

## THE MORAL PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY: REFLECTIONS BASED ON CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

*LOS PRINCIPIOS MORALES DE LA DEMOCRACIA: REFLEXIONES  
BASADAS EN LA PENSAMIENTO SOCIAL DE LA IGLESIA*

**WIESŁAW ŁUŻYŃSKI**

Doktor habilitowany (Post-doctorate degree)  
Associate Professor  
The Department of Social Sciences and Canon Law  
Faculty of Theology  
Nicolaus Copernicus University  
Toruń/Poland  
Wieslaw.Luzynski@umk.pl

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*Abstract:* Democracy is an expression of subjectivity of the society and thus deserves recognition. Nowadays, however, democracy is threatened with a separation from universal values and alliance with moral relativism. The result of this process is the reduction of democracy to mere procedures. This may lead to the tyranny of the democratic majority. Democratic procedures require fundamental values which are the basis of social consensus, agreement and cooperation for the common good. Christianity is an important source of these values. Universal values are also rooted in the Gospel and Christians participating actively in a democratic process play a crucial role in their transmission.

*Keywords:* democracy, Christianity, Church, values, relativism, human dignity, the tyranny of the majority.

*Resumen:* La democracia es una expresión de la subjetividad de la sociedad y por tanto merece reconocimiento. Hoy en día, sin embargo, la democracia está amenazada con una separación de los valores universales y aliada con el relativismo moral. El resultado de este proceso es la reducción de la democracia a meros procedimientos. Esto puede llevar a la tiranía de la mayoría democrática. Los procedimientos democráticos requieren valores fundamentales que son la base del consenso social, el acuerdo y la cooperación para el bien común. El Cristianismo es una fuente importante de estos valores. Los valores universales están también arraigados en el Evangelio y los Cristianos que participan activamente en los procesos democráticos desempeñan un papel crucial en su transmisión.

*Palabras clave:* democracia, Cristianismo, Iglesia, valores, relativismo, dignidad de la persona, tiranía de la mayoría.

## INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a system of government functioning in the majority of developed countries. It might be said that it is a crucial element of Western civilization. Democracy was created and developed in Europe where values originating from Christianity were the foundation of identity. The Church also underwent an evolution towards democracy from the initial distance or even criticism during the pontificates of Pius IX and Gregory XVI to a friendly attitude and acceptance during the Second Vatican Council and the pontificate of John Paul II. It is worth analyzing the current teaching of the Church concerning democracy, its moral principles in particular as these issues seem to be dominant in the teaching of the Church on democracy. The important questions are the definition of democracy, its social infrastructure and the issues which constitute the main element of the analysis, namely democracy in the modern cultural context, moral infrastructure of democracy with a special emphasis on values, evangelical origin of democratic principles and the contribution of Christians to the democratic process.

## 1. SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Trying to define what democracy is it is essential to focus on the etymology of this term. Democracy is thus understood as the power (*kratos*) of common people (*demos*), namely “people power.” (Mazurkiewicz, 2001: 92; Szulist, 2012: 72-83). The question, however, arises how the power of people can be expressed. It appears that in the light of papal encyclical *Centesimus annus* democracy requires necessary conditions, such as some social infrastructure. It is important to underline this element of democracy.

John Paul II emphasizes that democracy requires “the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility” (*Centesimus annus*, 46). People can manifest their power only if they are internally structured. An important indication for this question is 1944 Christmas message of Pius XII, in which he distinguishes two categories: “the masses” and “the real people/citizens”. The masses are inert of themselves, disintegrated and unorganized. Isolated individuals create a shapeless mass and have little influence on the life of the state. They may be the objects of various manipulations in the hands of other subjects. A shapeless mass does not have any internal strength to move by its own life energy. It is only moved from outside and the main problem of the society resembling the mass is its passivity. As A. Lincoln said “there is no nation, if it is dispersed into unorganized and unable to cooperate multitude of individuals” (Possenti, 2005: 141).

The passivity of society is typical of tyranny. The characteristic feature of the rule of tyranny wielded without the society or even against it, is, as Aristotle observes, the tyrant who does not allow “the formation of study-circles and other conferences for debate,” and employs “every means that will make people as much as possible unknown to one another (for familiarity increases mutual confidence)” (Aristotle, *Politics*: 1313b). The tyrant destroys every sign of social activity seeing it as a threat. Thus passivity is typical of tyranny and if it appears in democracy, it is, undoubtedly, the weakness of the system. Democracy assumes consent to participation and activity of the society, but if the society is passive, there is no social subjectivity.

On the other hand, the nation is an internally organized reality. Only an individual associated with other people can truly exert influence on the life of political community of which he is a member. An irreplaceable foundation of democracy conceived as the state system is basic democracy expressed in the common participation of citizens in various spheres of social life (Łużyński, 2001: 210-211). Thus democracy may truly become the power of people when citizens with political rights participate in the life of political community. According to A. de Tocqueville, “the *most democratic country* on the face of the *earth* is that in which men have, in our time, carried to the *highest* perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires and have applied this new science to the *greatest* number of purposes” (de Tocqueville, 1998: 216). In another place he observes that “in democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made” (de Tocqueville, 1998: 219). It is worth repeating after constitution *Gaudium et Spes* that “praise is due to those national procedures which allow the largest possible number of citizens to participate in public affairs with genuine freedom” (31). The nation can truly rule and decide about itself if it possesses the shape of a living body and consists of individuals, families and a dense network of other intermediary structures.

Thus democracy is the power of people, namely all citizens with political rights, people who are internally organized and able to decide independently about themselves.

## 2. DEMOCRACY IN A MODERN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Democracy should be valued because of its unquestionable features, such as respect for the subjectivity of citizens which is the expression of their dignity and freedom. It tries to reconcile personal freedom and the necessity of power. It seems that democracy makes the alienation of political elites from the society

more difficult (Łużyński, 2001: 209-210). However, Catholic social teaching observes that democracy has its weakness, which is expressed by the criticism of the system.

Modern culture is characterized by the visible moral relativism, in which “moral values, norms and opinions have a relative character and change in different times and societies” (Zabielski, 2005: 459). Relativism is linked with certain epistemological assumptions which purport that “it is possible to learn only the relations and determinants in which the entities are but it is impossible to know these entities. The consequence of this epistemological approach is the assertion that there is no objective and absolute truth and its objective criterion as knowledge has a relative character depending on a knowing subject” (Zabielski, 2005: 459). Moral relativism proclaims that there are no permanent principles and the only certain rule is that everything is relative (Possenti, 2005: 233). As a result, the advocates of ethical relativism demand the acceptance of every option and lifestyle as there is nothing which could be described as human nature, normality or perfection. That is why, every choice is as legitimate as other options (Possenti, 2005: 115).

Nowadays, there are views which maintain that moral relativism should be the ideological foundation of democracy. John Paul II in his teaching observes that

nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and skeptical relativism are the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life. Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends (*Centesimus annus*: 46).

If there are no certain and permanent truths, the society is plunged into despair and meaninglessness.

Consequently, relativism leads to the situation in which power is a dominant logic and replaces any rational argument. Truth becomes the product of policy and the majority decides about it becoming inevitably the tyrant towards the helpless minority. According to John Paul II, “if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism” (*Centesimus annus*: 46).

The key question is the attitude to truth which people should recognize and accept as the creation or production of truth may have dangerous consequences. According to Cardinal J. Ratzinger, “truth is not a product of politics. Relativists stating something to the contrary come close to the advocates of totalitarianism even though they bear in mind the primacy of freedom. The majority becomes

a sort of deity whose decisions are irrevocable” (Ratzinger, 1999: 75). Analyzing the views of Hans Kelsen – the founder of the school of legal positivism, Ratzinger reminds that Pilate judging Jesus is an example of the person who is guided by the pure democratic procedure and the rule of majority regardless of the consequences of his action. Pilate asks: “What is truth?” However, he doubts whether it is possible to attain it. In the situation when he has to take a decision he does not refer to truth but to the will of the people – he behaves like a true democrat: “because he does not know what is just he leaves the decision to the majority. ... Pilate appears as a symbol of relativistically and skeptically oriented democracy which is not based on values and truth but on procedures. It seems that the fact that a just person who did not commit any crime was sentenced does not worry Kelsen. There is no other truth than the truth of the majority” (Ratzinger, 1999: 67). If we assume that truth is unknowable, there is only the truth of the majority. Thus in the society the argument of power is dominant and the rights of the weak who are the minority cannot be guaranteed or respected in any way. John Paul II’s voice on this question is extremely suggestive. The Pope says:

everyone’s conscience rightly rejects those crimes against humanity of which our century has had such sad experience. But would these crimes cease to be crimes if, instead of being committed by unscrupulous tyrants, they were legitimated by popular consensus? ... Its “moral” value is not automatic, but depends on conformity to the moral law to which it, like every other form of human behaviour, must be subject: in other words, its morality depends on the morality of the ends which it pursues and of the means which it employs. If today we see an almost universal consensus with regard to the value of democracy, this is to be considered a positive “sign of the times”, as the Church’s Magisterium has frequently noted. But the value of democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes (*Evangelium vitae*: 70).

A democratic way of taking decisions does not guarantee their equity as democracy is not a panacea for morality, infallibility or respecting human rights.

J. Maritain when referring to these important questions observes that “the *people are not God*, the people do not have infallible reason and virtues without flaw, the will of the people or the spirit of the people is not the rule which decides what is just or unjust” (Maritain, 1992: 44). A democratic way of taking decisions does not mean that they are right as people may be influenced by emotions, fashions or desires and may take irrational decisions. In his analysis of American democracy Alexis de Tocqueville confesses: “*for myself, if I feel the hand of power heavy on my brow, I am little concerned to know who it is that oppresses me; I am no better inclined to pass my head under the yoke because a million men hold it for me*” (1998: 17). In another passage Tocqueville adds:

but *the majority itself is not omnipotent*. Above it is a moral order of humanity, justice, and reason, and in the political world prior rights. ... despotism in any form is odious. Lately, however, they have discovered that there are legitimate tyrannies in the world, and holy injustices, provided that they are exercised in the name of the people (1998: 457).

Tyranny can be introduced by a heartless ruler or can also be established by the people who do not respect moral principles. In such a situation human rights can be violated in an equally ruthless way. Despotism of the democratic people revealed in the majesty of the law established by the majority is equally fierce and ruthless. Democratic states allied with relativism can usurp God-like prerogatives, taking the place of God and decide about issues which can be judged only by the Creator. Democracy devoid of references to external and unchangeable principles which are not subject to the democratic will of the majority claims theocratic prerogatives (Salij, 1993: 107-121). The Church respects the autonomy of the worldly reality, including the autonomy of the political and democratic sphere of the state. However, modern society understands this autonomy as the complete independence from God. Such an autonomy rejects any heteronomy – any dependence on norms, criteria and external principles. In such a situation people take the place of God. Paraphrasing the statement of T. Hobbes it might be said that *homo homini Deus est*. Modern people believe that they are fully “mature” and independent and do not need any “suggestions” from external authority. They are fully self-sufficient beings and they claim that they belong to and depend on themselves only (Possenti, 2005: 232-338; 2000: 21).

Democracy is not only a procedural but most of all moral order. (Possenti, 2005: 138). This is “a certain type of culture encompassing human attitudes, system of values, customs and laws” ( Wilkanowicz, 1992: 18). It is based on the values which constitute it, namely freedom, equality, solidarity, justice and truth. Without these values democracy easily turns into its opposite. Democracy deprived of its foundation in universal and commonly accepted values unavoidably turns into the tyranny of the democratic majority (*Centesimus annus*: 46).

The societies and democracies based on laicism distancing themselves from values and religion are, in a sense, culturally disarmed (Possenti, 2005: 175). They lack a spiritual background represented by universal and timeless values. Benedict XVI observes that “when the State promotes, teaches, or actually imposes forms of practical atheism, it deprives its citizens of the moral and spiritual strength” (*Caritas in veritate*: 29). The elimination of religion from public life carries the great danger for both individuals and the whole society. Thus the Creation perishes without the Creator. It is difficult to preserve and develop what is truly human without God and general theological perspective. John Paul II reminded us that “dechristianization frequently leads to dehumanization” (*Evangelium vitae*:

21-22). “The death of God” declared by philosophers unavoidably leads to “the death of Man” (Possenti, 2005: 250-253). The elimination of the theological perspective sentences societies to the inevitable lack of sense and axiological chaos. Forgetting God results in such consequences as forgetting the man, in particular the unborn one, the embryo created through artificial fertilization and exposed to various types of manipulations, the old and sick being at the end of their lives. This means forgetting the people who are socially weak and have no real possibilities of influencing social life and protecting their rights (Possenti, 2005: 190). Therefore it is important to analyze an important question, namely the moral infrastructure of democracy.

### 3. MORAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy is not only a procedural but, above all, moral order. Presenting its basic elements of axiological infrastructure it is necessary to show the role of moral norms in democracy, evangelical origin of democratic principles and the role of Christians in a democratic process.

#### 3.1. VALUES AS THE FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRACY

In the context of contradictions characteristic of democracy devoid of moral references it has to be stated that democracy “requires true and solid foundations, namely ethical rules which due to their nature and role in social life cannot be the subject of ‘negotiations.’” (Łużyński, 2001: 218-219; Piwowski, 1993: 188-189).<sup>1</sup> No society and state can exist without these ethical rules. In the society deprived of these values conflicts between various groups of interest will inevitably occur and individualist attitudes as well as atomization of society will appear. The postulates of various social groups will not be solved relying on the criterion of justice but their financial or electoral power (Łużyński, 2001: 218). Apart from

1 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith no 2. In Catholic social teaching the role of fundamental values is stressed. Fundamental values denote a greater or smaller set of values accepted by all or the majority of the society. They are rooted in human nature not in a social consensus. Otherwise some of them would cease being fundamental values because of the lack of agreement concerning their operation. Social dialogue and cooperation for the sake of common good are based on them. Fundamental values usually include: dignity of a human person and ensuing fundamental human rights, freedom, life, equality, justice, solidarity, peace, tolerance, truth and love. In Polish conditions we may add patriotism and religion. Fundamental values are thus an axiological foundation and a prerequisite for a right functioning of democracy.

democratic procedures moral norms accepted by the society are needed so that the will of the society can be expressed in a responsible way in accordance with the good of people and common good of the whole society.

The importance of the axiological background of democracy is emphasized as early as in the ninetieth century by Alexis de Tocqueville. According to him, “*it is easy to see that no society can prosper without such beliefs, or, rather, that none can survive that way, for without common ideas, there is no common action, and without common action, men may still exist, but they will not constitute a social body*” (de Tocqueville, 1998: 489). J. Ratzinger speaks in a similar manner:

institutions cannot last and operate without the community of ethical beliefs. These cannot originate from a purely empirical reason. Also, the decisions of the majority remain fully human and rational if their premise is the basic resources of humanity which they reflect as the common good, the condition of all other goods (1999: 84).

Democratic state can exist thanks to external and moral guarantees and foundations. Reason which “has matured on the foundation of historical faith” (Ratzinger, 1999: 84) is such a guarantee. In Europe, Christianity has been such a faith with moral norms which play an essential role in a democratic process. Above all, they direct the democratic will of people, order their aims and aspirations and preserve necessary limits. They guarantee that this will is expressed in a responsible manner respecting the fundamental human rights.

### 3.2. FUNDAMENTAL VALUES INSPIRED BY THE GOSPEL

In the analysis of the axiological foundations of democracy it is necessary to draw attention to the undeniable contribution of Christianity to the construction of this system. Undoubtedly, there was a certain tension between Catholicism and democracy at the beginnings of its formation. However, the ideas and values which gave rise to democracy are typically Christian.

The basic truth originating from the Gospel is the exceptional dignity of the human person. Nowadays, however, this principle is not devoid of contradiction and ambiguity. Anthropocentric humanism justifies this dignity with the immanent truths without references to transcendence. Besides, human dignity is exalted so high that is the measure of all things and is ascribed the prerogatives of almost absolute sovereign not only when it comes to various earthly choices or practical means of their realization but also in terms of morality and fundamental human rights (Maritain, 1992: 43-47). The proper basis of human dignity can be found in God, in the truth about creation in His likeness and image, in particular, and in



redemption through Christ. The truth about the exceptional human dignity has its source in the biblical message.

Under the inspiration of the Gospel, the secular consciousness on the relationship between human person and the state has been shaped. People due to their spiritual life and vocation to achieve absolute goals exceed the limits of the state. The consequence of this belief is faith in human rights, justice and the necessity to obey earthly rule only if it is just and realizes the common good of the society and protects fundamental rights of the human person (Maritain, 1992: 43-47). The principle of the subsidiary nature of the authority towards citizens is rooted in the Gospel.

The conviction of the natural equality of people is also inspired by the Gospel (Maritain, 1992: 43-47). The authority has its source in God and not in man as no man and no particular group of people have in themselves the right to rule others. They do it only through the consent or will of the people they represent and in this way they should realize their common good (Maritain, 1992: 43-47). Despite natural differences among people no one is more or less a human being. Everyone possesses the same personal dignity.

The dignity of the people originates from the dignity of the human person, the consequence of which is the condemnation of the dominance of some nations over others. A truly Christian idea is faith in the brotherhood of man, a sense of the social duty of compassion for mankind in the person of the weak and the suffering. Our neighbor is thus any man who needs help (Maritain, 1992: 43-47). In the light of the biblical message we are all children of one God and we express this truth in the Lord's Prayer.

As J. Maritain observes "it is under the influence of the evangelical ferment at work in the world that they [these ideas] took shape in the secular consciousness" (1992: 47). To keep faith in these values a heroic inspiration and a heroic belief are needed which, to a great extent, originate from the message of Jesus of Nazareth (1992: 48). Christianity created axiological foundations of modern democracy, but it is essential to pose a question about the role of Christianity in a democratic process.

### 3.3. CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIANS TO A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Democracy is based on the consent of people. E.-W. Böckenförde claims that

the democratic order includes only such content which individuals, groups and ultimately the whole nation equips it with thanks to their ways of thinking, attitudes and understanding. ... Democratic order is built from the bottom up, from a single man,

and this is the reason why it is so important what an individual brings to this form of statehood. Both the possibilities and dangers are inherent to it (Böckenförde, 1992: 32).

Analyzing the problem of moral foundations of democracy it is necessary to ask a question concerning the role of Christians in a democratic society. Christianity is memory and the carrier of values cultivated in the Latin civilization in which democracy was born and developed (Possenti, 2005: 223). Modern state as a democratic structure urgently needs hierarchical form, which is the Church. The Church as a guardian of fundamental and commonly observed values is necessary in the society which in a democratic way negotiates solutions, procedures, values or even the foundations of personal and social morality. The Church enlivens the public sphere with values originating from the Gospel. (Possenti, 2005: 196). It influences the society through its members, in particular through its faithful laity who can be active in a political life and give testimony of their Christian life and choices in accordance with the Gospel. The Church forms the faithful in the spirit of responsibility for themselves and their neighbors, teaches generosity towards opponents and love as a fundamental value in life (Wilkanowicz, 1992: 23-24). The hierarchy also exerts influence on the democratic society and this is achieved through their moral authority, above all, through moral teaching. Maintaining a healthy distance from politics the hierarchy should evangelize the society, build human political culture and conduct the ministry for political circles (Wilkanowicz, 1992: 23-24).

In the society affected by relativism which suffers from uncertainty and the lack of permanent guidelines and guarantees, where the majority of rules are negotiable and everyone has their own truth, Christianity carries epistemic optimism and conviction that objective truth exists and people are able to know it and knowing it they can build their lives and the life of society which they create (Zięba, 1998: 97). Christianity introduces moral optimism into procedural democracy where the correctness of decisions is not judged according to their moral value but their conformity with a democratic procedure. This moral optimism is based on a profound belief that people are able to distinguish between good and evil and choose good and that the majority of people has an inner moral system and is ready to obey the law not only for fear of punishment but on the basis of conviction that the law is right (Wanat, 2012: 286-315).

Christianity enlivens public life with the values it carries. It exerts a positive influence on the cultural and, most importantly, on axiological foundations of a democratic system. Christianity is an answer to the questions which preoccupy every man: the question about the meaning of life, about man, God and what happens after the end of our earthly existence (Possenti, 2005:159). As Possenti observes it is important to emphasize that “religious traditions are constituting now

and will constitute in the future an important area of moral reflection, inter-subjective communication and searching for the meaning. Religions entering the public sphere and cooperating in posing the questions under the public debate force the society to a collective reflection over their normative principles, they question the claims of the state and market to be guided by a narrow and frequently instrumental rationality which ignores a person, moral values and common good. ... great world religions though referring to the person and thanks to their own normative orientations effectively influence the course of public affairs.” (2005: 192-193). Religion “introduces order in the matters of the state” (de Tocqueville, 1998 : 298) through normativity included in it and a clear vision of what is good and bad and what is true and false. Thus religion is a vital element of public life.

Pope Benedict XVI also undertakes a reflection on religious inspirations in political life. He observes that the fundamental role of politics is the realization of justice. The question, however, remains what justice is and how it should be realized in concrete social and political conditions. Practical reason is not sufficient to answer this question as it is endangered with “ethical blindness” resulting from the action of the influential power and interest groups in the society which can manipulate the public opinion and hinder the understanding of what is just here and now as well as the realization of what is actually just. Justice is not simply given; it should be strived or even fought for, an effort which has always demanded sacrifice. At this point, it is important to present the role of faith in political life. Faith helps the reason to be ever more fully itself, liberates it from its “blind spots” and purifies it. It helps to understand what the requirements of justice in a concrete social choices are. Faith offers ethical formation, shapes and mobilizes conscience in order to realize these requirements. The Church undertaking this social task does not wish to take political power or make its social teaching strictly political. Keeping distance from the political sphere and respecting autonomy of this area of human life the Church wishes to be included through ethical formation in the process of creating a more just society (*Deus caritas est* : 28).

A democratic state can exist thanks to a civic ethos (Böckenförde, 1994: 120). What is important in democracy is how an individual contributes to it. Thus for a political community the moral attitude of citizens, namely their honesty, justice, truthfulness, solidarity with other people and respect for others is important. Moral values play an important role in a democratic system as the final subject of political decisions is not the procedure but a human person with their virtues and faults. The Church shaping responsible civic attitudes is a great ally of a democratic state because faith as the motivation of human activity in social and political life leads to fully human solutions ((Possenti, 1996: 436).

Christian message has a great significance for reviving the civic spirit, activity and responsibility (Possenti, 2005: 135).<sup>2</sup> As V. Possenti observes “liberal societies need people shaped through moral and religious formation but are not able to ensure such formation and that is why they should cooperate with those who can provide it” (2005: 380). The Church and the message of the Gospel seem to be such allies.

## CONCLUSION

Democracy is the rule of the people. Citizens equipped with public prerogatives, organized in a “structured” society decide about the form of political power. The Church keeping distance and respecting the autonomy of political reality appreciates democracy as it takes into account the subjectivity of individuals, indirect groups and the whole society. Modern democracy, however, functions in a difficult cultural context, its features being worldview pluralism and ethical relativism. They are even considered nowadays as a natural ideological attitude of democracy. Relativism, value neutrality and neutrality from external criteria in the face of the will of the democratic majority lead to the so-called procedural democracy focused only on democratic principles not on the ultimate result of the process. Thus it may lead to the tyranny of democratic majority. Democratic majority bears characteristics of tyranny if it is devoid of references to fundamental values. Democracy, thus conceived, bears signs of theocracy and takes over the role of the Creator. That is why, democratic procedures require fundamental values which are the basis of social consensus, understanding and cooperation for the common good. It is worth noting that Christianity has created cultural and axiological foundations to form modern democracy. In a democratic process Christians play a crucial role as they believe in permanent, unchangeable and universal principles and values.

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<sup>2</sup> As Possenti states, it should be noted that “democracy constitutes the most demanding form of government as it considers all citizens responsible for public affairs and requires a proper moral attitude from them. ... No society can survive if it does not respect people and their rights as well as such values as honesty, keeping one’s word, appreciation for well-performed work and responsibility” (2005: 132).

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