



ATHENS AND THE TYRANNY OF A DEMOCRATIC STATE

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ABSTRACT

*Democracy, the celebrated symbol of socio-political success, seems the most popular legacy of Athens to the modern world. Yet, Athens also has a record of what has been seen as tyrannical use of power and ‘abuse of human right’ in her inter-state relations. Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian war (*The History of the Peloponnesian War*) has been a basis for the theory of political realism, ‘might is right’ which is used to explain the international aggression of the democratic Athens. Using an interpretive research approach, this paper takes some look at the Athenian path to democracy and particularly considers the Melian Dialogue, a passage in Thucydides’ work that enunciates the implications of political realism exemplified by the Athenians’ treatment of the Melians. While political realism implies international anarchy when power and conflicting national interests set the standard of what is deemed right, a democratic government led by this code could also act tyrannically despite its leaders’ profession of justice and equity. Therefore, the paper concludes that since democracy is no limitation to morality and justice becoming subjective, when interests are at variance in domestic politics, such tendency in individuals or groups who constitute a democracy would continue to account for political instability.*

Keywords: *Athens, Tyranny, Democracy, Morality, Justice*

INTRODUCTION

While the choice of the majority in a democracy appears morally just, the option leaves the question of what is tantamount to justice, especially when the values of the majority or the leaders of democracy are problematic or blatantly disregard the right or well-being of the minority. Concerning the practice of democracy in Nigeria, the following observation is made:

One very common visible attitude about Nigeria’s political office holders is their penchant and attachment to power ...Democracy as a system of government provides the needed framework for the wellbeing of the people to be taken care of because the people come first. But with respect to Nigeria’s political office holders, the reverse is the case (Esikot and Archibong, 2013:46). Italics are mine.

The above words paint democracy as a device for seeking power that may be devoid of any sense of morality. The thinking that political parties could be structures for the realisation of selfish interests of gladiatorial politicians may not be strange in Nigeria as many still ‘wonder if there are no agencies to check abuse of power in Nigeria and why there is so much power drunkenness

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and recklessness' (Esikot and Archibong, 2013:46). The implication of this situation has been expressed thus:

The flagrant violation of electoral laws and the consequent flawed processes witnessed in Nigeria over the ages challenge the notion of the importance of the mass public. More than ever before, it appears the mass public only represents a legitimizing tool for electoral indiscretions. Thus, irrespective of the character of the political elite; benevolent or malevolent, *the nature of contemporary State-system compels the mass of the people to surrender the mantle of political leadership to the group* (Odubajo and Alabi, 2014:132). Italics are mine.

Whether practice of democracy, overall, promotes a society where justice and equity hold sway even when the power holders are dominated by selfish interests is a serious issue which this papers makes the attitude of the ancient democratic Athens to power speak to. The discussion is in the context of how the Athenian 'democrats' championed socio-political freedom in the community of her equals while her inter-state relations have raised a serious question on why the Athenians would not see selfless use of power as a universal moral principle. The query over the accord between imperialism and democratic tenets the democratic Athens would continue to face.

ATHENS IN THE DEFINITION OF IMPERIALISM

Imperialism, the extending of the scope of a state's power and influence through diplomacy or outright military conquest is an age old concept that constantly raises the question of what is fair and just in human exercise of authority, especially at the international level. When premised on Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian war, imperialism is considered a political reality and 'a reflection of certain universal compulsions- compulsions of power and of human nature' (Forde, 1986: 433). Interestingly, the events in which the freedom loving democratic Athens of the fifth century was a prime participant are often used to advance the theory of political realism. Foremost, the theory argues that moral right can only be established when there is strength or physical might to enforce it. Although Thucydides' realist position readily applies to relations among states, it points to an inherent human trait in power play which could be an explanation for political conflicts within a multiethnic state even where democracy is practised.

The Athenian democracy emerged from a society that has a history of constant struggle for dominance and where noble birth and wealth determined share in political offices of the state. Aristotle depicts the inequality of the system thus:

For the Athenian constitution was in all respects oligarchical, and in fact the poor themselves and also their wives and children were actually in slavery to the rich and they were called Clients, and Sixth-part-tenants (for that was the rent they paid for the rich men's land which they farmed, and the whole of the country was in few hands), and if they ever failed to pay their rents, they themselves and their children were liable to arrest;' (Aristot. Const. Ath. 2.2)



The minority power grip was also seen in how ‘the Council of Areopagus [the Greek judicial body of aristocratic origin] had the official function of guarding the laws ... inflicting penalties and fines upon offenders against public order without appeal’ (Aristot. Const. Ath. 3.6). The resultant atmosphere of revolutionary discontent among the masses was compounded by violent aristocratic jostling for power. Consequently, the oligarchical factions’ agreement to have Solon (c.630BCE), a middle class man of moderate temperament, as an arbitrator became a compromise on power sharing and dousing of the social tension.

Solon was convinced that his community greatly desired justice and his knowledge of what this meant was reflected in the reforms of 594BC, which among other things, eliminated slavery and introduced freedom from economic oppression as fundamental socio-political justice. Of interest is the conscious effort Solon made to safeguard the interest of the lowly when he made provision for anyone who wished to legally defend victims of wrongdoing who were weak and could not prosecute crimes by themselves. (Aristot. Ath. Pol. 9.1). Similarly, Plutarch draws attention to how ‘the lawgiver correctly accustomed citizens to understand and sympathize with one another as parts of one body’ (Plutarch, Sol. 18.6).

However, while he was empathetically disposed towards helping the downtrodden, Solon could not completely detach himself from the aristocratic fundamentals, hence; it is most inaccurate to call Solon a democrat as he unsuccessfully sought a compromise between the demands of the rich and privileged and of the poor and unprivileged. ‘Solon transformed the structure of political authority from an informal oligarchy determined by heredity and traditional social class to a legally fixed government based on law, economic status, and a formal political role for all Athenians’ (Raaflaub et. al 2007:60). Solon aimed at *eunomia*, ‘good order’ and recorded insignificant success with *isomoiria*, ‘an equal portion for all’. Apparently, the latter was not his intention; therefore, in what followed, state politics would remain a factor of combination of economic and military power without any serious thought about moral justness. Hence, the question of whether the poor and helpless masses were naturally entitled to political power remained unanswered.

Athens from ‘Benevolent Dictatorship’ to ‘Tyrannical Democracy’

The rule of an authoritarian leader wielding absolute political power over a state for the benefit of the entire populace would never be acceptable to champions of democracy. But while Solon’s reforms are reputed as laying foundation for the Athenian democracy, the era of dictatorship that shortly followed his reforms is described in the following words:

Such was the origin and such the vicissitudes of the tyranny of Pisistratus. His administration was temperate, as has been said before, and more like constitutional government than a tyranny. Not only was he in every respect humane and mild and ready to forgive those who offended, but, in addition, he advanced money to the poorer people to help them in their labours, so that they might make their living by agriculture’. (Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 16.1-2).

Solon had set the pace for improving the economic lots of the Athenian lower classes, but hardly liberated the common Athenian citizens who continued to suffer from and felt threatened by



hunger and poverty. Although with the conscription of more Athenians outside the aristocratic order for military service, more common people gained access to public service, it would be presumptuous to call Solon whose constitutional reforms failed to end the bitter aristocratic struggle for dominance a democrat. Violent uprising that followed when Solon quit the public scene was the circumstance in which Pisistratus emerged unchallenged as a tyrant by 546BCE. With his leaning toward moderation and a sense of justice, as partly shown by Aristotle's words above, 'his administration was temperate'; 'more like constitutional government than a tyranny' as well as 'in every respect humane and mild'. Pisistratus enforced the constitutional reforms of Solon and even made them more operational. He took a major step that Solon failed to take by breaking the aristocratic control, seizing the lands of the rich and redistributing them to the poor farmers.

The dictator was a promoter of intellectual culture and made Athens a leading trading power in the Greek world. Nevertheless, none of these good qualities erased the fact that he got the power he greatly desired by use of force. Pisistratus' approach to getting power was not simply out of any sense of moral obligation towards the suffering masses; it was borne out of frantic effort to fulfill his political ambition as he competed with other aristocratic factions. Pisistratus made several attempts at seizing power and after gaining wealth in mining and timber abroad, he used his wealth to hire an army that was complemented by others who saw profit in joining a military force to cleverly carry out a successful 'coup'. Whereas he established a government that was credited with meeting the socio-economic needs of the masses, his path to power kept him on the list of self-seeking politicians; little wonder, an atmosphere of tense human egoistic self-interest persisted after him.

Tyranny ended in 510 BCE at Athens with the assassination of Hipparchus, a son of Pisistratus, yet, quest for power survived Pisistratus as aristocratic vying for power came to be between two factions; one was led by Isagoras and the other was led by Cleisthenes. What emerged was a contention for power by Isagoras who was in close association with the tyrants and Cleisthenes who 'enlisted the people on his side' and promised them a greater share in government (Aristot. Const. Ath. 20.1). Isagoras turned to Sparta oligarchy for support; however, the resistance he met illustrates the effectiveness of a superior militant power. Herodotus relates:

Cleomenes had sent for and demanded the banishment of Cleisthenes and the Accursed, Cleisthenes himself secretly departed. Afterwards, however, Cleomenes appeared in Athens with no great force. Upon his arrival, he, in order to take away the curse, banished seven hundred Athenian families named for him by Isagoras. Having so done he next attempted to dissolve the Council, entrusting the offices of government to Isagoras' faction. The Council, however, resisted him, whereupon Cleomenes and Isagoras and his partisans seized the acropolis. The rest of the Athenians united and besieged them for two days. On the third day as many of them as were Lacedaemonians left the country under truce... (Hdt. 5.72)

Aristotle reports the above incident as 'the people having taken control of affairs; Cleisthenes was their leader and was head of the people' (Aristot. Const. Ath. 20.4) and the development could be understood as victory over tyranny or dictatorial rule. However, reflecting over the



above circumstances surrounding the evolution of the democracy, the later course of events in the Athenian political history, rather than indicating emergence of a political system that had got the sense of morality in the use of any power acquired, pointed to a giant oligarchy that would subject ethical principles to political expediency and see nothing amoral about robbing other Greek states of their freedom. This takes the discussion back to Thucydides account of the Peloponnesian war. It is noteworthy that the events of this period belong to a period when the Athenian democracy was firmly established so much that her political hegemony, economic growth and cultural prosperity made the time Athens' Golden Age. Although the primary values of the Athenian democracy, *isegoria* (equal freedom of speech), *isonomia* (equality before the law), and *koinonia* (togetherness or partnership) all imply political freedom, the Athenians would not extend such principles to their dealings with other Greek states.

Following the defeat of the Persian at Plataea in 479BCE, fearing the Persian might attack again, coastal and Aegean Greek city-states formed the Delian League in 478BCE with Athens as its leader. The Athenian hegemony of the league also meant control of a vast naval alliance with which Athens began to wield a domineering influence around the Mediterranean Sea, using the advantage of her internally stable democratic structure. When its treasury was transferred to Athens by 454BCE, the league was as good as an empire and the allies were not only treated as subjects but members who wished to quit the League were forced by Athens to remain; compelled to substitute their naval contributions with monetary tributes. The 'subjects' faced both limited political freedom and inequality before the law.

Prominent in the foregoing role of the Athenians was the statesman, Pericles, who was well known for his persuasive eloquence which he used in introducing Athens to more daring and restless expansionism. In an effort to reduce the influence of his rival, Cimon, Pericles became confident, not only of the prosperity of the state's maritime commerce and manufacturing, but also of the surplus of the collections from the allies. The statesman set the pace for imperialism under democracy when appealing the self-interests of the demos 'he began to advise [them] to aim at the leadership, and to come down from their farms and live in the city, telling them that there would be food for all, some serving in the army and others as frontier-guards and others conducting the business of the community' (Aristot. Const. Ath. 24.1). The demos hearkened, and having 'won the empire, they treated the allies too masterfully [or dictatorially]' (Aristot. Const. Ath. 24.2). Concerning his imperialist character and nationalistic fervor, noteworthy is Thucydides' Pericles' Funeral Oration which 'is given over primarily to praising Athenian greatness, including the empire' (Forde, 1986: 434). Athens made no effort to disguise her self-interested imperialism but would rather provide justification for it. Thucydides expressed the defense through the Athenian spokesman at Sparta where Athenian imperialism was challenged in a congress, saying:

For you also, men of Lacedaemon, have command over the cities of Peloponnesus and order them to your best advantage. And had you, when the time was, by staying it out, been envied in your command, as we know well, you would have been no less heavy to the confederates than we, you must have been constrained to rule imperiously or to have fallen into danger. So that, though overcome by three of the greatest things, honour, fear, and profit, we have both accepted the dominion



delivered us and refuse again to surrender it, we have therein done nothing to be wondered neither at nor beside the manner of men (Thuc. 1.76.).

Any reasonable action taken by the Athenians in the course of courageously defending their city and accepting honourably the risk-taking role of a head in protecting other Greek states would seem plausible. Besides, the profit from shouldering such a weighty responsibility might be viewed a natural outcome of their resourcefulness. The argument tends to be that other Greek states would do the same if they had the chance and the Athenian saw nothing wrong with such overbearing holding on to power as their reasoning further shows:

Nor have we been the first in this kind, but it hath been ever a thing fixed for the weaker to be kept under by the stronger. Besides, we took the government upon us as esteeming ourselves worthy of the same; and of you also so esteemed till having computed the commodity, you now fall to allegation of equity, a thing which no man that had the occasion to achieve anything by strength ever so far preferred as to divert him from his profit. Those men are worthy of commendation who following the natural inclination of man in desiring rule over others are juster than for their own power they need. And therefore if another had our power, we think it would best make appear our own moderation; and yet our moderation hath undeservedly incurred contempt rather than commendation (Thuc. 1.76.).

However, when the statement: ‘Nor have we been the first in this kind, but it hath been ever a thing fixed for the weaker to be kept under by the stronger’ is representative of the democratic Athens, the question of reconciling Athenian imperialistic aggression with democratic values arises. Subscribing to ‘the natural inclination of man in desiring rule over others’ would similarly contradict the spirit of love of personal freedom and its concomitant respect for others’ that was extolled by Pericles as Thucydides again relates:

The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes, or even to indulge in those injurious looks which cannot fail to be offensive, although they inflict no positive penalty (Thuc. 2.37, 2, 3).

When Athens’ record is reviewed vis-à-vis the above world-view, there may be no much conjecturing about how a government of the majority despite profession of respect for human right can become oppressive in character. One instance, among others, that readily comes to mind when reflecting over how the ‘democratic Athens’ bullied other independent Greek city-states; robbed them of their sovereignty and made democratic doctrine arguably illusory in international relation is the treatment of the Greek island of Melos. Around 426BCE, Under Nicias’ command, ‘the Athenians, in respect that the Melians were islanders and yet would neither be their subjects nor of their league, intended to subdue them’ (Thuc. 3.91) but were unsuccessful. Athens, considering Melos’ sympathetic attitude to the Spartan course inimical, in 416BCE with her overwhelming superior forces threatened to destroy Melos if the island would



not willingly support Athenian alliance. Thucydides describes what might be seen as ancient examples of heinous war crimes committed by a state that vaunted democracy:

And the town being now strongly besieged, there being also within some that practised to have it given up, they yielded themselves to the discretion of the Athenians, who slew all the men of military age, made slaves of the women and children, and inhabited the place with a colony sent thither afterwards of five hundred men of their own (Thuc. 5.116).

The brutal and oppressive actions could be disappointing, but of more interest here is the disposition of the Athenians who believed there was no other way of asserting their power and perceived authority; seeing nothing amoral about how the situation was handled. Thucydides (Thuc. 5. 84-116) represents the emissaries of the Athenian invaders and the rulers of Melos engaging in what is now known as Melian Dialogue before the massacre. While Thucydides' account may not be perfect, the overall record of Athens' imperialistic aggression does not contradict the portrayal of the Athenians as oppressors, hence, the story does not amount to mere misrepresentation. Significantly, the debate exemplifies the conflict between political realism and political idealism; the contention between what is morally right and what is made 'right' by might (or force) which is not precluded by democracy when a group of political equals present a united front to tyrannically dominate others. As the arguments of both sides are examined in the succeeding subheading, it is important to see how irreconcilable the Athenian perspectives are with the social justice, accountability and human freedom that were identified with the ancient democracy.

MELIAN DIALOGUE AND THE DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

The Greek city-state, Sparta made no attempt to disguise her racist oppression of the large population of the helots who were cruelly treated as slaves, but such savagery would not be expected from the democratic Athens. Granted, Athens constitutionally guaranteed fair treatment of slaves in the city but this did not necessarily mean respect for the right to self-determination of other Greek state. The Athenian envoys made no effort to conceal the Athenian tyrannical and self-serving nature when they told Melian commissioners: 'because you would have the advantage of submitting before suffering the worst and we should gain by not destroying you' (Thuc. 5.93.1). By brandishing their superior military strength, the Athenians would want the Melians to see surrendering as the pragmatic step to take. Responding to this, the Melians reasoned that they saw no need for their coming under the Athenian siege and facing imminent capture since their city was neutral and harbored no animosity against the Athenians (Thuc. 5.94.1). That was to the Athenian envoys a weak argument and, in a characteristically dictatorial manner, they dismissed the thinking as beggarly by saying: 'No; for your hostility cannot so much hurt us as your friendship will be an argument to our subjects of our weakness, and your enmity of our power' (Thuc. 5.95.1). Melos' neutrality and independence made no difference since all the Athenian imperialist populace would bossily ask for was surrender and anything short of this would mean an intolerable failure to them.

Although the Melians saw the Athenians' stance as violating the law of 'equity' (Thuc. 5.96.1), to the Athenian envoys, no moral issue was at stake as they reasoned:



As far as right goes they think one has as much of it as the other, and that if any maintain their independence it is because they are strong, and that if we do not molest them it is because we are afraid; so that besides extending our empire we should gain in security by your subjection; the fact that you are islanders and weaker than others rendering it all the more important that you should not succeed in baffling the masters of the sea (Thuc. 5.98.1)

Concerning right and justice, the Athenians considered the issue to be that of self-interest and security in which the weak should eagerly yield to the strong. While the Melians argued that invading them would cause other neutral Greek states to become alarmed, fearful of suffering such treatment and then become more hostile to the Athenians (Thuc. 5.98), the envoys would not budge, reasoning that they entertained no such fear about the mainland Greek states who were enjoying enough freedom under their rule; ‘it is rather islanders like yourselves, outside our empire, and subjects smarting under the yoke, who would be the most likely to take a rash step and lead themselves and us into obvious danger’ (Thuc. 5.99.1), they added. What the Athenians saw as practical in the present instance was the Melians’ avoiding the unnecessary danger by submitting to the superior power.

The Melians realised it was a desperate situation, yet decided they would follow a path of honour by fighting and not shamefully and cowardly surrender against their wish (Thuc. 5.100.1). Again, flaunting her military superiority, the Athenian envoys reminded them that it was no time for what was morally correct but for what was expedient, saying: ‘not if you are well advised, the contest not being an equal one, with honor as the prize and shame as the penalty, but a question of self-preservation and of not resisting those who are far stronger than you are.’ (Thuc. 5.101.1). However, while admitting the Athenians were far stronger, the Melians had some hope of winning which they would regret quickly jettisoning (Thuc. 5.102.1). The Athenians rather viewed this as irrational risk taking and foolish optimism that would obviously end in bitter regret for the Melians (Thuc. 5.103).

Since they were not completely perplexed, the Melians decided to take their case as it were to the court of the gods by arguing:

You may be sure that we are as well aware as you of the difficulty of contending against your power and fortune, unless the terms be equal. But we trust that the gods may grant us fortune as good as yours, since we are just men fighting against unjust, and that what we want in power will be made up by the alliance of the Lacedaemonians, who are bound, if only for very shame, to come to the aid of their kindred. Our confidence, therefore, after all is not so utterly irrational (Thuc. 5.104).

The Athenians were not deterred by the “appeal to the supreme authority” and believing that they were not only acting according to what was divinely ordained but were also pious enough to merit the support of the gods, they boasted: ‘forasmuch as toucheth the favour of the gods, we have in reason no fear of being inferior’ (Thuc. 5.105.1-3). Neither would the Melians’ argument that their Spartan kinsmen would come to their rescue prompt any rethink by the Athenians who countered by reasoning that the Spartans were too practical to take unprofitable risks such as defending Melos when it meant joining battle with Athens, the stronger navy power



(Thuc. 5.105-109). Disappointed at the Melians' supposed unrealistic view of the situation, the Athenian imperialists further advanced their realist position by saying: 'your strongest arguments depend upon hope and the future, and your actual resources are too scanty, as compared with those arrayed against you, for you to come out victorious. You will therefore show great blindness of judgment...' (Thuc. 5.111.2). The Melians, however, would not change their minds but politely requested a mutually acceptable treaty (Thuc. 5.112.3) which only fell on the Athenian deaf ears (Thuc. 5.114)

The Melians are pictured as a snake writhing helplessly in the cruel claws of the Athenian hawk and Athens earns the reputation comparable to that of an aggressor who removes filth from his environment and dumps it in the drinking water of his neighbor who is considered inferior. The dialogue is an instance of how a state's belief in democracy does not necessarily amount respect for the right of a minority or a weak opposition. Against the Melian dialogue background, the Athenian democracy might simply be seen as a case of a political section of the ancient 'Greece' becoming oppressive to the less powerful in the process of achieving its self-interest; making others to suffer while enjoying the benefits of the achievement.

CONCLUSION

The preceding historical account does not only bring to the fore a frightening realistic case of clash between ethics and power in international politics but also suitably portrays the spirit that could be manifest in a competitive domestic politics. Evidently, the political self-seeking culture was not alien to the Athenian political history. The Athenian democracy, on the one hand, was a product of the aristocratic fierce competition for power and, on the other hand, the result of the masses clamour for better socio-economic condition as well as some share in politics. What appears as a compromise on the part of the aristocratic power seekers was in reality, a new device for securing power that did not change the tradition of eliminating political enemies. The practice of ostracism could be a proof of this. Again, it may not be difficult to see any difference between the motives of the tyrant, Pisistratus, and the 'democrat' Alcibiades who became so self-seeking that he sponsored an oligarchic coup and sided with enemies of his state in the name of political expediency.

Athenian Democracy, a broader base government that was introduced by the aristocrats continued struggle for power or dominance which now extended beyond Athens with the aid of the militant demos who constituted the people. Put another way, the Athenian upper class in reality had found in democracy a new outlet for pursuing power and displaying its innate desire for ruling; a system that provided the manpower for imperialism while meeting the socio-economic needs of its participants; thanks to Pericles' urging the demos to profit from politics.

It could be seen that the treatment of Melos was not dependent on the claim of the form of government as much on the inherent human disposition to lord it over others when there is power to do so and doing so seems advantageous. The Athenian record considered here is a typical reference when proposing that both the recurring leaning towards either dictatorship or liberalism in man could find expression in democracy, since democracy was largely a political device for attaining power and much less of a moral principle. Although a leader or a group of leaders may be put under pressure by democratic structures to be liberal, dictatorial attitude displayed in



international relations suggests that respect for the right of the other is often regrettably determined by superior power and not superior morality. Man's natural tendency to dominate others has made democratic principle hardly universal so that in multi-ethnic societies that claim to practise democracy, conflicts sadly are still resolved with brute application of force. Classical Athens' political history has shown that, even in democracy, morality in politics tends to end at the doorstep of political expediency where the strong is oddly the just.

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