

Analysis of Aristophanes' *The Knights* and Contemporary Ethiopian Politics.

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"You see, a leader of the people no longer needs to have any training or be honest in his dealings. Instead, he should be ignorant and disgusting".

- Demosthenes

Introduction

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, democracy is both a way of life based on the fundamental premise that all people are equal and have an equal right to life, liberty (including the liberty of thought and expression), and the pursuit of happiness. Democracy is a form of government based on the self-rule of the people and in modern times upon freely elected representative institutions and an executive responsible to the people. Studying political philosophy between the years of 1200 and 1800 mostly relies on depictions of democracy found in Aristotle's *Politics*, Plato's *Republic*, and the work of Polybius. They discussed democracy generally in their work, although there are fewer references to Athenian democracy. Particularly in the fifth century, Athens served as a model for several democracies throughout Greece. The majority rule was the Athenian definition of democracy *demos* and *demokratia*. However, Democracy was viewed by Plato and Aristotle as the rule of the poor or the mob (demos in a social sense) (March et.al. 1992).

Athens was taken over by demagogues after Pericles' death. Demagogues are bad because they "guide the people" in the wrong direction and, more importantly, they mislead by failing to lead. The demagogue is motivated by self-interest and the desire to increase one's position and,

consequently, wealth. It makes sense that the term "demagogue" has evolved into the most basic means of classifying the undesirable type with regard to Athens and its democracy (Finley, 1962). The Athenian political system, which the Greek comic playwright Aristophanes mocks in his play criticizing excessive democracy, will be thoroughly examined in this paper. Then, using current Ethiopian politics as an example, it will attempt to draw connections between ancient and modern politics. This will aid in comprehending the concepts of demagogues and democracy in the modern world we live in. The paper will begin by looking at the play's fundamental idea, analyzing its important characters, and critiquing it. The paper then establishes a general connection between ancient political theory and modern ideas. The paper concludes by discussing the idea of democracy and raising doubts about it by illustrating the current political situation in Ethiopia.

Aristophanes - *The Knights*

Aristophane was one of the greatest comedy authors ever. In addition to being a comedy genius, he was a significant political thinker. Aristophanes shows himself to be a strong critic by employing comedy. He powerfully lays out the problems that both then-existing democracies and modern ones face from internal conflict and external warfare. Above all, Aristophanes is an incredible observer of the irresistible appeal of demagogues and the harm they can do to a more or less healthy democracy as well as a wise adviser to it.

The tragic conflict between the Greek city-states of Sparta and Athens served as the inspiration for *The Knights*. The fight started when Corinth, a Spartan ally, assaulted the Athenian army. Athens' military response put Corinth's land in danger and eventually brought Sparta into the fight. The conflict lasted for a very long time. When Athens and Sparta signed the Peace of Nicias in 421 BCE, the conflict was temporarily put to a halt and lasted for 50 years. When Athens'

military sent forces to fight Sparta in Sicily, a modern-day Italian island, it violated the terms of the contract. Athens capitulated and Sparta seized control of the city as the war came to an end (*The Knights*). Demosthenes and Nicias, who are both slaves to a man named Demus, talk about the cruel lord Cleon in the opening scene of *The Knights*. They fear that if Cleon holds onto power, they will die. They discuss how to die manly because they have no choice but to die a decent death. Demosthenes proposes wine in place of Nicias' suggestion that they drink bull's blood to pass away. The two of them will then become drunk and decide to take the oracle that Cleon protects, which allows them to predict Cleon's downfall.

Demosthenes [reading from the scroll]

“The man who will destroy the Paphlagonian is a sausage dealer”.

The fate of the city now rests on the sausage seller, and this is the play's main beginning. They summon the sausage seller and tell him how he will beat Cleon and turn into a great man. The sausage seller is doubtful because he does not even have an education. The man's ordinary birth and lack of education, says Demosthenes, are advantages for him as a politician. When Cleon emerges from his chamber, after a lot of convincing the sausage seller decides to stand up to Cleon to take power. By competitions like yelling contests, lots of insults they run to the senate to explain their case. By announcing the cheap price of anchorage, which was expensive in Sparta at the time. The senate favors the Sausage seller over Cleon. To demonstrate their master Demos their love, Cleon and the sausage vendor go to him. The sausage vendor surpasses all of Cleon's boasts. The sausage vendor and Demos return to the stage. Demos has totally recovered from being the smug

fool that Cleon had made him, and he now appears more honorable than ever. The sausage vendor provides an appropriate penalty for Cleon. At the entrance, Cleon will be selling sausages.

Reading the Characters

Analysis can be drawn for all the characters in the play, but this paper will only focus on the major four characters of the play, Sausage seller, Cleon, Demos and Demosthenes. The play's sausage seller is the first major character. He is portrayed as an uneducated man who works as a sausage seller in the city. He begins by stating that he lacks education and is unfit to serve as a politician. However, with the help of the knights and Demosthenes' persuasion, he chooses to challenge Cleon for power. Since authority resides with the majority and is therefore dependent on popularity rather than merit, this calls into question the concept of democracy. The second prominent character is Cleon, who is portrayed as a corrupt, egotistical, and arrogant ruler. He competes with the sausage seller, displaying his arrogance and narcissism. His personality is distinct, although it also has traits with other leaders that we see. The realities of the real world are reflected in the play including corrupt and power-hungry rulers that prioritize their own interests. He is the best example of the demagogue that Aristophanes criticizes. So, in a way he might also help as psychoanalyze contemporary politics and leadership.

Demos is the third interesting character. Demos is presented as good yet easily fooled and deceived. Even the sausage seller bribes him with gifts and wins his heart after Cleon has been mistreating and deceiving him for a while.

*Demos, I say I'll offer you a bowl
of state money, a salary, to feast on—*

and you don't ever have to do a thing!

-Cleon

Another character in the play is Demosthenes. Demosthenes thinks that politicians behave as though they are ignorant and naive and he is a slave who has been oppressed by the tyranny of the Cleon. He thinks the sausage seller will make a great politician because of this. He then makes a significant contribution to persuading the sausage seller to challenge Cleon for power.

Contemporary politics: Ethiopian politics and the play

The "feudal" rule of Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in Ethiopia in 1974 by the popular Marxist revolution. However, it established a military dictatorship in place of a true democratic revolution. For seventeen years, Mengistu's administration ruled in terror with the backing of the socialist bloc led by the Soviet Union at the time. Apart from the long-anticipated nationalization of the land, hardly much meaningful economic and/or social advancement was made. War, suffering, and famine remained linked with Ethiopia. Several opposition groups, including the OLF and the TPLF, have engaged in armed conflict with the government. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) controlled Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an umbrella group of ethnic-based organizations, took power in 1991. Thus, Ethiopia developed into a federal state made up of nine regional states and two city governments. Political parties based on ethnicity proliferated all over the nation. The EPRDF leadership adopted the rhetoric of democracy and liberal economics, establishing the framework for the current political situation that is being taken into consideration (Loukeris, 2001). The start of a new era for the country is set for February 5, 2019. The legislature passed new, liberal regulations pertaining to civil society organizations and draconian legislation that violates human rights. Prime Minister

Abiy Ahmed, who is pro-reform, led this movement and change. Since he took office in 2018, he has been urging and promising significant changes to the people. He ended decades of war with Eritrea, released thousands of political prisoners, and allowed women a chance at participation by giving them a 50% share of the ministerial duty. The country, however, soon found itself in a major mess and political crisis. All the changes that were promised amounted to little more than empty words. A number of innocent lives were lost in the war that the Abiy government fought with the Tigran revolutionary party since 2020. Political violence, economic instability, and human rights violations are now part of everyday life in the country. What started as a revolution to promote democracy turned into a platform for demagoguery.

The play directly reflects Ethiopia's current politics, which is related to democracy and demagoguery. *Demos*, for instance, might be viewed as a character who symbolizes "the people" that *Cleon* and the sausage seller have been deceiving. We can clearly see that it was quite easy to impress him, but anyone who wants to gain power must win his favor. This is a clear criticism of democracy because it fails to protect the people and instead relies on the mass for power.

Connecting it to the play, Prime Minister Abiy can be seen as both *Cleon* and the sausage seller. When he first came to power, he deceived the people (*Demos*) by making many promises of change, but as soon as he took office, none of those promises or changes happened. The way the government of Abiy treated the people was similar to how *Cleon* treated *Demos*, causing severe political, economic, and human crises for the nation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Aristophanes clearly showed the idealized "democracy". He showed what the Athenian democracy actually did and destroyed. His play the *Knights* can actually be used to

examine and analyze contemporary politics, where democracy took a different shape from Athenian democracy and people. However, its ideology and fundamental thinking can be seen through his lens of the play. Both democracy and the concept of demagoguery are put into question through the play. The *Knights* has the earliest occurrence of the Greek word for demagoguery (demagogia). At first, it simply meant "leading the demos," which is a political term for the largest political class, who is also by definition the poorest and least educated. However, "demagoguery" quickly began to appear the same to us as it does to them. A demagogue is a cunning master of slick language who manipulates the populace to his own objectives. Finally, the play illustrated the fact that a demagoguery cannot exist without the support of the populace. The egotistical and arrogant leaders would not exist if there were no people who desired to be ruled. In other words, the people are what give the ruler's power. Democracy is a well-known ideology and a popular form of government in the world we currently live in. Democracy, however, cannot shield us from lawlessness, brutality, or violations of human rights. As a result, demagoguery exists because of widespread support. Now the question is, since we elect our leaders, should we also bear responsibility for the abuse of power?

References

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