How Democratic Was the Roman Republic and Empire?

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Abstract- The history of Rome has always been an interesting topic for discussion among the scholars since the past centuries. Starting just as a city of Latium region, the Rome expanded its empire and dominance throughout a huge region including the many parts of modern Europe, Northern Africa and Western Asia. Rome witnessed monarchical rule till 510 BCE; but after the expel of Etruscan monarchy, Republican government was established which testified democratic institutions and elements. These democratic elements and processes often became a model for the later democratic world, although Roman never followed proper democracy alike modern times. Even after the establishment of Principate rule by Augustus Caesar in 27 BCE, the democratic and republican institutions sustained without having any real power. Therefore, it raises a very interesting question how democratic was the Roman Republic and Empire, which has been discussed in my paper. Besides of showing the democratic elements and its limitations and changes throughout the consequent ages, I have also spoken about the symbiotic relationship between the institutions of democracy and aristocracy.

Index Terms- Rome, Democracy, Aristocrat, Republic, Election, Senate.

I. Introduction

Famous historian of Hellenistic period, Polybius mentioned in his book, *The Histories*, that theRoman Republican Constitution was the mixture of three elements of Government, among which Democracy was represented by the instruments of popular sovereignty i.e. popular assemblies, tribunes of *concilium plebis* and popular participation in voting process and electing officials. Since most of the past centuries, historians have a general view that Roman Constitution is theoretically quite democratic, but practically undemocratic, dominated by a socially and economically privileged group of wealthy aristocrats; which is challenged by many scholars after the triumph of Western Democracy in the international battlefield.

The idea of Democracy meaning "Government of the people, by the people, for the people" as stated by American President Abraham Lincoln, was first-born in Greece, but has been changed and refined throughout the ages. Polybius argued that "where reverence to the gods, succor of parents, respect to elders, and obedience to laws are traditional and habitual… in such communities, if the will of the majority prevail, we may speak of the… government as a democracy."[1] The global proliferation of democratic regimes in 20th century, especially the idea of Representative Democracy, has the root in Ancient Rome; even while arguing for the ratification of the United States Constitution, Alexander Hamilton claimed that the Roman Republic had "attained to the utmost height of human greatness."[2] Even the notion of the rule of law and the idea of constitutionalism were first originated in Roman times.[3] Since the Roman Constitution had profound impact on the democratic world, scholars find special interest in analysing the nature of Roman Democracy.

II. Materials and Methods

This research work mainly focuses on determining the nature of Roman Democracy during the Republican period and consequent ages. For such analysis, I have mainly focused on the literary sources. As the paper approaches towards theoretical explanations, I have not focused in the field-works and or other works like that. The sources and the journals which have been used as authoritativeness are mainly secondary in nature. I have used as many as twenty-five books and articles in total many of whose authors made researches based on primary sources. I have used the writings of Fergus Millar, P. A. Brunt, Brian S. Roper, L. D. Blois and R. J. Van Der Spek, Mary Beard and others as the fundamental sources. The details of all books and journals have been mentioned in the 'References' section.

III. Analysis of Findings

Roman antiquities narrate that after the suicide of virtuous Roman matron Lucretia due to the rape by the son of last Etruscan monarch (Tarquin the Proud), the outraged Romans outcast the Etruscans and elected a Senate, which in turn elected two annual consuls and other officials to conduct the new republic's government and army.[4] Thus the establishment of republic was occurred by aristocrats, but with popular support. However, republican tendencies were always part of the Roman political machinery, even during monarchy.[5] But the republican structure went through various changes during the five centuries (510 BCE – 27 BCE).

1. Political structure during republican period

Roman political structure was mainly represented by the Senate, senior and junior level magistrates and Assemblies. The oligarchical council i.e. Senate controlled the political, military and economic matters of the state, supervised public opinions and conveyed decree (*senatus consultum*) to magistrates. The senatorial class was initially an exclusive patrician order based upon birth, but their membership dependedupon wealth.[6] The 'honorary offices' (L. de Blois and R. J. van der Spek, 2019: 214) of the magistrates started with quaestorship, then *aedilis*or tribune of the *plebs*, then *praetor* and finally *consul*. Besides, there were

censors, *dictator*, *apparitores*. The unpaid officials were elected by popular vote and the voting was done by group procedure.[7] The third element of Roman republic within which democracy was resided according to Polybius, was assemblies being three in number during republican period, namely *comitia centuriatia*, *concilium plebis* and *comitia tributa*. *Comitia centuriata* being referred as *comitiatus maximus* in Twelve Tablets used to elect consuls from a time well before the middle of the fifth century.[8] This assembly of arms-bearing men where 193 centuries (later 473) voted in bloc in five units,rarely vote on legislation or declaration on war, but elect magistrates which, according to P. A. Brunt,was very important for giving successful candidates lasting prestige in the counsels of the Senate.[9] Due to the growing discontentment of the plebeians and the following conflict of orders, there was created *concilium plebis* and *comitia tributa*. The former discussed plebeian issues and organised voting through a vote system based on the residence of the citizens to elect tribunes. The later including all male citizens of 35 tribes is a guardian of liberty, as Cicero viewed, protecting popular interests and sustaining senatorial legitimacy.[10] In the last years of the Republic, it was frequently seen that the decision of *comitia tribute* was against of *comitia centuriata*.

2. Democratic elements of Roman Republic

Ancient writers had not the idea of democracy alike the modern sense which is present in India or USA. *Demokratia* of Hellenistic age "no longer necessarily connoted a system of direct popular control like that of Periclean Athens, but had come in practice to be applicable to any government which was not openly monarchical."[11] Romans thinkers gave importance to democratic control, not because of any "definitional connection with liberty but from the fact that it is a means of furthering liberty."[12] Roman people enjoyed three fundamental constitutional rights – right of direct voting on legislation including declarations of war or making of peace, electing officials and judging in popular courts. Lily Ross Taylor mentioned that voting was a major occupation of the Roman citizens and there was hardly any season while Rome was free from voting in assemblies and voting campaigns.[13] Even, voting was so important that the candidates often tried to influence over the voters, which is also seen in today's democratic elections. Though Roman group voting system collected unit votes contributing a single result, every citizen i.e. every adult male citizen including ex-slaves had the right to vote within a subunit. There was no trace of property qualification or the requirement of citizen-birth for voting.[14] Even, in late republic the *comitia tribute* passed the overwhelming mass of legislation without formal 'timocracy.' That is why Fergus Millar argues that it was the crowd within Forum, more than the Senate, whose 'voting power… had effects that were felt from Britain to the Euphrates.'[15] He added that the political life of the Roman republic should be seen as a form of open, mass politics, with speeches being addressed to the crowds who gathered in Forum and voted individually, originally by voice and later by ballot.[16] Millar's argument has been supported by other scholars who focus on the fact that the prospective candidates often gave importance in persuasion, promises, canvassing and bribery to gain popular support before the elections, which is also seen in modern democracy.[17] Even, Mouritsen mentions about certain cases where bills had been withdrawn due to the public reluctance along with the threat of a 'tribunician veto'. Like the failure of the bill

rogation Servilia occurred due to its unpopularity among the *plebs* and this claim was based on the testimony of Cicero.[18] E. S. Staveley argues that if the *fasti* of the early fifth century contains the name of plebeian consuls for several years, despite of shorter period, the choice of consuls in each year depended at least to some extent upon the whims of the popular assembly.[19]

The actions of the magistrates and the commanders during wars were investigated by Senate and need to be approved by the people's votes. Even the consuls hardly could go against the popular support, as we had seen in 196 AD when the emissaries from Flamininus proposed for peace with Philip. The newly elected consul M. Claudius Marcellus wanted to fight in Greece and spoke against peace before people who were against of war. The Senate testifying popular opinion did not support the consul and sent ten emissaries to approve peace thereby reflecting the power of popular support.[20] Even the Senate had to be wary, as the *tribune plebis* could bring halt any public business, including senatorial meetings, with their veto, and could propose legislation to the plebs.[21] Besides, the people enjoyed the important powers of jurisdiction, as they could appeal to the centuriate assembly against capital sentence imposed by a magistrate.[22] Even during late Republican period, despite the murder of Tiberius Gracchus and Gaius Gracchus, their reforms i.e. the distribution of public land to landless and the arrangement of state subsidies to purchase grain for commoners respectively retained by Senate to prevent the popular revolts.[23] Thus the view that Rome was totally controlled by hereditary oligarchy who kept the political and economic structure in favour of themselves is nothing but "frozen waste" theory (John North, 1990: 278) to those scholars who finds democratic elements in Roman political structure.

3. Limitations of Democratic elements

Despite the presence of democratic elements, Rome was never fully democratic concealing the popular sovereignty; and after the decline of Roman republic, democratic elements lost vitality.By the foundation of the Republic, Roman offices were monopolised by 'senatorial aristocracy' who was not a classic hereditary aristocracy in the sense of a closed and legally defined group privileged by right of birth and descent.[24] Ste Croix argued that after the result of the 'conflict of orders,' patrician oligarchy was replaced by 'patricio-plebeian oligarchy' having little difference in outlook and behaviour.[25]

The *nobiles* always dominated and influenced popular assemblies through their clients, personal relations with members, successful command in wars and deep-routed traditional authority. Brunt mentioned that ruling class often used bribery to influence the poor urban plebs during the elections, and the consuls rarely defer to the will of the Senate, as they always aimed to get elected in Senate after the end of their offices.[26] Keith Roberts mentioned that wealthy aristocrats often sought clients for their power and influence, and clients sought patrons for economic assistance. As it was impossible for clients to violate the patron's advice (especially in voting procedures), this symbiosis favoured the patrons during their elections.[27] Moreover, as the poor persons had not the access to stand for elections, the assemblies were only allowed to 'take their pick' of candidates coming from the privileged classes.[28] Even, in *comitia centuriata*, the *centuries* were divided into five classes based on property qualification, and the patricians and wealthy plebeians were placed in first three

classes who could easily be manipulated by aristocrats.[29] Roman assemblies had many limitations, like – it did not allow the people to come together regularly or debate on current issues, it could not emerge popular initiatives or proposals by self, it was directly regulated by presiding official who decided the time - space - issue of voting, and after all it could not vote freely as the presiding officials could refuse any vote. Besides the attendance of the people in the assembly was very low because the majority of the population who had neither adequate time nor money, were engaged in daily battle for economic survival.[30] The old Comitium in the north-western corner of the Forum Romanum that was used as the meeting-place of assemblies could hold about 3800 voters. At next, the assembly was transferred to the Forum which holds about 10,000 voters; and then it was at the Saepta on the Campus Martius holding about 25000 voters, where citizen population total exceeded a million in late republic.[31] It indicates that neither people were interested in voting process nor the ruling class was interested to include people thereby indicating the lack of democracy during republic.

Theoretically people are deliberate on the question of peace and war, but practically it is the Senate and consuls, not assemblies which can do that. Even before the Second Macedonian War against King Philip V, when *comitia centuriata* rejected war with Macedon, the consul proclaimed "let Macedonia rather than Italy be the seat of war, let it be the enemy's cities and fields that are devastated with fire and sword… go to the poll and confirm the decision of the Senate."[32] This signifies the limited power of assemblies. Even Scullard argued that most of the legislations which were introduced in the assembly by the tribunes were shaped previously in the Senate, and the tribunes became only an 'instrument of the senatorial oligarchy.'[33] That is why Cicero claimed that the Senate must respect the freedom and interests of the commons, but they are allotted no more than a passive role.[34] Even during late republic some legislations being favourable to the popular interests was passed and the reforms of the Gracchus brothers retained only for a group of aristocrats of the Senate namely *populares*.

4. The Late Republican period

North is right to say that the popular will of the Roman people is expressed only in the context of divisions within aristocracy, and democratic politics was a function of the degree and type of competition in progress between aristocratic families, groups or individuals.[35] As a result, when the symbiosis broke down and conflicts arose among the aristocrats and military commanders who gained authority and prestige for giving leadership in the wars, democratic elements lost their power resulting civil wars and the arrival of dictatorship in the last years of republic. Thus Sulla, after defeating Marians, proclaimed himself as the dictator in 82 BCE and began a reign of terror where he liquidated about a hundred senators and sixteen hundred knights.[36] In this way military power became more important than elective power to gain political control in Rome, and the commanders tried to became dictator with the help of troops who were more loyal to them than to Senate. In this political turmoil, Julius Caesar broke the First Triumvirate from Pompey and Crassus, and appointed himself the dictator for ten years in 47 BCE and then for life in 44 BCE. During his dictatorship, he used to nominate candidates for election and control other elections behind the scenes.[37] He tightened the control of provincial governors, limited the number of recipients of wheat in Rome, and settled about forty thousand veterans and tens of thousands of proletarians and freedmen from Rome in colonies thereby governing Roman Empire alike an absolute monarch.[38] But this destroyed the interests of *optimates* of the Senate and resulted his assassination by Brutus and Cassius who wanted to bring republican government back. Even they struck a coin with the words "Ideas of March" and a liberty cap between two daggers indicating that they had liberated the fatherland by their murder of Caesar.[39] But soon they were defeated by the Second Triumvirate in the battle of Philippi (42 BCE) which marked the end of democracy or liberty in the senatorial sense. Later Caesar's nephew Octavian, with his military power, captured the Roman throne by defeating Lepidus and Antony, and became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. To legitimize his reign, he returned his power to the Senate, and Senate in turn handed back to him this power thereby offering the title Augustus who established Principate rule in Rome.[40]

5. Augustus and his successors

Augustus Caesar, inspite of establishing autocracy, balanced between Senate and military. He declared himself 'commander-in-chief' and made Senate just an 'arm of administration' (Mary Beard, 2015: chap. 9). He established the *Consilium Principis* i.e. council of his trusted advisors which influenced the Emperor more than the Senate. Popular assemblies declined substantially and people hardly attempted anymore. His successor Tiberius transferred the power of electing magistrate from assemblies to Senate.[41] Thus Augustus sustained some republican institutions, but gave them no real power thereby resulting the decline of democratic power. However, he had been praised by contemporary writers and orators for consolidating the huge empire and bringing peace (*Pax Romana)* throughout the empire through military conquests. Chester G. Starr mentioned this reign as 'the perfect democracy' as it offered liberty, economic and social justice, and gave to each class what it deserved.[42]

After Augustus, democratic elements totally demolished. Senate thereafter consisted only of emperor's friends, advisors, confidants, dinner guests, drinking partners and family members. Though Tiberius wanted to return open ballot voting system, Senate opposed. One Senator sharply asked, "Could you tell me in what order you will cast your vote, Caesar… If you go first I shall have something to follow. If you go last of all, I fear I might find myself inadvertently on the wrong side."[43] Thus autocracy is so pervaded in Roman political institution that it became impossible to bring the previous system back. The emperor himself became the 'super-patron' (L. de Blois and R. J. van der Spek, 2019: 292) of the people. Moreover, wars and rebellions broke out throughout the empire, and it was the Roman army who solved this problem. Thus the military commanders became more powerful and became a huge claimant for getting into Roman throne through military power. Besides Senate often got involved into the conspiracies thereby leading to the assassinations of the emperors which became very common in the history of Roman Empire. That is why after Augustus, twenty-five emperors reigned in 220 years. As the emperors had come to throne by military power, they had very little respect for Senate, like – Commodus had been depicted to threaten "the Senators in the front-row seats of the Colosseum by waving the head of a decapitated ostrich at them."[44] Besides due to the extension of citizenship rights to all free inhabitants of the

empire, non-Romans also became claimant for being emperor, as we saw in the case of Septimius Severus who had origin in North Africa. With the death of Severus Alexander, the Principate rule was ended marking the official end of aristocracy's power; and during the third century crisis (235 – 284 CE), the previous system totally broke down and the principle of election by the soldiers was established.[45] Thus Maximinus having origin in Thrace and pursuing a purely military career supplanted Alexander by his troops.[46] Third Century Crisis witnessed huge political chaos, civil war and violent death of more than twenty emperors in fifty years. In 284 CE, Diocletian wished to reorganise the Roman Empire to solve the crisis and took the new title *dominus* denoting him a slave-owner thereby completely wiping out the republican institutions.[47] During his time, Senate was nothing but a 'town council' which had no power in important administrative matters and no access to high military offices.[48] Thereafter Constantine shifted the seat of the emperor to Constantinople in the eastern part, and Rome as well as the Senate lost its political significance.[49] After the division of the empire into two halves in 395 BCE, the eastern empire flourished, but the western empire was declined after several tribal invasions.

IV.   CONCLUSION

Therefore, after such a brief discussion, it is still very hard to decipher how democratic was the Roman Empire. The dominant view about the Roman Republic which has been popularised by nineteenth-century German historian Theodor Mommsen, was that it was an oligarchy.[50] But after the triumph of Western democracies in World War I, there has been change in the historiography to find out the democratic elements in the Roman political system; and still now huge debates has been pervaded among the scholars about the nature of the Roman democracy. It is my opinion that democracy and aristocracy had a symbiotic relationship in Roman Republic and were depended on each other in directing the governance. That is why we see that aristocrats always came into power through democratic processes and democracy manifested through the aristocratic prominences. As a result, when the aristocrats got involved into conflicts to grasp power, democratic elements also collapsed during the late republic period and can never be revived later. So instead of arguing whether it was democracy or aristocracy, we should focus on the relationship between the elements of democracy and aristocracy which affected the Roman political system. Even after the decline of the republic, democratic and republican institutions also sustained within the dominance of autocratic and military power, though no real power was accorded to them.Officially it was the Senate who legitimized the emperor's reign, although the scene was just opposite in practice. However, after the end of the Principate rule, that legitimization of the Senate was not seen anymore. Therefore, Roman democracy should be seen as a 'very particular form' (John North, 1990: 286) which never flourished in a full-fledged way, but has a huge impact in the governing system of today's democratic world.

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