

A Guide to  
*Democracy*

for Tibetan Secondary School Children



**THE TIBETAN CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY**

## *Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy*

The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) is a non-governmental organisation founded in January 1996 and registered under the Indian Societies Registration Act on May 4, 1996. The Centre was established in response to a need for effective monitoring of the human rights situation in Tibet and the promotion of democracy in the Tibetan community. TCHRD relies primarily on testimonials provided by Tibetan refugees in India, in addition to sources within Tibet and other concerned human rights groups.

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TCHRD utilises the United Nations mechanisms and submits its reports to the UN Commission on Human Rights, UN Working Groups and Special Rapporteurs; participates in UN human rights conferences and other national and international fora to highlight the human rights situation in Tibet; organises seminars and workshops on human rights and democracy in the exiled Tibetan community and conducts campaigns for victims of human rights violations in Tibet.

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*The Greeks are widely viewed as the first people to have had a modern democracy*

# Lesson 1

## A Road to Choose

Imagine that you and your classmates are walking down a road in the countryside. There are fields all around you, and the ground is perfectly flat in every direction. You must stay on the road because it leads to your home and it is getting late. You also must stay together to ensure that nobody gets lost.

Suddenly, you come to a fork in the road. You can go either left or right. Someone has told you that both of the roads will eventually lead home, but there are no signs to show which is the better way. You all have to make a decision.

How would your class decide which way to go? More importantly, which way of making such a decision would be fair to all the students in your



class? If one person in the class decided to go to the left, and ordered everyone to follow him or her, that would probably make the fewest people happy. It would be the least fair to the most students because only one person would be able to act on their own decision. In other words, it would not take into account the **opinions** of the rest of the students in the class.

### *An Informed Vote*

Another important thing to consider in your decision-making process should be the matter of which road is really the *best* choice. Sometimes the choice that wins in a vote is not necessarily always right, especially if voters are **unknowledgeable** about their choices. To make the best decision for yourself you must research your options and learn what each choice means. Often, before people go to vote on a certain issue or person, they study all the different choices before they make a decision. To do this, they watch the news on TV, listen to the radio, or read the newspaper to find out as much about the topic to be decided as possible. Some people even go to the library and find books on the subject that is being put to a vote. That way they can find out how the different choices will affect them. This is called making an informed vote. Thus, if everyone in the class had studied a map that showed that the left road was much shorter, then everyone would of course vote to go left. When voting, you can make better choices depending on how informed you are.

The situation would be the same if five people decided that everyone should go to the right. While more people would be able to express their thoughts, the **majority** of the class would still be denied their opinion. Therefore, the best way to decide which direction to walk would be if everyone could choose. Such a method would be most fair to the most students.

The way to go about deciding which road to take, and doing it in a manner that would be fair to the whole class, would be to take a **vote**. This means that each student would have a chance to say which direction he or

she wanted to go. With a vote, everyone's choice would matter.

You can take a vote in many ways. The simplest way is by having everyone in your class say which way they want to go and then having someone count the number of people in favor of each choice. You can also vote by having someone call out the available choices and then having students raise their hands when the one that they like is announced. You can even have a secret vote where everyone writes down their choice on a sheet of paper and gives it to somebody to count. The choice with the most votes wins, and everyone has to go in that direction. Regardless of which way you decided to vote, you would always be able to decide your future course in a way that considered everyone's opinion.

We are faced with decisions similar to such imaginary forks in the road every day. When we have to decide such things just for ourselves, we can always make a choice that will make us happy, because we only have to take our own opinion into account. If we have to make a choice with several of our friends and classmates, or our family, we can usually talk about our options and decide which choice will make everyone happy. However, sometimes decisions have to be made that involve all the people in a town, or a city, or a country. Decisions like this are similar to the one you and your classmates faced on the road, as the opinions of many different people need to be taken into account. However, they are also different because there are a lot more opinions to be taken into account. The best way that people have found to make fair decisions for so many people is through a **democracy**.

*Activity: Think about all the rules in your daily life, such as having to go to school, learning in English, not hurting people, or not stealing. Discuss with your class how you think the actions of your government affect the things that you do every day (It might do this in more ways than you think.) With this in mind, do you believe that it is important for you to have a voice in what your government does?*

## Lesson 2

### What is a Democracy?

A democracy is a system of government that is founded upon the ideals of equality for all people, majority rule, and **freedom of choice**. It attempts to give everyone that lives under this system the chance to influence the actions of their government, and therefore have a say in what happens in their own lives. Before you can participate in a democracy however, you need to know a little bit about the philosophy behind this **unique** type of government.

#### *The Basic Idea*

Democracy literally means “rule by the people.” The term actually comes from two Greek words. The first, *demos*, means “the people”, and the second, *kratos*, means “**authority**”. The Greeks lived in a time when most countries were ruled by kings that told their people what to do. In fact, it was almost unheard of to let the citizens of a country make their own rules and decisions. The Greeks however, were ahead of their time. They had developed a democratic form of government and their people enjoyed the authority to make decisions without being told what to do by a ruler. Therefore, the reason that we use a Greek term to describe this form of government is because they had the first modern democracy. Just as a new invention is named after its inventor, democracy was named after the Greeks.

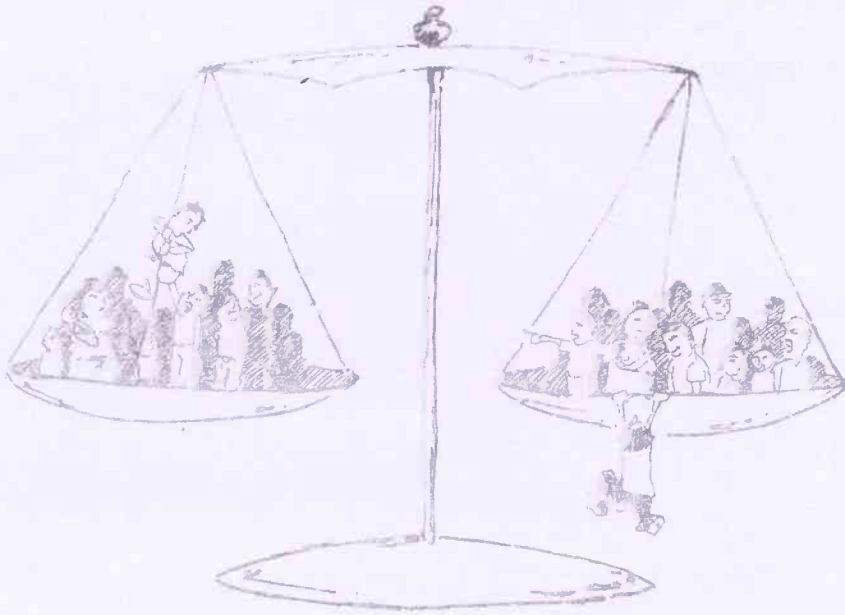
The basic idea of a democracy is very simple. You have probably used it in your every-day life to help you make decisions when there was more than one opinion involved (just as your class would at a fork in the road). The basic idea is this: *as many people as possible should be able to contribute to the decision-making process of their group, town, city, or country*. To make this basic idea work, everyone who lives in a democracy must have their opinion counted equally in any decision-making process. In a true democracy all people including the rich and the poor, members of different religions or societal groups, women, and people of different ethnic backgrounds are included. This makes everyone’s opinion important and



allows normal people to have an affect on the final outcome of any group decision.

A democratic government is therefore very special because it allows a large portion of society to have a powerful voice in what their government does. Instead of a government telling its people what to do, like a king or **dictator** does, in a democracy, the people tell their government what to do. That way, the government's job is to work for its people.

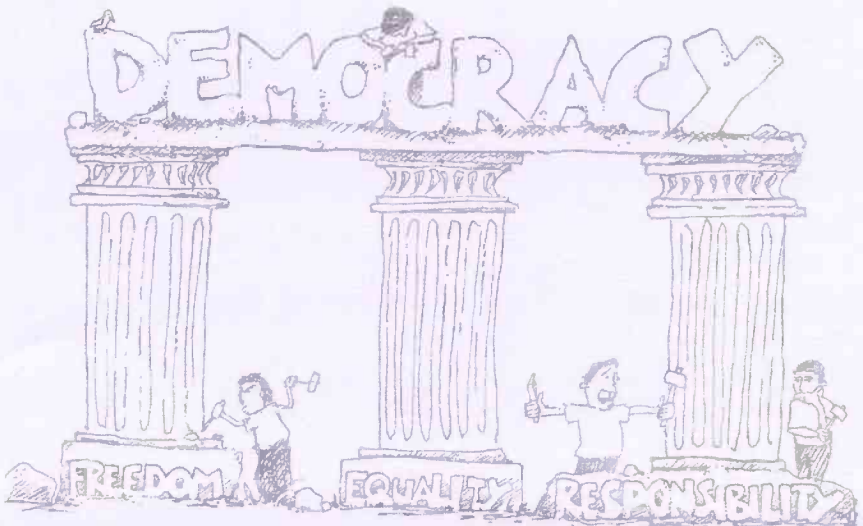
The strength of this basic idea can be seen through the wide range of decisions that people can make in a democracy. For example, people can help decide who their leaders will be, which laws are made, how taxes are spent, or even which days should be holidays. Many people have called



democracy “a government of the people, by the people, for the people.” The key to understanding the strength of the democratic system is to know that it is successful primarily because everybody’s opinion is taken into account; in other words, its strength comes from the number of opinions that are expressed. That is all there is to it! As you can see, democracy is a very simple idea. The difficult part about a democracy comes in making sure that everyone really is included.

### *The Key Qualities of a Democracy*

The basic idea of democracy must have a good foundation in order to work properly. A democracy therefore rests upon three things: freedom, responsibility, and equality. These qualities help ensure that everyone in a democracy is included in the governing process. Without them, a government is not a true democracy because it does not really work in the best interest of all its people.



**Freedom** is important in a democracy so that people are not afraid of, or prevented from expressing their opinions. There are many kinds of freedoms that are protected in a democracy. These include the freedom of religion, press, speech, and association; the freedom to live and work; and freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. Without these freedoms, people would not be able to make decisions based on their true beliefs. They would be too scared to speak out if there were a chance that they could get arrested or imprisoned for their opinion or their actions.

**Equality** means that the voice of every person in a democracy is the same. No voices are louder than others, and no opinion can count for more than another. This ensures that everybody has an equal share of any decisions that are made in a democracy. There are several different kinds of equality that are included in this provision. These include equal protection of all people by the laws, equal opportunities for people to pursue their lives as they wish, and equal rights to participate in political affairs. People are even equal to their leaders, under the law. Without equality, a person in power might think that they were above certain laws. They might even think that they could make decisions that served only their own interest without considering the interests of other people.

**Responsibility** is just as important as freedom and equality; and maybe even more so. For a democracy to work, it requires that people participate in the social and political affairs of their community. This means that a democracy requires people to actually take part in the democratic process. They need to be knowledgeable about issues and problems, and make an informed decision. In other words, you have a responsibility to participate through stating your opinions. You are then also responsible for **adhering** to any decisions that are made. This is because responsibility also means following established laws and rules. If everybody did as they pleased, the democratic rights of many people would be violated.

## *Your Responsibilities in a Democracy*

- Study about issues and make informed decisions during elections
- Debate issues concerning social, economic, and political conditions in your area
- Work in a community in support of a particular cause or in protest against a government action
- Vote in elections. Attend political or community meetings
- Campaign for people who you think should be elected
- Talk to government officials. Write about various issues or leaders
- Offer solutions rather than complaints about problems facing your community

Source: Human Rights for All, Lawyers for Human Rights (South Africa) 1991

**Activity:** *As a class, exercise your responsibility as citizens of a democracy. Research an issue that your class finds important to your community (your teacher will help you find an issue). Then, think of a solution to the problem. In this manner, you will be meeting your democratic responsibility to be involved in the democratic process.*

## Lesson 3

### Modern Democracy in Action

If you had to make a decision with your classmates (like the one about which road to take), it would be relatively easy for everyone to state their opinion. This is because your class does not have many people in it. There would be enough time for everyone to speak and take part in a discussion of the issues. If your whole school had to make a decision, however, it would be much harder for everyone to speak. It would take a very long time for everyone to say how they felt about the issue at hand. Modern democracies face this same problem: they must struggle with the question of how to take into account the opinions of as many people as possible in the decision making process. Where your school would have to deal with only a few hundred opinions, a modern country would have to deal with millions of opinions.

#### *The Media in the Modern Democracy*

The media is a very powerful force that has a great influence on the decisions that people make in a modern democracy. Radio, television and newspapers all fall under the category of the media, and all of them play a significant role in how we form our opinions and ideas. This is because we get much of the information we use in our everyday lives from this resource. The media is important in the democratic process because it tells us which candidates or issues may be up for election. It is often impossible for us to go meet the candidates for ourselves and hear directly what they have to say, so we usually rely on the media to bring this information to us. It is therefore very important that the media gives an objective and unbiased view of the facts surrounding any choices that need to be made during an election. If this were not the case, the media could easily influence elections by giving only certain information, or giving only one side of an opinion.

A democracy that has everyone take part directly in decision making is called a **direct democracy**. This brings us back to the Greeks. Direct democracy is the kind of democracy that they invented 2500 years ago. Everyone in the Greek capital city, Athens took part in the decision-making process. Citizens met in a giant building and discussed which laws to make and how to solve the problems that faced them. This worked primarily because the population of Athens was small.

Today, most countries use a different system of democracy because direct democracies are impractical in the modern world. You only find direct democracies in small towns and communities. This is because the large populations of modern countries make it impossible for everyone to take part in the government directly. Imagine how long it would take for millions of people to all say what they were thinking about a certain law that was being discussed - it would be impossible!

The democracies of today use what is called **indirect democracy**. This system works by having a small group of people, usually a couple hundred, represent the opinions of the rest of the people in their country. These specially selected people are called **representatives** and they form the actual government in a modern democracy. They usually form a body called either a parliament, congress, or legislature. The population takes part in the decision making process indirectly, by electing those representatives that share their own views. This **alleviates** the problem of having everybody in a country say their opinion on an issue. Because a representative is like a choice for a certain opinion, people simply make political decisions by voting for a person that shares their opinion.

Representatives only serve for a short term (two to four years or so). By having such a short time in office, representatives are forced to listen to the people that have elected them. If they don't listen, they will soon be voted out of office during the next election.

**Activity:** *You will now continue to exercise your democratic responsibilities. First, find out who your representative is (your teacher will help you gather this information). Then, write a group letter to your representative expressing your concern over the issue that you researched in the last section, and, offer a solution.*

## Lesson 4

### The Voice of the People

So far we have focused on the idea that the people in a democracy have a voice in the decisions of their government. This voice is what connects people with their government, and in turn keeps a government in tune to its people. It is the tool with which citizens **exercise** their opinion, and take part in the democratic process. Now we will discuss how people get to use their voice.

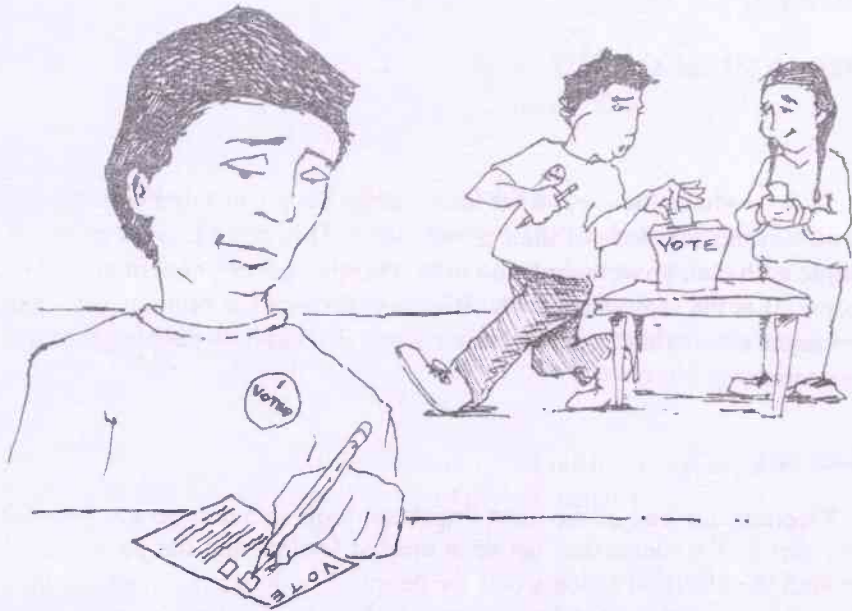
#### *Elections*

Elections are one of the most important tools in a democracy because they serve as a connection between elected leaders and the people. It is through the electoral process that the people in a democracy can say they control the government. Elections may be held to elect leaders, make laws or **implement** policies

To work effectively, elections must be held periodically or at fixed intervals. In most democracies they are held every two or four years. The threat of being voted out of office in an election keeps leaders **accountable** for their actions. If they abuse their power or do not serve the will of the people, leaders know that they will not be re-elected in the next election.

Elections must conform to three basic standards to operate as intended: they must be open, private, and accurately **tallied**. All adult citizens of a country must be allowed to take part in an election. Only if elections are open to everyone are they truly fair. For example, if only bald men over the age of 55 were allowed to vote this would exclude anyone whom is younger, female, or had hair. Obviously this would not be very fair because a significant part of the population would not have a voice in their government's actions. Before long the country would be run in the interest of that small **minority**.

For elections to work without an undue pressure or **bias** to pick a certain choice, voters must be allowed to make their decision in private. Privacy



allows citizens to vote how they truly feel. If people were held accountable for their votes, they might feel inclined to vote for whichever choice had the most public support or power. People might even feel threatened if they did not vote a certain way. Therefore, during an election, people should be allowed to cast their vote alone and to keep their choice to themselves. Because of this need for privacy, there are many rules to help keep votes secret. For example, voting stations are often required to have enclosed booths in which people can mark their ballots; people do not have to put their name on their ballot; and once votes are cast, they are sealed until counted. These regulations all help to ensure the sanctity of the electoral process.

Finally, elections must be **accurately** tallied to be fair. To ensure that no one is cheating during an election the voting process is often **monitored** by independent people who have no **stake** in the outcome. Monitoring can be done in a number of ways; as each citizen can only have one vote, monitors watch to make sure that no one has voted more than once. The people that count the votes are also watched by the monitors to make sure that they do



not make a mistake, or change the results in favor of their own choices. Finally, monitors make sure that candidates who are running for office are not pressuring or bribing people to vote for them.

### *Voting: The Way to Voice Your Opinion*

The way that people get to express their opinion in a democracy is by voting. A vote is a personal choice for a certain representative, idea or decision. It is a very powerful tool that nearly everyone can use. In most democracies all people who are over the age of eighteen and are citizens are allowed to vote.

Voting is a powerful tool because it can work in two different ways: it can express approval, or, it can be used to show disapproval. Therefore, if a government is doing well and people are happy with it, citizens can support it by voting to re-elect the same representatives during the next election. If a government is not doing well, and not listening to its citizens, then they can vote for a new government. In other words, if people did not vote they would not be able to control their government. Another way to look at it is like the steering wheel of a car. If a driver uses the steering wheel he can drive to where he wants to go. However, if he does not use the steering wheel, the car will crash. In the same way, if people do not vote and make decisions for their government, their government will not function well.

You may think that your one vote out of countless other votes is unimportant and does little to express your own special views. However, every vote is important because it affects the overall outcome of an election. The choices that win in an election will eventually have an effect on you.

### *Political Parties*

Political parties have become an important tool of the modern democracy. They help to organize people into groups that share similar political ideas. On the large scale of modern populations, it is impossible for everyone to have completely different political ideas. If this were true there would be

millions of **candidates**, each representing a different view, running in every election. As you know, this is not the case. In reality there are only a limited number of problems and views of how to solve those problems. For example, in the problem that your class faced with the road, there were only two choices. It is more sensible for people that have similar views to join together and elect someone that represents their general ideas. Members of a political party do not necessarily have to agree on every idea, but they share a general view of what they want their government to do. A political party therefore amplifies the small voices of many individuals into one loud and united voice that the government can easily hear.

There are many different kinds of political parties in the world today. Some are united by a single goal while others share a whole **philosophy**. The interests of different political parties range from preserving the environment or stopping a war, to rallying around a broad system of economic or political ideas.

**Activity:** *Do you know anyone who has voted? Each student in the class should find a person that has voted in an election (the person can be a member of the students family or a friend). Ask the person about why they voted and why they made the choices that they made. The students should report their findings to the class.*

# Lesson 5

## Keeping a Democracy Fair

As you have seen, democracy is intended to work for everyone. It can only do this if it is fair, and equal to everyone involved. There are several safeguards in place to protect the rights of the people, and to keep the government from acting without the will of the people. These include documented rules that a government must follow, standards of openness so that everyone may see what a government is doing, and protection of those who are not in the majority so that those in power will not abuse those who are not.

### *Constitution: The Rules of the Game*

A **constitution** is the framework upon which a democracy rests. It states exactly what the government can and cannot do. Most importantly, the



constitution sets limits on the power of a government and keeps all of its workings out in the open. Many times there is also an attached document called a **bill of rights** that says what rights and freedoms the people in a democracy will enjoy. It is the responsibility of everyone to know their constitution so that the government and the people each know the rules.

A constitution limits the **scope** of government by strictly **regulating** its powers and duties. If the government does not **adhere** to the constitution it is acting illegally; and because of the constitution, the people of a democracy will know it. The result will be that in the **next** election new leaders will be elected.

The constitution also states exactly how the government is formed, how laws are made and how the constitution is to be **amended**. This keeps the government from making laws in its own best interest (for example giving itself a big pay-raise or extra holidays). It also lets the people know exactly how the government is operating so that they can see if it is obeying the rules.

The people in a democracy are also protected from the government by the constitution. The bill of rights usually underscores certain freedoms and rights that the people of a democracy can enjoy. The government therefore cannot interfere with its citizens in an **arbitrary** fashion. People are guaranteed freedom to live, express themselves, to have their own opinions, to not be arbitrarily arrested, to have fair trials, and to take part in the government.

### *Separation of Powers*

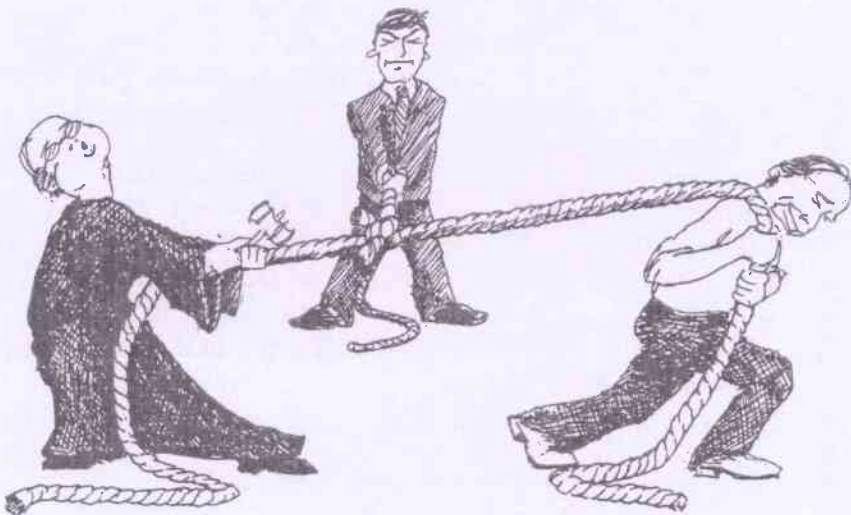
Another aspect of modern democracy that keeps government fair is the separation of powers. This idea limits the power of the government so that it does not become too uncontrollable. The primary way that it does this is by **compartmentalizing** different branches of government. This means that the representatives that make new laws, the representatives that **execute** the laws and the representatives that judge the laws are actually not part of the same group. To help with this they have separate offices where they work and separate buildings where they meet. They are interconnected and all depend on each other, but they are made to be independent so that they

cannot join together and abuse their power. This is done in the interest of making government as fair to the people who are not in power as possible.

To understand the idea of separation of powers, it is good to know what the different branches of government do, and how they relate to one another. Usually, the group that writes the laws is called the **legislative branch**. Its job is to see what laws need to be written, to discuss if they are fair, and then to write them. This is the limit of their powers, however. They cannot put the laws into practice.

The group that executes the laws is called the **executive branch**. The role of this body is to enforce the laws that the legislative body has written. The executive branch may also recommend laws to the legislature for consideration. In some countries, like the United States, the executive branch may even **veto** some of the laws proposed by the legislative branch.

Finally, the **judicial branch** judges whether any laws have been broken, or if new laws are not fair. It can stop the execution of an unfair law by the



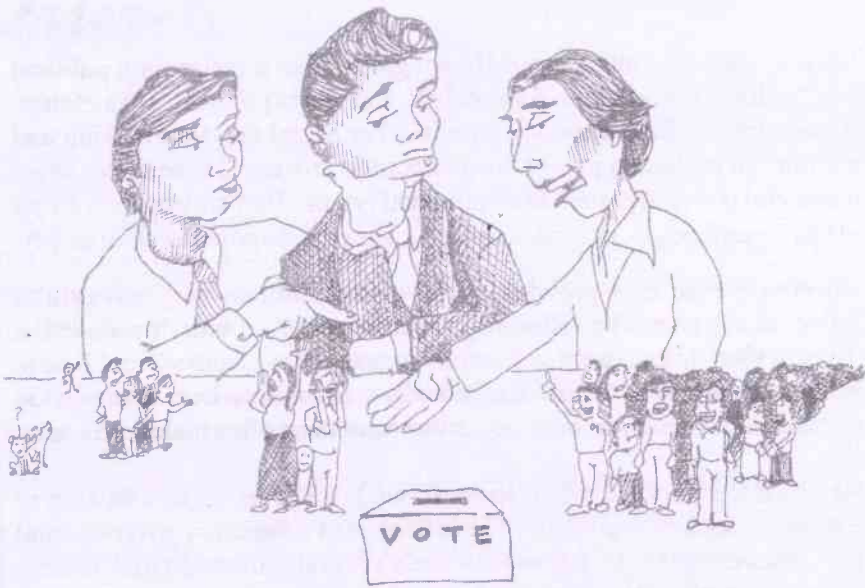
executive branch and guide the writing of laws by the legislative branch.

Separation of powers is sometimes known as a system of checks and balances. The different parts of the government are set up in such a way that each part checks, or blocks the power of the other. In this way they all balance out. If all these powers were under the control of one person or group, the government could easily abuse its power. For example, if the body that wrote the laws could also implement them and decide if they had been broken, they would be able to interpret those laws without anyone to see if they were being fair. If this were the case, most likely their interpretation of the laws would be biased. Only another body would have the proper perspective and distance from the law making process to be able to judge if laws were fair or not, or if they had truly been broken.

### *Accountability and Transparency*

**Accountability** is an important part of democracy because it makes all people, including elected officials responsible for following laws. This allows everyone to be equal under the law. Leaders cannot commit illegal acts because of the privilege of their office. Accountability also means that leaders must be able to justify and explain their actions. If they have acted illegally they can be tried in a court of law. If they have not acted in the interest of those who voted them into office they can be voted out.

**Transparency** is connected to accountability. It means that the decision making process of the government must be open to the critical eye of the people. One way to think about this concept is to imagine that the government must work in front of a window through which people can readily see. The public should be allowed to attend government meetings to see what is being done and whether it is legal or not. The government should also keep records of meetings or proceedings. This ensures that nothing illegal or unfair is going on in the government without the knowledge of the people.



### *Majority Rule versus Minority Rights*

As you have seen, democracy ensures that the voices of as many people as possible are taken into account in a government's decision making. While everyone's voice is equal, this does not mean that we are all exactly the same. We all have different thoughts and opinions and that is why we vote differently. When more people favour one opinion than another opinion, they are said to be in the majority. This means that if there is an election, their position would win. Democracy however, also means protecting the interests of people that are not in the majority. People in a democracy can never make decisions that will hurt or exclude the minority. It is understood that someday the minority might grow and become the majority.

Source: Democracy and Free Elections, Non-Violence International

## *Focus on Social Forces*

Society is divided into many different groups that translate into political forces. Some are religious, some ethnic, and others political. Many times, these forces influence society's political or social decision-making and are thus an important part of the democratic process. These forces often transcend political parties and individual issues. They are usually born out of similar experiences, or conditions that are shared by large segments of society.

**Women** are an ever-growing social group that can very powerfully influence elections. They often make up over half of a country's population. Thus, if there is an issue that interests women, they can often mobilise to bring it to victory or defeat. Traditionally women have been interested in fair and equal treatment in societies that have been often male dominated.

**Religion** is a very important social force. It often serves as a bastion of values for society as a whole. The influence of religion in governmental processes can often be felt when it adds a moral dimension to decisions or laws. For example religion often makes us ask if the options that we have when voting are good or a bad.

**Labour** is one of the most powerful social forces. Since most people work, labor has an almost unlimited supply of supporters. Usually, the interests of labor focus on fair wages, safe working conditions, and help for workers when there are not enough jobs.

**Business** has a very powerful effect on the operation of government and is therefore regarded as a strong social force. Large businesses have lots of money that they can give to representatives as contributions. Often this money is used to make politicians agree with a business' views. The interests of businesses revolve primarily around taxes, and government regulations that affect their growth.

**Activity:** *Consider that your class is one of the social groups mentioned above. You know that as a social group you can influence government to make policies in your interest. What issues would you take up and how would you go about communicating your needs to your government? (i.e. School conditions, quality of education, number of teachers, etc.)*



## Lesson 6

### Two Systems of Democracy

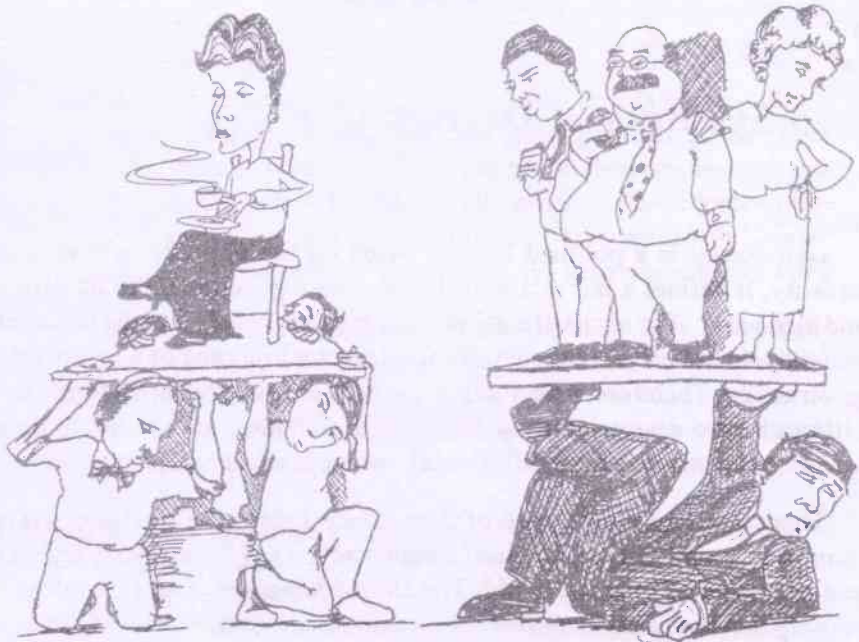
Democracy is a political system based on the philosophical idea of equality. It defines a fair relationship between a government to its people and vice versa. The ideals of a democratic system are only a guide however, and they do not offer concrete rules for the actual running of a democratic government. Therefore, a democracy can take on many different forms and although two countries may both have a democratic system, their governments may seem as different as two sides of a coin.

There are two main types of democracy today: the **parliamentary democracy**, and the **presidential democracy**. They both work very well and are found all over the world. The United Kingdom is an example of a country that uses a parliamentary style democracy, and the United States is an example of a country that uses a presidential style democracy.

#### *Parliamentary System*

In a parliamentary democracy, the representatives that are elected by the people are called the **parliamentarians**. The parliament is made up of representatives that have been voted into power by the citizens of their country. A parliament is usually made up of members from two or three main political parties, as well as a few members from several smaller parties. The role of parliament is to make decisions, pass laws, decide on public **expenditure**, and supervise the higher branch of government, the ministers. The Prime Minister and his cabinet answer to the parliament and the parliament in turn answers to the people.

The top officials in a parliamentary system are called the ministers, with the Prime Minister as their leader. The ministers are responsible for executing the work that parliament has done. The ministers are not elected by the people, however, they are appointed. The Prime Minister is elected by the



majority party in the parliament and then selects lower ministers to help him with his work. Political parties may even join together temporarily to form a larger party that has more power. Such a union is called a coalition. Coalitions are usually formed so that small parties can be in the majority. The Prime Minister is therefore the leader of the largest party or coalition.

In most parliamentary systems the Prime Minister also acts as a connection between the head of state (usually a king) and parliament. He is given his oath of office by the head of state to show that there is a higher leader than the Prime Minister. However, in a parliamentary system, the head of state performs primarily ceremonial functions and the role of governing the country is left to the parliament and ministers.

A Prime Minister usually serves a set term in office from the time he is elected. If a majority of the parliament votes that they do not like the job that he is doing however, he can be voted out of office.

## *Presidential System*

In a presidential democracy the president has far more power than the Prime Minister in a parliamentary democracy. The president is the head of government and the head of state, and exercises the duties of both. He has the power to execute laws, conduct domestic and foreign policy, and veto legislation that he does not approve of. Citizens in a presidential democracy also have the right to vote for their president. Thus they have a more direct voice in who their leader will be. Presidents remain in office as long as their term lasts.

The government is divided into a legislative body that writes laws, the executive body that executes laws, and a judicial body that decides if laws are fair or not. For example, the judicial body may rule that the actions of the executive or legislative body are unconstitutional and ask them to change. The judicial body is the only group that is not voted into power. Its members are appointed by the president and then approved by a vote of the legislative branch.

# Lesson 7

## Tibetan Democracy

The Tibetan Government-in-Exile is built upon the framework of the modern democracy. It is a parliamentary style democracy that has worked for the last four decades to become as open and representative as possible to the views of the Tibetan people.

### *Birth of Tibetan Democracy*

The Tibetan people have only had a democratic government for the past 40 years. Ironically this government is not even in Tibet because of the Chinese occupation. It is therefore known as the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.

Before 1959 the government of Tibet was based on a theocratic system. This meant that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was both the head of the government and the spiritual guide of the Tibetan people. Most governmental decisions were made by a group of monks and noblemen called the *Tsongdu*. It was not a very representative form of government because there were no elections, and lay positions often passed from officials to their children. Many people have mistakenly described this form of government as a feudal system, meaning that all levels of society were rigidly fixed and that the lower classes could never attain a higher social position. This, however, was not always the case. Tibetan society was more mobile than traditional European feudal societies and peasants could sometimes improve their position in society by joining a monastery and doing well at their religious studies. Many members of the lay government had come from modest backgrounds.

The fourteenth Dalai Lama began the process to democratise the Tibetan society. He did this by instituting sweeping reforms, initially while he was in Tibet and later in India after he was forced to flee. His first reforms addressed the issue of the unrepresentative system in Tibet. He endeavored

to make land reforms, tax reforms, and to help end a crippling debt problem among the peasants (caused by payments to their masters). The land reforms transferred large pieces of land that were held by monasteries and the aristocracy to the Tibetan people. The Dalai Lamas tax reforms reduced taxes for the general population. Finally, the debt problem was resolved under new economic policies.

After 1959, following his journey into exile, His Holiness the Dalai Lama began extensive democratic reforms. In public speeches he put forth a plan for a democratic parliamentary government that would address the needs of all Tibetans. He soon created a popularly elected body of peoples' representatives and in 1963 a draft constitution for a future Tibetan government was written. Before long, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile had all the principle democratic ingredients that we discussed above.

The first incarnation of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile consisted of an elected body of deputies that served under the Dalai Lama. The elected body consisted of three people in exile from each of three provinces in Tibet and one from each of the five religious sects. The first elections for these posts were held on September 2, 1960. Initially, the role of the deputies was a largely symbolic one as there was no staff to carry out the operations of government and no official buildings in which they could work and meet.

In the interest of continuing democratization, a constitution redrafting committee was created to write a charter for Tibetans while in exile. The Charter was a working constitution until the government could return to Tibet and implement the constitution for a free Tibet. The Charter included the directive principles for the new Tibetan government, and the fundamental rights and duties of all Tibetans while in exile (see appendix).

In 1990 perhaps the most dramatic reforms were implemented by the Dalai Lama. He expanded the membership of the Assembly, sought to give women a greater voice in government, and announced that he would no longer have the right to approve of assembly members and to appoint ministers. These reforms made the Tibetan Government-in-Exile far more representative than it had ever been before. As you can see, the Tibetans' transformation to a democratic form of government was a long process that required many changes. It also required that the Tibetan people learn and accept the ideas of democracy.

## The Government-in-Exile Today

Today, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile resembles any other modern democracy. It has legislative, executive and judicial branches and fairly represents the wishes of the Tibetan people.

The legislative branch of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile is called the Assembly of Tibetan Peoples Deputies. It is the highest elected organ of the Tibetan refugee community. It consists of forty-six members that represent Tibet's three provinces, and its five religious sects. There are also two European and one American member who represent the wishes of Tibetan refugees in their respective communities around the world. Finally, the Dalai Lama is allowed to nominate three members that represent the fields of arts, sciences, and literature. The Assembly is headed by a chairman and a vice-chairman, both of whom are elected by the deputies. It meets twice a year, for two weeks, and its members serve a five-year term from the time of the first meeting.



The Assembly has many responsibilities. It keeps an eye on the executive branch, makes all laws, and listens to the needs of the Tibetan people-in-exile. Members also take tours of exile communities to make assessments and hear opinions of the refugees.

The executive branch of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile is known as the Kashag. It is led by the Dalai Lama who exercises his power directly, or through his officers. The Dalai Lama has eight executives that work under him. He proposes at least sixteen candidates for cabinet positions whom are then elected by the Assembly. The primary job of the Kashag is to enact legislation that is written by the Assembly.

The judicial branch of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile is called the Supreme Justice Commission. It is the highest court in the Tibetan administration. It is led by three Justice Commissioners who oversee all the courts of the Government-in-Exile. The head Justice Commissioner is nominated by the Dalai Lama and must be elected by a two-thirds vote of the Assembly. The primary job of the Supreme Justice Commission is to see that the actions of the government are legal, and that it operates within the confines of the Charter.

### *The Future Tibetan Government*

The Government-in-Exile has already done much planning for a future government in Tibet. Towards this end, the Government-in-Exile has decided that it will be dissolved when Tibet again returns to the control of the Tibetan people and that a new government shall be created with the help of Tibetans living both inside and outside of Tibet. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has also announced that Tibetans in Tibet will be largely responsible for the formation of their new government, and that Tibetan officials currently serving in the Chinese government will have an even greater responsibility in a new Tibetan administration.

In developing plans for a future Tibetan government, His Holiness the Dalai Lama announced in 1992 that he would not play a part in the future Tibetan administration. As many Tibetans rely on his guidance, he stated that he might play a consulting role in the future government when there are difficult problems that cannot be easily resolved. He will not however,

hold any official public title.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has expressed his view that although Tibetans will be able to choose their future government, it is his hope that the new government will be based on democratic principles. These principles include that the Tibetan people will elect the new government and that there will be a multi-party system, with three organs of government. Additional guidelines for a future Tibet include that it will be a peace loving nation, that it should be dedicated to preserving the environment, and that it will be a demilitarized zone.

When the Tibetan people finally regain control of their country from China, they will finally get to vote on the type of government that they wish their country to have. The many years that the Tibetans' have had to refine their democracy abroad will ensure a smooth political transition when they go home.

Source: Democracy: An Education Booklet, TCHRD, 1999

**Activity 1:** *The Tibetan Government-in-Exile has elements of both a parliamentary and presidential system. Make a distinction of presidential and parliamentary system of government. Then list the elements that the Tibetan Government-in-Exile has in common with each system, and find out what system of government do we have.*

**Activity 2:** *Pretend that your class is in charge of creating a new government for a free Tibetan state. One of your duties is to write a constitution for the new government. Discuss with your classmates what you would include in such a document. For example, what would the rights of the Tibetan people be? What would the duties of the state be? Would you have a parliamentary or presidential government?*



## Excerpts from the CHARTER OF THE TIBETANS-IN-EXILE

### *Fundamental Rights and Duties of the Tibetan People*

**Equality before the Law** – Every Tibetan citizen is the same before the law and shall enjoy the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Charter without discrimination.

**Religious Freedom** – All Tibetans are equal before the law regardless of religious beliefs. All Tibetans are entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

**Right to Vote and Stand for Office** – All Tibetans who are 18 years or older have the right to vote unless they have committed a crime that disqualifies them. All Tibetans who are 25 years and or older have the right to run for public office.

### *Other Fundamental Rights and Freedoms*

All Tibetan citizens have the following rights:

1. Freedom of life, liberty and property
2. Freedom to express themselves
3. Freedom to go where they please
4. Freedom to write down, and circulate their ideas
5. Freedom to assemble (without arms)
6. Freedom to be represented fairly in a court of law
7. Right to join any religion, group, or club
8. Have an equal chance for employment
9. Work any job that they wish
10. No children below the age of 14 should be employed

## *Obligations of Tibetan Citizens*

Every Tibetan is required to do the following things:

1. Be loyal to the Tibetan Nation
2. Obey all laws set forth by the Charter or the Tibetan government
3. Work towards the return of the Tibetan people to their homeland
4. Pay taxes
5. Perform those duties which may be required if there is a threat to the Tibetan people, or a national disaster

## *Enforcement of the Fundamental Rights and Duties*

Any Tibetan who feels that their rights have been violated may approach the Supreme Justice Commission or any Local Justice Commission to have their case heard.

## *Directive Principles of the Tibetan Government*

**Working Towards the Solution of the Current Problems in Tibet and Help with the Social Welfare of Refugees** – The Government-in-Exile's duties include: working towards the legitimate goal of the Tibetan people; the ending of the subjugation and persecution of the Tibetan people in Tibet; and in the mean time overseeing a progressive social policy of justice, equality, and economic productivity in the Tibetan exile community. In addition, special focus will be on providing adequate education, the opportunity for acquiring the traditional cultural heritage and providing health care for the younger generation.

## Glossary

**Accountable** responsible

**Accurate** very careful, exact, or making few or no errors

**Adhere** to stick or hold fast

**Alleviate** to relieve from something

**Amend** to change

**Arbitrary** random; without identifiable cause

**Authority** the power to command

**Bastion** firmly established place or view

**Bias** prejudice

**Bill of Rights** the part of a constitution that details the rights of the citizens of a country

**Campaign** organized effort to achieve a goal (ie. Electing someone to office)

**Candidates** people who stand for an elected office

**Coalition** an alliance of political parties

**Compartmentalising**

**Constitution** a written document that laws out the fundamental principles by which a government should operate

**Debate** discussion or argument

**Democracy** government by the people

**Dictator** a person who exercises absolute control

**Direct democracy** a form of democracy where all citizens are involved in writing and executing legislation

**Equality** the principle of being the same

**Executive Branch** the part of a democratic government that is responsible for executing laws

**Execute** to carry out

**Exercise** to make active use of

**Expenditure** the act of expending (ie. money)

**Feudalism** system based on the service of peasants to a lord

**Fork** a branch or division

**Freedom** independence of action or thought

**Implement** to put a law into practise

**Indirect democracy** a type of democracy where citizens are represented by a small group of people

**Judicial Branch** the part of a democratic government that oversees courts and ensures that the government is acting within the confines of established rules and regulations

**Lay people** those people who are not part of a religious profession

**Legislative Branch** a part of a democratic government that writes laws

**Majority** a group that is larger than another group

**Minority** a group that is smaller than another group

**Monitor** to watch carefully

**Opinion** belief or conclusion; what someone thinks

**Parliament** the body of representatives in an indirect democracy

**Parliamentary Democracy** a type of democracy that is composed of a parliament and a prime minister

**Philosophy** a system of thought or ideas

**Presidential Democracy** a type of democracy that is marked by a president who is both the head of state and head of the government

**Regulate** to control

**Representative** One who stands for the ideas or opinions of a larger group of people

**Responsibility** job or duty

**Safeguard** something that serves to protect or defend

**Scope** range

**Stake** interest or involvement in a project

**Tally** to count or tabulate

**Transparent** something that can be seen through

**Transcend** to extend beyond established limits

**Unique** one of a kind

**Unknowledgeable** not having knowledge about a certain subject

**Vote** a formal expression of a wish or choice