

The Role of Opposition in a Democracy

Essay No. 01

POINTS TO DEVELOP

1. Place of 'opposition'; in various forms of government and origin of the concept.
2. opposition and the party system.
3. function of opposition in a democracy- form alternate up public opinion and get it incorporated in policies; bring up priority issues for attention of the policy makers; ensure the upholding of the constitution.
4. in times of national crises, a democracy gains strength as government and opposition act in concert
5. Responsible behaviour required if opposition is to work for the nation's good.

Some forms of rule cannot tolerate opposition. And root it out wherever. It arises. Other forms not only tolerate it, but make room for it within the institutions of government. This feature of internalised opposition; has sometimes been taken as mark of limited, as opposed to absolute. Government. And also, as the marks of politics, as opposed to coercion. It is hard to imagine the feature without extremely complex institutions and constitutional devices: it is one of the principal problems of political thought to discover what makes such opposition possible. The use of the term 'opposition'. To denote forces within political institutions that resist the ruling officers or party is comparatively recent. J. Carn Hobhouse, speaking in the house of Commons in 1826, remarked that it was said to be very hard on his Majesty's ministers to raise objections to some proposition. For his own part, he thought it was, more hard on his majesty's opposition to compel them to take this course. Hansard records laughter at the phrase "His majesty's opposition".

Although the term 'opposition' was used as far back as the eighteenth century to refer to a party or a caucus within an assembly, the suggestion of an established opposition is relatively new. It is now, however, quite normal to refer to a 'loyal opposition'. And to imply that the interests of the state are as well served by the opposition as by the government itself.

The 'opposition' in the modern UK parliament consists not merely of opposition parties of faction but princely of a 'shadow formations'. The offices of government are imitated within the opposition which thereby forms itself into a body prepared to substitute for all the occupants of those offices at any time. The opposition has

its leader its every move of the government with counter proposals, representing. In theory, what it would do if it were in office.

Even in states with high levels of repression it is rare to find no trace of opposition. In single- party systems, the opposition may exist as an underground movement as in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics where no Union was permitted but dissidents like Boris Yeltsin continued to exist. Or an opposition may engage in armed struggle as in El Salvador. Undue repression of the opposition often results in bloodshed and even change of government through violent means.

In democratic systems, the opposition is officially permitted and recognised. Even the leader of opposition is given an honourable place in the system. In Britain, the position of the leader of Her Majesty's opposition is as the tight of reply to prime ministerial broadcasts. In India, too, the opposition leader has been given certain commands the support of the required number of Parliament members.

The concept of opposition in the modern democratic state is closely connected with the idea of the political party. A political party is a more or less organised group of citizens who act together as a political unit, have distinctive aims and opinions on the leading political issues and problems in the state and whom by acting together as a political unit, seek to obtain control of the government. The party that is out of the government at given point of time is called the opposition party. The number of the opposition party. The number of opposition party parties may be one or more depending on whether there is a dual-party or multiparty system.

The most prominent question that may strike one's mind is: why does democracy demand the existence of opposition? An opposition party always looks for an opportunity to replace the party in – government, and implement its own politics and programmes. As a result, it serves two purposes. One, the government of the day eschews being arbitrary in its action and negligent of the interests of the people in general; on the other, the people of democratic country are offered an alternative in governance of the country in their interests.

The opposition parties also enable men and women who think alike on public questions to unite in support of a common body of principles and policies and to work together to see that those principles and policies are adopted and implemented by the government. Without organisation, the people can neither formulate principles easily nor agree on policy. The opposition makes articulate the inarticulate desires of sections of the masses and gives expression to their pent- up feelings. This goes a long way in checking violence and political crimes which are, in reality fatal for the healthy survival of democracy.

Out of the innumerable problems which call for solution in a state, the opposition is expected to select those which are comparatively urgent, study them, think out solutions and present them to the people and to the government. And, thus, it acts as a “broker of ideas” as Lowell says. It preserves a sense of continuity in public policy, organises and educates the electorate, and helps to carry on and necessitate regular elections. It also dramatises politics and keeps the nation politically alive. It keeps the government on its toes.

The opposition, like the judiciary is an agent for safeguarding the Constitution in case the government wittingly or unwittingly does something to violate it. The opposition also necessitates periodic interpretation, reinterpretation and amendment of the Constitution on suit changes in times, circumstances and priorities. In most democracies, the opposition's views have to be taken into consideration in legislating on socially- sensitive matters. The opposition has the capacity to instill in the government the confidence and ability to deal with national crises. Here, the opposition's support means that the entire country is behind the government in the hour of crisis. Not many would have forgotten the thundering speech and support given by Atal Behari Vajpayee in the Parliament (1971) when the government of India led by Indira Gandhi had to withstand the Pakistani aggression. In the absence of the opposition, the government cannot be sure of the entire population's support. Moreover, the opposition also gives credence and authenticity to any measures of the government taken in the interests of the people and the state. The parties outside power extend support to certain measures as they cannot afford to be regarded as anti- people or animation as they, too, they ultimately to face the praise of wrath of the public. Thus, the opposition does not always have to oppose the government.

Sometimes the parties in opposition oppose the government measures merely for the sake of opposition. This delays even the progressive steps of the government and results in waste to time, money and material. It also misleads the masses. Not infrequently, the leaders in opposition resort to demagoguery which is harmful for the nation's health. However politically ignorant the people may be, they cannot forgive such irresponsible and delinquent behaviour on the part of an opposition party.

In a democracy, the modus operandi of the opposition involves going to the people and criticising the government, giving press- statements, debating and discussing issues in Parliament, arousing public opinion, both national and international, and placing no – confidence motions against the government. In India, submitting a memorandum to the President is also a common practice. All these are commensurate with the democratic norms and contribute to the consolidation and stabilisation of democracy in the social and political system.

To sum up, the opposition fulfills certain necessary functions- so necessary, indeed, that many competent thinkers consider it essential to the working of representative government. Of course, the opposition sometimes delays the proceeding and the implementation of vital legislation. But the balance tilts towards it beneficial impact rather than the baneful. If democracy has come to stay, it is not because it is the perfect form of self-government. Unlike dictatorship or totalitarian systems, it does not believe in self-evident principles. No plan or policy can benefit the people if we look only at its 'pros' and deny the 'cons'. Only the opposition that puts rein on the power of the government and checks it from becoming absolute.

Essay No. 02

The Role of The opposition In Democracy

Wherever the parliamentary system of government has been established, the importance of a healthy, effective, vigilant and wide-awake opposition has been realised. The British Parliament is generally acknowledged to be the "Mother of Parliaments". It has also become the model of a system where the opposition is officially recognised as Her Majesty's Opposition. The largest minority party constitutes the official opposition in British Parliament, with its own council popularly known as the "Shadow Cabinet". The leader of the opposition in Britain is accorded official recognition and provided with several facilities to enable him to function properly. He is regarded as the future Prime Minister since his party offers a viable alternative to the government of the day. Similarly, in India, the leader of opposition is accorded the full status of a cabinet rank.

The common belief that a healthy opposition is essential for the sound working of democracy implies that unless there is a vigilant opposition constantly on the alert and even watchful of the government's policies and actions, the ruling party would tend to become complacent and tardy. But when there are well-informed critics ever-ready to expose the wrongs committed by the Government and to bring to light its acts of omission and commission, the ruling party can hardly afford to be slack and negligent in the performance of its duty towards the country namely, to provide an efficient and sound administration. The parliamentary system of government works very smoothly where there are two principal political parties, more or less equally matched, the one out of power ever-ready to take over the reins of administration whenever the majority party is voted out of office, or resigns on a major issue, or is reduced to minority as a result of defections or resignations of members. The constant tug-of-war between the majority and the minority keeps the government on its toes and this ensures good government.

Generally, it is the opposition parties that are supposed to play an effective role in keeping the government of the day alert and active. But a vigilant public also plays his role. Democracy, after all, is participation in the administration in a responsible manner. "The democratic problem", said the well-known commentator Lindsay, "is the control of the organisation of power by common man". The citizens of a democratic country must be "thinking men and women", possessing independent opinions and capable of taking intelligent interest in public affairs. It has been rightly said that the success of a democracy depends upon the ability, character and the power of discrimination which the people are expected to possess. In fact, democracy is reduced to an empty show if the citizens begin to behave like sheep and dumb cattle and develop the crowd mentality of being driven whichever way the leaders dictate.

Active and intelligent participation of the people in public affairs can be assured if they are adequately educated. Without education there can be no intelligent discussion and participation in the process of government. Education produces rational human beings, and the power of thinking develops the power to discriminate between good and bad. A citizen of a democratic regime is not merely to obey; he has also to see if his obedience is rational and warranted. A citizen is expected to develop the power of vigilance and ability to distinguish between chalk and cheese. People, who follow Bentham's maxim, "While I will obey promptly, I will censure freely", are true citizens of a democratic State. They possess the power to judge right and wrong and also the ability to criticise. It is this ability to judge and discriminate that leads to responsible criticism and healthy democracy.

The people generally also have an important role to play in a democracy—that of intelligent critics, and no democratic government worth the name can afford to ignore or bypass public criticism. If it were to commit this folly, it would soon become unpopular, lose its hold on the people and its majority in the legislature. This would signal its exit and facilitate the entry of the opposition into the citadel of power. Consequently, there is a reversal of roles—the party in power goes out of office and assumes the role of opposition, while the party sitting until then on the opposition benches becomes the ruling party. But the switch-over cannot, by the very nature of things, be permanent. If the new incumbents of office fail to come up to the people's expectations and if the new opposition remains strong and vigilant, it can come back to power once again. The smooth transition and the changeover from the Treasury Benches in the legislature to the opposition wings is a valuable characteristic of democracy. In dictatorship the transition is seldom smooth. There are frequent coups, counter-coups, bloodshed and revolutions with considerable dislocation of life and normal business.

Democracy provides an outlet and a safety valve for people's anger and frustration, and this outlet is open criticism of the Government whenever and wherever it does

something wrong or fails to adopt the right course as demanded by the public interest. Thus, the public shares the role of opposition whenever occasion demands it. The Press also has a vital role to play in a democracy. It is the popular forum for educating the public viewpoint. Actually, the Press not only reflects public opinion and is the people's voice in a democracy, it also helps to build up public opinion. The Press should really be a zealous guardian of the people's rights; privileges and liberties. The newspapers are the watchdogs and guardians of the public interest, like the opposition parties in a legislature.

Granted that it is the function of the opposition to oppose, but whether it is the opposition in Parliament or the critics of the Government in public or the newspapers in the country, all criticism has to be made, and the opposition voiced, in a responsible and healthy manner. If the opposition behaves irresponsibly and indulges in unhealthy and destructive criticism instead of constructive discussions, the entire democratic fabric is endangered. Both sides—the ruling party and the opposition—have to observe the rules of the game. They must not play foul; for one foul inevitably leads to another and yet another and then the end of the folly is nowhere in sight. Democracy then becomes a mess. It is quite obvious that unless the people are vigilant and alert, all power would pass into the hands of clever professional politicians who seldom hesitate to exploit the ignorant masses and pursue policies that help them to perpetuate their rule.

While opposition is essential for sound working of a democracy, such opposition has to be responsible and healthy. The purpose of the opposition is to keep the Government on its toes and to prevent misuse of power. But the true function of opposition can be performed only when there is discipline, a sense of responsibility all round and a desire to give the topmost priority to the public interest as against personal or party interests. Discipline and responsible conduct ensure steady and smooth progress of all democratic structures, but the lack of discipline of a healthy, constructive approach inevitably leads to instability, confusion and reversal of economic progress.