the 'might of right'. And no history of Democracy suggests a willing submission of the few, especially rich and influential, to the many who are generally poor and lacking in influence. On the contrary, it is often a record of the former subverting the will of the latter.

Logically, Plato[2] says:

> 'It is Might which first gives actuality to the rules of the Right and make Right what it is and what it shall be. If might had not toiled beforehand. On behalf of Right if it had not broken with its Iron fist the will that strove against it and accustomed men to discipline and Obedience, I wonder how Right could have founded its kingdom! It would have built on quicksand.

Thucydides[3] speaking through the mouth of the Athenians drives home the point harder. It is expressed in a 'conversation' between Coal and Diamond.

Why so hard? [the coal once asked Diamond]
Are we not akin?
[The Diamond replied] why so soft?
Ah brethren – I ask you. For are we not brethren?
Why so yielding, so feeble, so flaccid?
Why much negation, abregation in your heart?
So little Destiny in your eyes?
And if you refuse to be a force of destiny,

Inexorable, how can you expect to conquer
along with me? And if your strength will
not flame and flash and radiate how
Shall you ever create along with me?
Creators are hard. No! you must
hold it bliss to stamp the impress
of your hands upon millennia ...
This new commandment I give to you –
be hard !

Coal and diamond are both carbon-based compounds, indeed 'brethren'. Granted, diamond is completely carbon and the hardest known material in the whole world, yet, when subjected to burning, it is claimed that coal can become an artificial diamond when subjected to some degree of burning. It is not necessary here to prove this claim. It is however clear that coal cannot glorify in its flaccidity, to "conquer", it has to be hard.

Similarly, 'the people' will not be best armed with only the letters of the law but must also possess the real power (might) as sceptre to hold sway. Democracy might be seen as a contention between the few and the many. Victory is not to be determined by whose voice is loudest. Plato[4] suggests two ways of fighting which are applicable in this instance. One he says is according to 'law and right' and the other is the application of force (the latter can be associated with might). While he deems the use of force as characteristic of animals, he notes that the former is often ineffective, hence, the recourse to the latter. He then suggests that a ruler must know how to make a 'profitable' use of all laws, right and force.

The people in a democratic state are supposedly 'the ruler'. They are of necessity to combine the dual attributes of a lion and a fox. Since a force is instinctively wary, it can easily detect a snare and outsmarts a potential predator. However, this attribute is certainly not the immediate need when a fox is suddenly confronted by a wolf. Boldness, fierceness and power, the dominant attributes of a lion are needed.

Yet, no one should want to promote a rule by force – not according to Democracy. Plato neither seems to be advocating a rule by force. So he says this kind of mental disposition will not be good 'if all men were good'. Indeed a realistic conclusion. We rightly expect men to be different from animals. He is expected, far more than the brutes, to have a better perception of justice. But it is not always so. Paradoxically then, Might must accompany Right or Freedom, otherwise, the Morality of Right is ineffective. 'Since the idea of Might accompanying Right may sound objectionable when discussing freedom, it should be noted that this does not mean setting out to

achieve Right with the use of force. Rather, it implies that Might must be a handy weapon ready to safeguard the interests of Right, especially when threatened. Clearly, the Right of the Majority to rule makes no sense when there is no anchorage in some power possessed by the majority itself to defend its Right. Plato[5] rightly says, 'the authoritative assertion of what is right by the man in power carries right along with itself.'

Hesiod[6] provides an illustration in a fable of a Hawk and a Nightingale that supports what Plato says above. The Nightingale's right to exist and enjoy life holds true as long as it is able to escape the superior might of the Hawk. When the Hawk swoops down from a tree and seizes the Nightingale unsuspecting, the Nightingale's right to exist now depends on the prerogative of mercy, which Hawk may or may not choose to exercise. It is just as Thucydides[7] puts it. 'This law has always held good, that the weaker should be in power of the stronger'.

Democracy as practised by the Athenians clearly reflects the principle of 'Might is Right' and demonstrates the need for 'the people' of Democracy to have the real power. The power to actually select their leaders and to remove them when they so wish. According to L.A. Thompson[8], 'If the people is powerless, its powerful ruler cannot be subject to democratic accountability'.

Viewed by a modern eye, the Athenian concept of 'the people' is parochial. This was because the Athenian body which constituted the *'demos'* ('the people') in the democracy was made up of only adult males from age of eighteen upward. Those who fell in this category were for the most part the poor majority of the Citizen body. Why these limited 'people'? And what was the source of the power of the predominantly poor majority?

Thompson[9], justifying the exclusion of women and free alien residents from 'the people' points to the Athenian Society's cultural norms as different from the moderns'. In the Athenian society, women's place was home. They were to manage home affairs and had no political roles to play. It is not difficult to understand why alien residents were not usually enfranchised. Foreigners could not safely be relied on to wage wars. The experience of Sparta with her helot populace had justified this. Although there were some permanent alien residents, such people generally stayed temporarily in Athens. It is obvious that the *demos* did not include such people who were not the sorts needed in achieving the political objectives of Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries. The *demos*, in fact, came to be from among those who were in position to assert their Right owing to their Might.

Let us briefly take a look at how 'the people' of Athenian democracy came to power. To the early Greeks also known as the Hellenes, the sea meant trade, commerce and industry and the resultant

riches. Men who were successful in these economic pursuits returned home and constituted the foundation of the urban culture, the so-called city states. Such men as they increased in number revolutionized the old peasant society especially dominated politically by the nobles. The hoplites, - skillful soldiers – soon came out of this economic class since they had enough money to equip themselves militarily. Their appearance marked the arrival of Athens on the terrain of military might and glory.

In time, the hoplite infantry dealt a death blow to the all-powerful nobility as the need for the former in the defence of the city and the frequent military campaigns became greater. Democracy was yet to emerge, however it is not hasty, based on this trend, to say that democracy seems to have its 'people' defined as those who are available or obtainable, in promoting the prevailing interest of a society.

While Cleisthenes was crucial to the emergence of the Athenian Democracy, it is noteworthy that he never conceived it in the form it later became operational. The system developed even beyond his imagination as the *demos* (the common people in the majority) increased in power and became indispensable to the realization of 'the prevailing interest'. In his struggle for power with Isagoras, Cleisthenes had quickly proposed a reform to 'the people' and with the military support 'the people' gave him, he forestalled his opponents' appeal for outside military help. Thereafter, having entered into right political alliances, his family dominated Athenian politics for ten years. Yet, 'the prevailing' interest of a Greek society such as Athens was not just united to the ambition of Cleisthenes. The social structure of the "world of Homeric epics" provides a good background to understanding the notion of 'the people' and 'the prevailing' interest.

Homer's Iliad in Book 12 illustrates the fact that personal courage was foremost of the requisites in the code of honour by which a noble had to live. A noble asked:

> Why is it that we nobles are privileged above all others.... enjoying the front seat and food and full cups of wine and all men look up to us as if we were gods....? This makes it our duty to stand in the front ranks in battle..., face to face with scorching battle, so that some corseleted countryman of ours may say, 'truly these are great and glorious men who rule us, there lords of ours who feed upon our fattest sheep and drink the choicest of our honey sweet wines; there is indeed good strength in them, for they sight in our front ranks".

In the 'Homeric world', in communities preoccupied with wars and raids, the nobles occupied the leadership position which was socially justified by the military obligations imposed by the societal values. Hence, a king would not only be a judge, a lawyer but of necessity must also be a military commander, otherwise he had 'founded his

kingdom on a quicksand'. 'The people' as we tend to perceive them now had no identity; not in any way seen as a political force. Warfare, 'the prevailing interest' was the buisness of the heavy-armed nobles. The powerless mass ('the people') had no such relevance to 'war business' of the state.

Any attempt by a common man to be involved in community decision making would be presumptuous and only resulted in humiliation. He was considered lacking in both resources and qualities needed to support the 'prevailing interest'. As the saying goes among the Yorubas of Nigeria, 'a poor man's noble ideas usually comes to nothing when there is no money'.

However, by the late 6th and 5th century B.C. the trend had to change. In Athens, a poor man could have a say. In most Greek States, the 'prevailing interest' was the defence of the States. Warlike, men exceeding the number the nobles could provide, were needed. This was particularly so with Athens which was not only concerned with her defence but also driven hard by imperial ambition.

While political goals of the state usually originated with the nobles, the need for the common people in the majority in realizing these led to yielding to their agitation for more political power. Additionally, the people had developed the outstanding quality that made the nobles of the 'Homeric world' to be recognized as leaders or rulers – 'personal courage' Aristotle[10] shows that the *demos* had been responsible at the time of the Persian wars in the early fifth century for Athens gaining 'mastery of the seas'. The *demos* became the soul of the nay which was the source of Athenian power. Justifying their gaining political power was their role as described by Xenophon[11]:

> Because it is this class that provides the rowers for the fleet and on which the power of the city is based; the steersmen, boatswains, look-out men shipwrights – these are the men on whom the power of the city is based, far more than the hoplites, the noble and the respectable.

'The people' had steadily increased in power. It was with the support of Zeugites who constituted the heavy infantry of the army that Cleisthenes resisted King Cleomenes and the Spartan force. At this period of Athenian history, there was a connection between dominant form of military service and a share in political power. Cimon's rise to power owed a lot to his military excellence. His military *arete* and moral leadership won Athenians of all classes and persuasions over to him. But he seemed not to have recognized the irrespressible nature of the growing power of the *Demos*. His policy at a time was meant to hold the *Demos* to a limited Democracy and retain the traditional role of aristocracy.

This attempt failed because it was not Morality of Right that gave birth to the Athenian Democracy. Rather the system was engendered

by the increased or the Superior might of the *Demos* which was very relevant to the politics or the 'prevailing interest' of the day. The limited democracy promoted by Cimon had been supported by the hoplites, most of whom were of the middle-class and the stronger part of the emerging 'people'. However, the absence of Cimon with the middle –class from Athens in 464 B.C. soon brought the long awaited opportunity for his rival group led by Ephialtes to gain the political power.

While Cimon was away, Ephialtes and his colleagues made use of 'the people' (this time the largely dissatisfied class, the thetes who also performed military services) in passing a law transferring all the power of Areopagus to the council of 500 and to the popular law courts which were considered more people-oriented. Cimon could not reverse the situation when he returned, for the failure of his military expedition only made him unpopular among the Athenians, even among his soldiers.

Granted, Ephialtes and his associates had taken an advantage of Cimon's absence to achieve their political ends, nevertheless, one fact became apparent; the "Thetes" as lowly as they may appear must be reckoned among 'the people'. Aristeides[12] confident in their ability urged them to:

> Seize the leadership and to give up their residence in the countryside and to come to live in the city. For they would have their livelihood there, some by participating in military expeditions some by doing garrison service and still others by participating in public affairs.

As Athens got to realize her imperial ambition, only men who could function as indicated above were truly regarded as 'the people;. Their relevance cannot be overemphasised in a popular assembly that debated issues largely related to war; approval or disapproval of treaties making, declarations of war, assigning generals to campaigns and deciding what forces and resources they should command.

Pericles after Ephialtes' death had risen to become the historical leader of the democratic Athenian naval power. He readily recognized the Demos ever growing power. His series of reforms naturally increased the political role of the lower classes especially the 'Thetes'. Theirs was the multitudinal strength made relevant by their indispensable support for the system. Great majority of them fought in the navy and heavy infantry. They manned Themistocles navy, and that of Cimon too. Pericles saw the real need for their support and it is pertinent here to mention that he would not allow poverty to deter them from attending the meetings of the popular assembly where they were mobilized for war. Hence, Pericles introduced pay to compensate for the time and material loss experienced while attending such meetings.

'The people' of Athenian Democracy were actually soldiers who fought for the city and for their rights. They were never passive people who were urged to merely thumbprint in an election in support of a course. If they voted in support of an attack of a city, they themselves would carry it out. Their leaders also were not just men who relied on rhetoric or political sense of organization. Such leaders must combine these much needed aforementioned qualities with military experience. In reality, the rule of the *Demos* was championed by military Generals (*strategoi*) 'Military democrats' you may say.

The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature[13] reveals this:

At Athens in the 5th century B.C., *Strategoi* were of political as well as military importance ... in 487 B.C., all archons, including Polemarch came to be selected by lot; since good military leaders could not be guaranteed by this method, the Polemarch ceased to be elected to command the army and powers were transferred to the *Strategoi* who continued to be elected and who in some cases became political leaders as well. Themustocles and Cimon were examples. Pericles was *Strategoi* almost continuously from 443 until his death in 429.

Added to the above list of 'military democrats were Cleon, Nicias, and Alciabiades, all of who remain to this day the famous leaders of the historical Athenian democracy. It is not wrong to conclude that since the *Demos* as soldiers were not powerless, it was not difficult for them to check their leaders whose authority depended on the *Demos* numerical support. The *Demos* could make their leaders accountable. Notable in this regard were several cases of trials of Generals who had disappointed the *Demos*. For instance, there was the trial of eight Strategoi who were accused of dereliction of duty in connection with the sea battle of Arginossal in 406 B.C. The *ekkelesia* voted that six of them should be executed. Such was the coercive power of 'the people'.

While this may sound as the criticsm of democracy, it is a fact that the motive of the original initiators of Athenian Democracy was not altruistic and as a result what actually emerged was the government of 'the people that –mattered'. Yet, those were 'the people'. This paper is introducing an issue which is to be examined in a future work: reflecting over the Athenian Democracy especially its 'people', what factors have determined 'the people' of the African Democracy, Nigeria in particular! A future paper will examine the trend.

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