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## Book Review

# Debunking Democracy

## Democracy Under Threat

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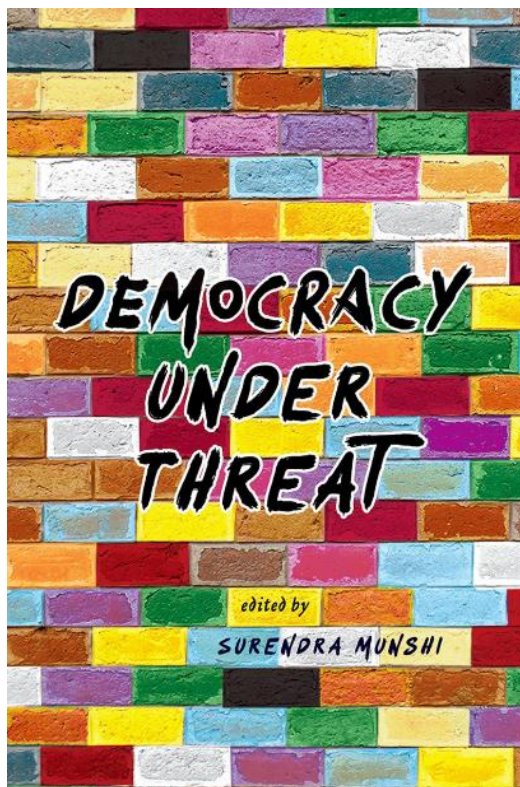
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This book, edited by Sociologist Professor Surendra Munshi, is a compilation of articles written by concerned journalists, diplomats and political professionals, which anchors the challenges in a democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The rising influence of Populists and Fascists has become a serious threat to Democrats worldwide; hence it has been essential to figure out where we, the people, flounder. Indubitably, human lives have never been so easy and secure as today, however, while achieving technological brilliance and intellectual development, we most definitely have overlooked the cynicism of human nature. As humans, it is undeniable that we are drawn to power by a large extent, to a point that we tend to ignore our morals and values, and stray far from humanism.

We cannot deny the fact that everything has its own pros and cons. Similarly, we are aware of the pros of a democratic system but what we are not prepared for are the cons that can cost us chaotic repetition of history. The world has seen monarchs, communists with authoritarian rules, and ample wars. Fairly reflecting, war never ends; only the grounds of war change (Munkler, 2019), and it is our responsibility to try to tail off the damage.



With the World Wide Web, today's world has become a small village, and information flows with the speed of light. Along with that, media has become a primary source of information for most of us, especially youths. Media has been a vital source of information regarding politics for youths to perceive what they hear (Bessant, 2016). However, the flip side of news and information being passed on with the speed of light thanks to the internet, especially if the source of information is not relevant and valid, is that it can

cause huge misinterpretation and chaos. Nevertheless, anti-democrats have been taking advantage of how news spreads like wildfire, especially misinterpreted news, and there have been many cases where they have provoked conflicts through media. And as natural human tendencies, we are drawn towards conflict, which further provokes the media to showcase unnecessary debates on national issues to raise Television Rating Points (TRPs). We must realise that the rising anti-democrat youths are detrimental for democracy in a nation.

This brings us to a more recent situation in Nepal, where a huge youth protest was led during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding dissatisfaction towards the government, which was misinterpreted by Indian media. Let's call it a coincidence that it happened exactly when Nepal claimed its border, and there was a high dispute among both countries. Some Indian media used clips of the protest from Nepal and made the news headlining, 'people of Nepal are not in support of border claiming'. What more is that there were endless and toxic debates between the two countries' media that provoked hatred towards each other. Governments use these kinds of strategies to tap into xenophobic feelings of people, and media further

exposed and heightened it unnecessarily. Democracy is a very big challenge that comes with high responsibility and self-realisation (Bhatt, 2018). If one cannot balance it, it will turn incrementally chaotic.

Likewise, this book further elaborates and critically focuses on the victory of Trump leading to the end of the renowned democracy of America, immigrant issues leading to the Brexit vote in the UK, Putin's autocracy, supportive Filipinos towards President of the Philippines's brutal killings in the name of anti-drug war, China taking advantage of its culture-exchange and the present attitude of humans, which compels me to wonder – is democracy still relevant?

## **Section Highlights**

The introductory section of the book revolves around the articles and books by Francis Fukuyama, who once shook the world with his article "The End of History", published some months prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. He then has presented that liberal democracy is "the best" system, and no country shall ever have to face the history of chaos and war again, as liberal democracy is medicine to all problems (Munshi, 2017). Later, after the Iraq war

in 2003, he critically analysed the movements of America, which were definitely not supportive towards the wave of democratisation and impressive competency of the authoritarian Chinese system with the partial market economy. Fukuyama, in 2014 with his books “Political Order” and “Political Decline”, stated the threats towards the decay of democracy in the United States and other developed democracies (p. xiv). This makes it clear to not obsess over democracy whatsoever, as it is most definitely not the perfect state for a nation and its people. As John Stuart Miller has argued, we should examine and try all forms of government, not just focusing on which one addresses liberal rights and which does not (Brennan, 2016). Democrats today are showcasing liberal democracy as the one and only system which itself is not liberal at all. Calling anti-democrats uncivilised, brainwashed and vulgar by liberal democrats is ironic and goes against many of the morals they tend to campaign for.

The first section of this book is placed with three articles dealing with the issues on Crisis in Democratic Leadership. The issues regarding threats from Russia to Europe and Obama signing anti-missile treaties that

threatened NATO alliances are explained in this section. The threat has been caused by the maximum dependency of Europe towards Russia (p. 3).

Such dependency also reflects the relation between Nepal and India. Due to the over-dependency of Nepal towards India and having an open border, India tends to use its power to create border disputes, strikes during disasters and interrupts with internal affairs. It is very important to balance relations with all neighbours and especially those who are ideologically different. In this regard, Mortazavi et al. (2018) argue that the relation between two countries depends not only on political or economics but highly rely on cultural aspects and what I believe, culture is an easy tool to manipulate.

Culture and tradition tie us to the root of our existence. Being sentient beings, humans always try to connect with their roots and develop a soft corner in their hearts towards similar cultures.

Therefore, it is easy to manipulate and interfere socially and politically. It is very important to create a safe diplomatic distance regardless of common traditions. In the present context, India plays a crucial role in threatening the democracy of Nepal.

An unavoidable threat to democracy in this generation is seen as media. Media is spreading immense power to people and populists, which is very dangerous as no one is compelled to answer anyone. The era of information and globalisation has turned chaotic in this manner. Media is presenting news and information on the subject they want to focus on their benefit rather than focusing on what is important in the present context. However, means of communication and information dissemination is very important. According to Vilmer et al. (2018), "information manipulation is tied to human nature and arguably finds its roots in psychology and epistemology (that is, cognitive weaknesses and a crisis of knowledge)" (p. 12). People are faint over information, and they believe what is strongly put towards them by the majority. Thus, what I realised, every system has drawbacks and focusing only on the bad side by media will make people restless.

For example, in Nepal, since the 18 years of our democracy, we never had a stable government for once. It always used to collapse in 9 months, but in 2017, Nepal Communist Party won the election with a majority and is trying to eradicate unstable situations. However,

media is always notifying only weak areas instead of motivating by highlighting good actions taken by the government. One could also call this tactic used by media as a way to sensationalise the underminings rather than celebrating wins. This has been affecting people's attitudes a lot, and no one is ready to recognise the effort put by the government to assimilate concerns. Due to constant pessimism and exaggeration from the media, people are expecting socio-economy, corruption and irregularities to change overnight, but are forgetting that what they are expecting is only possible through dictatorship and definitely not with liberal democracy.

The second section of this book includes two articles. The first article by Tarek Osman presents the future of democracy in the Arab world and its challenges. As we know, Arab is a country where people are more concerned about religious norms and values rather than the rule of law. The liberal democracy, as we imagine in the West, is not possible in Arab due to people's belief in religion and their moral values (p. 48). But due to media, millennia are gradually falling into some changes. As stated by Osman, Arab has many challenges to be a democratic nation

because it has been repressed for a long time. Very few people have control over huge resources, and religion interprets in such a manner that people accept their life as their fate and not repression of riches. The people of Arab are not getting opportunities for quality education which makes them incompatible in the global market, and they are likely to end up being traded as labours to Europe. Likewise, for Arab to be democratic, disputes within policies and power decentralisation can cause the main problem. Economically, Arab has to struggle a lot for the working-class people.

In the present context, those who can afford are making their connection to an international level, but the low, middle class and working-class people are struggling for their living.

Comparatively, Arab has a high rate of entrepreneurship going on in this 21<sup>st</sup> century as entrepreneurs are the catalyst in democratisation (Elbadawi & Makdisi, 2016), which indicates a hopeful yet challenging start.

In a similar way, Nepal has an ancient history of culture, tradition and religious practices, which are deep-rooted in people's minds. Due to this reason, Nepal is not being able to practice liberal democracy to its full extent.

Nepal has a difficult time balancing industrial progress and ancient traditions. This creates a dilemma among people regarding their position in the development of the nation. However, the inception of change in attitude is in sight towards certain issues despite that hard-core belief clinging in the society.

For example, Nepal is known as the land of living goddesses, but they are completely overshadowing the violation of child rights in the name of religion. No government has ever been able to raise an issue to eradicate it. This may seem a very ignorable issue for the rest of the people, but the complete violation of child rights of that little girl remains unseen. Likewise, the “Untouchable practice during menstruation” is a wretched system that, on a deeper level, still makes women feel they are some kind of sin. Unless customs, traditions, and religions like these are not eradicated from society, democracy is just a dice in the game board of politics.

In the next article, the frustration of Arun Maira screams through each of his words regarding the situation of the world and their fragile democratic institutions. He presents data about people born after 1980 and against democracy. Additionally, he presented how political parties portray democracy

for their own benefit. Maira gives an example of Aam Admi Party of India and the winning of Donald Trump along with the Brexit vote, which is a reminder of the context in Nepal as well. People blindly trusted the government who were by name, the Communist Party, but got left with disappointment for a dispute over power demands. This is a fundamental question to ask, and the answer strikes to only one point due to a lack of honesty. Politicians and political parties initially are very promising in their manifesto. They vow to change and and bring equality and prosperity, but later they tend to slow down and push their agendas as far as possible. Thus, time-consuming conflicts and poor resource management strategies may lead to frustration among people.

Maira also precisely tells us about the miscommunication and the world of social media that has done tremendous damage to people's minds (p. 56). In order to rise, TRP debates are being held where conflicts are made up to entertain the viewers to get more advertisements. People are now relying on social media for information and choose to believe in what they like but not what actually is. It is a crucial time to respect the voice of each people to create peace and harmony among all. But people are now

not listening to each other and just arguing to get more likes and reward themselves as victorious. This creates disorder as it shows that the system being democratic is not enough. It should be taken as the passage to end the dissimilarities and create equal opportunities. Being humans, we should unite to make this world a better place to stay for everyone. Respecting others views and understanding each other is the main aspect of democracy.

The third section contains the situation of Taiwan, Turkey, Russia, the Philippines, and countries turning to authoritarian rules. It states problems such as Nativism and Nationalism, which are crucial points to manipulate country people. According to Christopher Walker, new competition is emerging through media, culture, and politics (p. 68). In a democracy, education and media are the major media to influence people towards anti-democratic movements. Similarly, China and Russia's governing systems and international affairs are creating threats for western countries where a so-called well democratic governing system exists. In addition, Adam Michnik gives a brief history of Russia, its revolution and psychology on why Russia is authoritarian and is still trying to invade

other countries (p. 81). ‘Russians for Russia’ has influenced fascist parties, and as an outcome, we can hear the chants ‘Hungary for Hungarians’, and ‘Poland for Poles’. Even after dismissing the Soviet Union, Russia considers itself to be the most powerful and greatest country, and are on their mission to reclaim its lost territories. According to Suat Kiniklioglu, for Russia, its geography, history, and inability to adjust (neither Europe nor Asia) are also reasons for its high demand for power (p. 94). Due to the mass majority support, the current leader of the Russian Federation is gradually becoming a dictator, which shows the current parliament’s decision to allow him for a long term leadership role.

Likewise, its new president Rodrigo Duterte has been bringing massive changes in foreign policy and have vowed to execute three million people under anti-drug war. In the name of making the country drug free, Duterte is using it as a militarised weapon to kill his rivals and gain sole power over the country.

Similarly, here in Nepal, corruption has become a drug like a problem, and if any group of people stands against anti-corruption and declares war to kill corrupts, there will be massive killings

and an excellent opportunity to take over the nation with the support of people who do not really understand the strategy behind it.

Among the four articles under section four, the first presents three flaws in the populist wall to which we must react. The first flaw is globalisation’s incorrect interpretation of poverty and unemployment. Further, it examines how populist leaders focus on isolationist policies and make their countries great again (p. 130). The second flaw is anti-immigrant sentiment; this is the very reason Donald Trump got victory over America and Brexit in Great Britain (p. 131). This was also the main reason for populism in Italy and France. Immigrants will enter the country and bungle the culture and tradition, which is the main threat put forward by populists towards nationalists (p. 135).

In another chapter, Neelam Deo and Arjun Chawla have discussed the paradox of dynastic politics in India (p. 152). Leading the independence movement, Gandhi feared most regarding the power concentration among few. But after his demise, the Nehru-Gandhi family dominated Indian politics for a very long. When dynastic rules are dominant, they forbid another



party to win because they tend to control every political movement. The tickets are provided to those who support them. In a dynastic rule, corruption is at its high peak like no other force questions them. But the downfall of a dynastic rule is certain because, as Neelam and Arjun say, "democracy can be understood as a process, and not a product, then there is hope for more representative forms of governance to continue to evolve" (p. 161).

Similar histories are there in Nepal regarding the dynastic rule. The Rana's ruled Nepal from 1846 to 1951 AD. After being free from Rana's rule, the Panchayet system was introduced, making Nepali Congress the only party to thrive, banning all party systems. Starting from Bishweshor Prasad Koirala (BP Koirala), the Nepali Congress was only led by Girija Prasad Koirala and Sushil Koirala until they died.

The fifth section has three articles to deal with reasons for the West's devastating situation, which was once an example of a peaceful community. The extremists taping xenophobic fears of the people and depreciating other religions and values lead us to the hatred generation. The use of words is critical; morality and a fragile communication

bubble are vital aspects to consider for our weakening democracy. According to Andrej Kiska, 30 per cent of Slovak citizens believe that vaccination is a conspiracy of pharmaceutical companies (p. 182). This is due to social media and its flood of expertise. The westerners have initiated human rights movements, and globalisation and also they have been leading the free world since the end of World War II. It has been like a legacy of western dominance all over the world. This reminds me of an article about the dynastic rule and legacy politics from this very book. The West has had it; it has manipulated the rest of the world with its materialistic values, supporting wars and providing arms. It has prevented many countries from democracy. It steps over other countries' internal affairs and politics and acts as a rescuer. A dynastic rule eventually plays over the rules, norms and disparities, and the West is heading towards the same road. America should have been leading the world towards democratisation but is doing the exact opposite, enhancing authoritarian rule. Likewise, Nepal is trying to balance democracy and communism but fails to understand its central notion and crumples to analyse ideologies through human nature. Thus, this section gives insight that democracy is for liberals

who keep individual profit rather than nation.

Under the sixth section, two articles deal with lessons from Havel and Gandhi to Munshi, concluding with post-truth and truth. Vaclav Havel believed in non-violent ethical politics (p. 217). Like Gandhi, Havel considered religion and politics as human meditation of truth. Unless a person is in power, we never know its true intention. They believed that ethical politics is the only way to create a better place for everyone to live. For both of them, spirituality was the main concern that affected one's power of decision making. For both of them, politics was not a game, but an immense responsibility. It reminds me of Plato's ideal state where the rulers were ought to be philosophers and were not allowed to have families to be inclined to their responsibilities solely. I am personally very fascinated towards this philosophy as family leads to selfishness. Being emotionally attached, we tend to provide luxury and benefit them that eventually turns into corruption which is unethical professionalism.

In conclusion, the author has written an article on post-truth and truth where 'post-truth' is understood as "belonging to a time in which the specific concept of truth has become unimportant" (p.

221). The authoritarians have worked very hard to suppress or misinterpret truth for us, but now we ourselves are choosing to live in a post-truth era.

Here, the writer has explained by reading the book, written by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, on experiments with truth (p. 224). Living a life of truth is very difficult than we think. Self-realisation and setting a moral is essential. Nepal is being devastated because of a lack of morality, especially in those at the forefront of leadership (Dhakal, 2020). We still have a generation that has been following every political transformation. Our country has faced Hindu Monarchy, Authoritarian rule, Panchayat system, Maoist war and is currently practising Socialist Democracy. And all these incidents host vast dissimilarities.

Among these three rules and how it is affecting Nepali lives, Hindu Monarchy has a concept of worshipping the King as Lord Vishnu. Only people nearing the monarchs benefited from opportunities, and others had to accept their poverty as fate. In an authoritarian rule, Jung Bahadur Kunwar took over the power of the King and created his own hierarchy where Rana's were above all. While the world was debating and fighting for human rights and freedom, while the normal class citizens

were not allowed to study, have high property, and constantly inspect the Rana's. After the fall of Rana's reign with India's help, Monarchy and Panchayat system arose where only one party affiliated with King was allowed. This highly benefited the rich and created a large imbalance between rich and poor, especially in villages, leading to huge socio-cultural and political movements for a multiparty system and eventually success. Along with this, there was a Maoist party who were fighting to end Monarchy and repression due to cultural imbalance, traditions and social inequalities. Around 17 thousand people were killed during the war, more than 2,518 people disappeared and many were left injured as recorded in Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP) Nepal. In the name of ending repression, they also ended many moral values from society and damaged historical monuments. After the insurgency, along with the help of other political parties, the civil war ended with the peace accord, and Nepal turned completely democratic. The end of political repression leads to a chaotic sense of freedom through media and society. People are unaware of their needs and are unsatisfied with everything. I see this as a phase of depression before enlightenment. Western countries have already been through an enlightened period, whereas Nepal is preparing to enter it.

## Final Commentary

The book presents a global crisis on democracy and is trying to inform us with articles from different countries. The articles are easy to read and are understandable with issues that strike minds to rethink about the reader's own attitude. It highly reflects our nature of misusing media and gossips that misinterprets the information. The challenges towards democracy are unconsciously linked with human attitudes. The era of dissatisfaction and cynicism has compelled democracy to fail.

Gadding around liberal democracy and its establishment, Munshi has disregarded the effect of democracy upon caste politics, which is very popular in India and Nepal. Nepal and India share certain common ground in religion where caste comes within. Social stratification according to caste has been an ancient practice. Even though societal stratification in the name of caste or class, both are unacceptable, and Nepal and India are still struggling to eradicate such issues. But due to weak democracy, political professionals are manipulating the lower caste people to gain their vote and keep up their political supremacy. It is impressive to

read “Democracy against development”, written by Jeffrey Witsoe in 2013, where he mentions the huge Patna “Lathi” movement led by Lalu Yadav. Bihar was the worst governed state in India during the Lalu period, but yet he won several elections because he played politics of lower caste support. In today’s world, it is not difficult to provoke hatred towards each other for the benefit of an individual as we all are shaped with a similar power pyramid concept.

However, the book fails to identify inequality and the chaotic world built by capitalism through so-called liberal democracy. It is not vital to clutch the liberal system when we know it is hard to maintain. Being harsh on Russia and China is not the solution but an opportunity to rethink our system. Liberalism has created great indifference between developed or powered and under-developing countries. Munshi has failed to involve Africa and has been highly concerned only the West; only the West is not the world. The book ends with very insightful suggestions that Nepal should consider strongly. A democracy can never thrive with a lack of morality. Especially in a Socialist democratic system like ours, it is challenging to

address every small aspect. Without ideologies guided by moral values, freedom leads to dissatisfaction because nothing is ever enough for humans. We now have to philosophise if this world is ready for democracy or waiting for the new system.

## Disclosure Statement

The author declares that no potential conflict of interest exists.

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## Reviewer Biosketch

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