

YACOOB ABBA OMAR | Is not voting an infantile disorder?

In a 1920 critique of ultra-leftist communists Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Russian revolution, described their emphasis on doctrinaire idealism over practical revolutionary strategy as “an infantile disorder”.

A century later David Runciman, author of *How Democracy Ends*, described Europeans attacking the democratic systems as “children throwing tantrums whilst trusting that the grown-ups will always be there to pick up the pieces”.

As much as Lenin and Runciman may be horrified at being cited together, their words best describe those who won't bother voting on November 4 and did not participate in the recent general elections.

[Democracy](#) has never anywhere been the tidy, self-executing thing it is sometimes made out to be. Ancient Athens, the place we credit with inventing the idea that ordinary people could govern themselves, built that experiment on the labour of slaves and the exclusion of women and foreigners.

That purported embodiment of democracy — the US — pulled back from the brink during the Great Depression, in part through Franklin Roosevelt's willingness to let Southern segregationists keep their racial order in return for their votes in Congress.

South Africa's negotiated settlement of 1990-94 was a genuine miracle: a country destined for civil war built a constitution that relocated ultimate authority from a racially exclusive parliament to a document binding on everyone, including the state itself.

Three decades on, the unfinished business of building our democracy shows up as [state capture](#), as collapsing infrastructure, as protest and, yes, as declining faith that voting changes anything. None of this is unique to us.

From Budapest to Buenos Aires to New Delhi to Washington, elected leaders are learning to hollow out democratic institutions from the inside, using the very mechanisms of elections, parliaments and the courts that are supposed to constrain them. This “backsliding” rarely arrives as a coup. It arrives as apathy, as the slow surrender of citizens who conclude that showing up no longer matters.

That is precisely the trap [local government elections](#) invite us into. National politics has drama, personalities, a story we follow through media coverage. Local government has potholes. It is unglamorous, which is exactly why it is where democratic erosion happens, corruption festers and is noticed late. Added together, across a country, this is how a democracy dies without anyone declaring war on it.

And yet local government is also where democracy is most within reach. You cannot easily get an audience with the president. You can more likely get one with your ward councillor. This is the level of government closest to where people actually live their lives and it is therefore the level where the vote of a single, unglamorous ward can still visibly change who holds power and what they do with it. Nowhere is the excuse “my vote doesn’t matter” less true.

I do not think our democracy is doomed, but I don’t think it’s guaranteed either. The honest position is that it is genuinely uncertain and that the uncertainty will be resolved by what citizens choose to do, not by historical inevitability in either direction.

US philosopher Richard Rorty warned that future historians might one day explain the decline of a democratic age not through some dramatic seizure of power but through the “craven acquiescence” of citizens who let it happen through their own silence and nonparticipation. We should not let that be written about us.

The problem with those choosing to not register to vote, to stay at home on election day or scatter their vote among small parties is that it empowers an unstable coalition of convenience arising from the electoral debris.

Inaction could mean that South Africa becomes an example of “competitive authoritarianism” where elections persist but their meaning is systematically hollowed out; democracy being dismantled from within by those democratically elected to protect it.

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