

Most of us believe in democracy as a concrete reality but democracy is only a theory. It is a set of guidelines for governance set out in a constitution.

As it is a theory, it still has to be proven and it is in its implementation in governance that we discover wider implications of democratic principles.

This leads to modification and expansion of the theory.

And it is an evolving process, a process continually moving towards definition of greater individual freedom – the key to a progressive society.

Consequently governance is also an evolving process and the laws controlling a society have continually to be adjusted to accommodate new understandings of the nature of being and existence.

Resistance to change often indicates a resistance to individual freedom and new ideas and consequently to progress. Tradition, which is the domain of fixed norms and values, offers strong resistance to change.

At present, events in the Middle East are challenging traditional forms of government and there is much to be learnt from them about government based on democratic principles.

The people in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are teaching the world that liberty, fraternity and equality must extend beyond the borders of one's own country.

The US government is being forced to reconsider its policies and its alliances in the Middle East.

The US's understanding of democracy has been challenged and shown to be insular, pertaining only to itself and not to other countries.

Now the US is being forced to recognise that its alliance with countries from which it obtains important resources such as oil, has been imperialistic, undemocratic and an endorsement of tyrannical governance.

It is fortunate that Barack Obama is the US President so the approach to Libya has not been the usual kind of peremptory aggressiveness. The US is being forced to recognise that its relationships with other countries, i.e. the governments AND

their peoples, must be informed by democratic principles.

But self-interest undermines democracy.

The word democracy, derived from demos (people) and cratos (power), means people power; ideally that would mean that every individual adult in a society is both governor and governed and every individual adult is involved in decision-making concerning the rights and responsibilities of the individual and the welfare and development of the group.

But from the time of Ancient Greece to 2011, there is no record of a society in which every adult of a group has been involved in the governance of the group.

Democratic government has always meant government by representatives and in modern times, we elect representatives.

Through the vote we give them permission to rule in our stead.

So we have modified people power to mean rule through representation and the majority of the population is not directly involved in government.

Thus the society is divided into rulers and ruled.

Representative government requires the trust of the voters; trust in politicians, trust that they will be guardians of individual rights and responsibilities and promoters of the welfare and development of the group.

And that is where idealism comes in.

It is idealistic to believe that human beings, especially human beings in power, are people of absolute integrity and can always be trusted to put the welfare of the people before their own self-interest.

Human beings are fallible so corruption goes hand in hand with government.

And with multi-party government we have multi-party corruption.

Small parties often succumb to bribery and remain under the hegemonic control of the governing party in the same way as Middle Eastern rulers succumbed to the bribery and coercion of imperialist powers and clung to power at the expense of their own people. Multi-party government, another modification of democracy, moves even further from people power than representative government.

In a multi-party democracy, people no longer choose their representatives; they have to accept governors appointed by a political party.

And that leads to even more corruption because the vote can no longer put these governors out of office.

Under multi-party government the power of the vote has been reduced to endorsement of party politics.

It is no longer a vote for a representative who has proven her/his competence to participate in government.

At present, people in areas of Mpumalanga, the Eastern and Western Cape are protesting against party appointments and attempting to reclaim the power to choose their own representatives to government who will be accountable to them through the power of the vote.

They are seeking to restore the power of the vote.

They are reminding us that the vote is no longer an effective means of ensuring a measure of balance in power, that multi-party government officials are accountable to the party and not to

the people.

In South Africa, we boast about a liberal constitution.

But multi-party government which forces people to vote for parties rather than individual representatives and has split the opposition into feeble, petty tribes, has undercut all the noble aspirations of our constitution and turned them into clichés with little reference to reality.

And that brings us to the difference between democracy and government, that is, between theory and practice.

Implementing democracy is not democratic because it requires conformity to democratic beliefs and behaviours.

This is a paradox because the principles of democracy have to be enforced.

As human beings we are fallible and that makes us unreliable so we have government to ensure that we act as responsible citizens.

Government, therefore, means control.

Though the electorate is expected to trust those who become our governors, governance itself is based on distrust.

We have laws that regulate all our actions and relationships, we carry identity documents, we have bureaucracies to legitimate where we live, conduct our businesses, where we travel, etc. and we have prisons for those of us who do not conform to the requirements of the society.

Democracy is only a theory, based on idealistic principles such as liberty, equality and fraternity.

And a theory is a tool for discovering how to achieve a particular objective.

In the case of democracy, the objective is to discover ways of providing governance that allow for individual freedom while maintaining the cohesiveness of the group.

In all societies there is tension between the individual and the group, because individual needs do not always coincide with group needs. So government cannot be based on trust and government, no matter how benign, is authoritarian.

And it is this authoritarianism that leads to corruption.

In autocratic, patriarchal and totalitarian governments which are openly authoritarian, the individual needs of rulers take precedence over the needs of the people and, in general, governors rule to maximize their personal power and wealth. In so-called "democratic" government, authoritarianism is hidden under rhetoric.

All we can hope for are some governors with integrity who will put the interests of the country before their own.

If all our politicians had integrity there would be no corruption and no poverty which are the

yardsticks by which to measure democratic government.

By those yardsticks, we all fail.

So, in my opinion, there is no such thing as democratic government.

Democracy is a theory; it is not real and does not exist.

It is something we strive to make real.

But we are fallible human beings.

So democracy remains pie in the sky or to put it in dignified terms, a Platonic Ideal.

To believe that democracy has been achieved once oppressive rule has been overthrown is naive.

The closest we come to democracy is to enshrine its principles in a Constitution, a hallowed document meant to provide guidelines for the way in which we conduct our lives. And to some extent it does.

Where corruption and poverty are not blatant, it means that the governors do have some commitment to democratic norms and values.