

THE ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

The recent years 1992-1993 reflected a special time for celebration. It was then and still is now the time to celebrate another Greek experience that found its particular path into the future to be rediscovered; an idea which is still shaping the quality of life of the nations of the world; one that epitomizes the most original achievements of the Hellenic mind and the Hellenic ideas that shaped the course of the intellectual, artistic and political orientations of the Western World.

The changes that were brought forth on the political scene of the Athenian society in the years 508-507 B.C. by Cleisthenes of the family of the Alcmaeonidae, are finally seen to set decisively a new form of human governance; *Democracy*.

As the initiation of the Athenian society to Democracy celebrated its 2,500 year anniversary, it could be of special meaning to all of us to honor these great Athenian people, by celebrating this once in a millennium event in the spirit of another Hellenic ideal; love for knowledge.

In doing so, it becomes essential to learn of some historic elements which will help us to understand the roots of the Athenian Democracy, its ideological substance, its structure and operation that truly define its name as Democracy or *Demo-cratia* which means People Power, and expresses the Rule of the People.

Since the very early Greek times, the concept of absolute monarchy or *mono-archia*, as the word implies "the rule of the one", is unknown in ancient Greece. In both the Iliad and the Odyssey we find an *elders' council* involved in the decision making; in the Iliad it is constituted of the most important *leaders* of the united Greek forces; in the Odyssey it is made up of the *notables*. Besides such councils, there is always an assembly of the people to be addressed by the king, and laws to be respected by everyone. In the Odyssey, Homer describes the Cyclops as a society of uncivilized and wild men, "...they have neither will-bearing assemblies of the people nor laws..."

Even the Spartans, who are considered as one of the most conservative and antidemocratic societies of ancient Greece, have two kings who are not by any means absolute monarches. Their authority was controlled to a large degree by two bodies that were in reality governing the Lacedaemonian city-state; the five *Trustees* and the 28 member *Senate*. The *Trustees* and the *Senate* were elected by the assembly of the people called *Apella*. Aristotle clarifies that the 28 members of the *Senate* were elected among the elders and the excellent citizens, while any citizen could be elected as a *Trustee*.

As with most of the Greek city-states, even this form of monarchy was succeeded by aristocracy or as *aristo-cratia* implies, "the rule of the noble". During the 7th and early 6th centuries B.C., deep social upheavals developed to the phenomenon of Greek emigration and colonization that spread to the western Mediterranean area (particularly to southern Italy), the north Aegean and the Black Seas. At the same time, tough political antagonism between the populace and the nobility led to the imposition of *tyrants*, whose rise to power became the first step in the abolition of the *oligarchy* (power restricted to a few) of the aristocrats. Although aristocracy was succeeded by *tyranny*, ironically the *tyrants* themselves, as a rule, were coming from aristocratic families. Nevertheless, the complete lack of controls affixed to their authority led the majority of them in such an arbitrarily cruel exercise of power, that their title "*tyrant*" quickly received the meaning we still give to this word today.

Such was the social and political situation in Athens at the end of the 7th century B.C. The political, judicial and

legislative reforms of Solon, at the beginning of the 6th century (594 B.C.), constituted the first steps towards a political Democracy. Solon's reforms resulted in the creation of the *Council of Four Hundred* and the institution of *Seisachthia* that forgave the debts accrued by the peasantry, thus securing for the farmers of Attica their land ownership and freeing them from the slavery which was in essence imposed on them by the large landowners.

Unfortunately, the times were still not ripe for further advances towards a complete Democratic rule. Peisistratos managed to deceive the Athenians repeatedly and to become a tyrant three times as he imposed himself, ruled and fell from power twice. At the end he rooted his power more firmly, allowing for his sons to succeed him as Athenian tyrants till 510 B.C., when a Spartan army drove the family of Peisistratos out of the city. As a result, Athens found itself in a political vacuum which the aristocrats tried to fill with a return to the old days of aristocracy. But Cleisthenes broke new ground and changed the rules of the political game forever. He began to campaign outside aristocratic circles, proposing to overthrow the traditional system that favoured landowners who controlled and dominated the political and religious organizations, and to replace it with a new order that would make a place for the common man. His opponents invoking the "curse of the *Alcmaeonidae*", drove Cleisthenes, his family and supporters out of the city. But Cleisthenes had already won the hearts of the Athenian common people. Recovering their poise after the expulsion, they took up arms, drove the Spartans out, and brought him and his faction back in triumph, and this way Democracy was finally introduced.

This was the time, towards the end of the 6th century B.C., when throughout all of Greece and particularly in Athens, a deep change in spirit and thought emerged. It is not incidental that two of the greatest gifts among those which the Greek mind has contributed to the world came to life in Athens; Democracy and Tragedy. The rich experiences from the preceding years and the philosophical thought, conjunctively produced the final answer which the Athenians were longing to give on the position and the responsibility of man, not only within the entire cosmos, but also within the human society itself. The answer they are giving with Democracy and Tragedy is identical; "*we undertake*", the Athenians said in essence, "*the responsibility of our existence in both the cosmic and human worlds*". Contrary in position, the characters of the Tragedies walk down the path of Fate, but through their destruction they gain their freedom, paying for it a price to the Gods, no matter how dear that might be. Democracy and Tragedy are the *thesis* and the *antithesis* positioned side by side to the choice in responsibility as contrasted against the submission to Fate.

The same feeling of responsibility with every private citizen leads to the Athenian Democracy. The private citizen himself will decide what the fate of his city is going to be, he will judge his violations of law, he will govern his city-state. As with the Cleisthenean and later with the Periclean structures, all citizens must take on the burden of these decisions. This principle was embodied in the "*Ekklesia of Demos*", the popular assembly in which every free citizen could vote; it was the most original assembly in the history of the world. An assembly of an entire citizenry that united carried the heavy and many times tragic responsibility to decide about every issue that addressed it. This is not a responsibility transferred to leaders or even elected representatives. The Athenian Democracy was not in essence structured on the "*Ekklesia of Demos*" alone. In

all practicality, the Democratic Athenian State could not operate and function with a single governmental body that convened only four times in each 35-day period, which was the duration for every administrative session, called "prytaneia".

A much more important and decisive role was placed with the "Vouli" (parliament or congress) and the selected officials and leaders. The selection process for the members of the Vouli and the officials, including judges and leaders, constitutes a second principle and the most critical element in defining the substance of the Athenian Democracy in its own perspective. With the exception of a few leaders and officials who were selected because of their needed special skills, all the rest were selected by drawing of lots. With a few exceptions again, no one man could be selected for the same position more than twice in his lifetime.

These two principles do not only complement each other, but they are interconnected as to express in unison the one and only Democratic doctrine: *that all citizens have the right and the duty to undertake the responsibilities of authority.*

Consequently, in order to have such a Democratic process materialize and function in a relatively large nation as the Athenian State was at that time, it was necessary to reach down to the popular base or in a better term to initiate from it. For this reason the selection and drawing processes started from the small local communities (*demos*), which were dispersed throughout Attica and were composing the Athenian State. These processes were then passed up the ladder to wider bodies like the *Trittyes* and the *Phyles*. One could use the terms of local, county and state governmental organization, as we know them today, to draw parallels with this organization of the Athenian citizens and to better understand the depth and substance of the Athenian Democratic concept.

Although these Democratic principles were allowing the free advancement to termed positions of authority for every Athenian citizen, the state took the care to establish a number of safety measures in order to secure the national interests from possible recklessness and abuse. Therefore, preventive and corrective measures were established in the process.

The first of these measures was called "*dokimasia*" or test. Every citizen who was selected to serve, either as a *Vouli* member, an official or a leader, had to undergo this test or "hearing" prior to the undertaking of his duties. The nine leaders who were composing the highest body of the government, had to go through a double hearing; one in the presence of the *Vouli* and a second in the presence of a popular court (*dikasterion*). All the rest were undergoing a single hearing; the officials in the presence of a popular court; the new members of the *Vouli* in the presence of the departing one. Everyone had to prove that he was at least a third generation Athenian citizen, that he had fulfilled his military service and had been paying his taxes. Additionally, he had to prove that he had a family grave, that he was observing the traditional religious rituals to Zeus and Apollo and that he was treating his parents with great respect. This is the image of *eusebia*, this guaranteed the integration of the individual into the community. These tests were performed in public and any one citizen could challenge the validity of a deposition, where such an action would result to a call for a public trial.

The second measure was applied at the end of a public service and was called "*euthynae*" or straightness (*euthys*) in responsibilities (*euthynes*). Every leader or official who had administered public money during his term, had to give a full account of his spending activities to the accountants (*logistes*). Further, all had to respond to charges that were filed by

displeased citizens against them during their term in public office. These charges were arbitrated in public, before a ten person body, who were called "*euthynoi*". Through these checks the Athenian Democratic State, while being open to all of its citizens, took the care to assure not only the honest administration of the public funds by those selected to public service, but for the exercise of their authority as well within the frame of law.

There are many more elements of the Athenian Democracy worth our mentioning, most importantly the famous "*Eliaea*" the popular justice system and the institution of ostracism (*ostracismos*) that was designed to prevent the dissolution of Democracy by ambitious leaders in government. In critical moments of the Democracy, the *Ecclesia of Demos* took extreme security measures and introduced legislation to protect the assembly. In 410 B.C. the "resolution of Demophantes" revived an old law of Solon which outlawed anyone plotting to overturn the Democratic rule. This resolution was in essence repeated with a renewed law which was passed and enacted in 336 B.C. after a motion by Eucrates.

Unfortunately, even this law could not prevent the dissolution of Democracy. Such a dreaded dissolution was brought to the Athenian Democracy, soon after the death of Alexander the Great, when the Macedonian general Antipatros established in 322 B.C. a Macedonian garrison in Mounichia. Antipatros demanded and succeeded in having the Athenians deliver before him the leadership of the Democratic organization; Demosthenes, Hypereides, Himeraeos, Aristonicos and Eucrates. Demosthenes, the greatest orator of all time, knowing what was awaiting him, took poison and thus ended his life. The remaining four had tormented deaths. On the 16th of the month of Pyanepsion (November 1st) of the year 322 B.C. they were put to death after they were subjected to terrible tortures, (we know that they cut Hypereides tongue out).

This was the sad and tragic epilogue to the Athenian Democracy that lasted for only 186 years. Only in ancient Athens and in the United States so far has Democracy lasted for as much as two hundred years. Monarchy and different forms of despotism, on the other hand, have gone on for millennia. An understanding of this reality should give pause to any who may think that Democracy in our time is to be taken for granted. It is the most delicate and fragile of human experiences in citizenship and could be destroyed if we lose sight of its basic principles which these Athenians have defined for us.

More than two thousand years later, people through the American and French revolutions regained the view of a sight. We can still watch it gleaming bright, far down the dark road we left behind. It gleams with the 186 years of the intellectual brilliance of a simple people who loved their country, liberty and law, poetry, philosophy, theater, art, architecture, history, god and man.

In remembrance of these Athenians, our conscious and constant encounter with their inexhaustibly rich minds is our very precious heritage.

(Based on the article "I Athinaiki Dimocratia" by professor and archaeologist Mr. Manolis Andronikos. Translated and edited by Anthony G. Maroussis).