

**VALIDITY OF THE TERM DEMAGOGUE IN  
INTERPRETING INDIVIDUAL POLITICIANS – A STUDY  
BASED ON 5<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BCE ATHENS**

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‘demagogue’ - ‘ජනනායකයා’ යනු වර්ෂ 1648 සිට පිළිගත් දේශපාලන ව්‍යවහාරයේ දේශපාලනඥයන් කොට්ඨාසයක් හැඳින්වීම සඳහා බහුල ව යෙදෙන නාමයකි. ‘ජනනායකයා’ යන්නෙහි නූතන අර්ථකථනය වන්නේ සාමාන්‍ය ජනතාවගේ හැඟීම්වලට ආමන්ත්‍රණය කර ජනතා ප්‍රසාදය දිනා ගැනීමට උත්සාහ කරන්නෙකු ලෙසය. සම්භාව්‍ය බටහිර ලෝකයේ ‘ජනනායකයා’ යන නාමයේ ආරම්භය ක්‍රි. පූ. පස්වන සියවස ග්‍රීසියේ ඇතන්ස් නුවර දක්වා දිවයයි. ‘ජනනායකයා’ යන්නෙහි නූතන අර්ථකථනය සෘණාත්මක වුව ද එහි සම්භාව්‍ය අර්ථකථනය අපකෂපාති හා අවස්ථානුකූල ව වෙනස් වන බව දකගත හැකිය. මෙම අධ්‍යයනයේ පරමාර්ථය වන්නේ ක්‍රි. පූ. පස්වන සියවස ඇතන්ස්හි ‘ජනනායකයන්ගේ’ මූලාරම්භය පිළිබඳ ව විග්‍රහාත්මක අධ්‍යයනයක් කිරීමය. මේ සඳහා පවතින ඓතිහාසික හා ලිඛිත මූලාශ්‍ර ද, විද්වතුන්ගේ අදහස් ද විවේචනාත්මක විමසුමකට ලක් කෙරෙනු ඇත. සම්භාව්‍ය යුගයේ ඇතන්ස්හි ජනනායකයන්ගේ පෙළපත් හා සමාජ තත්ත්වය එහි පාරම්පරික දේශපාලනඥයන් හා සංසන්දනය කිරීමෙන් ජනනායකයන්ගේ ආරම්භය සඳහා යෙදුණ සමාජ-දේශපාලන පසුබිම අධ්‍යයනය කෙරෙනු ඇත. සෘජු ප්‍රජාතන්ත්‍රවාදය තුළ ජනනායකයන්ගේ දේශපාලන ගමනේ සාර්ථකත්වය සඳහා ඉවහල් වූ හේතු ලෙස සාමාන්‍ය ජනතාව සමග සන්ධානගත වීම හා වාග්වාක්‍යය යොදා ගැනීම විමර්ශනයට ලක් කෙරෙනු ඇත. ‘ජනනායකයන්’ යන නිර්වචනය කෙතරම් පුද්ගලබද්ධ වන්නේ දැයි විමසුම සඳහා ඇතන්ස්හි දේශපාලනඥයන් දෙදෙනෙකු වන Cleon - ක්ලියෝන් හා Pericles - පෙරික්ලීස්ගේ දේශපාලන ජීවිත

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සංස්. ආචාර්ය පූජ්‍ය මිමුරේ ගුණානන්ද හිමි, මහාචාර්ය ඊශා හේවාබෝවල, මහාචාර්ය සුසන්ත මහඋල්පත, ජ්‍යෙෂ්ඨ කථිකාචාර්ය ප්‍රියංකර රත්නායක  
මානවශාස්ත්‍ර පීඨ ශාස්ත්‍රීය සංග්‍රහය, 20 කලාපය, 2012/13, මානවශාස්ත්‍ර පීඨය, කැලණිය විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය

සංසන්දනය කරනු ඇත. වචනයේ පරිසමාප්ත අර්ථයෙන් ජනනායකයා හා පටබැඳුණ ලක්ෂණ කෙනෙක් දුරට මේ වරින් ඇසුරෙන් සාධාරණීකරණය කිරීමට හැකි වේදැයි යන්න අවධානයට යොමු කෙරේ.

‘Demagogue’ is a standard term of the political vocabulary from 1648 onwards and is recurrently used in modern politics to define a certain type of a political leader. The modern connotation of a demagogue is “a political leader who tries to win support by using arguments based on emotion rather than reason” (Oxford Advanced learners’ Dictionary of Current English, 2000). The etymology traces the origin of the terms ‘demagogue’ and ‘demagogy’ to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens. Though the modern connotation of the term is excessively pejorative, its classical meaning which is far more neutral, indicates that the term demagogue differed according to the context in which it was used. This article will focus on acquiring an impartial understanding of the emergence of demagogues in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens. This study would be supported by a critical analysis of the existing historical and literary evidence and an evaluation of scholarly assumptions. The distinction in genealogy and the social position of the demagogues from the traditional aristocratic leaders will be examined in order to identify the socio-political circumstances which led to the origin of the particular type of politicians. The alliance with the ‘demos’ and the oratorical skills will be observed as the crucial attributes of the demagogues which contributed to their political advancement in the ‘direct democracy’. This study would be substantiated by an observation of the carrier of Cleon, an Athenian statesman from 465-422 BCE, who is recognized as the prototype of the demagogues in Classical Athens. Pericles will also be evaluated to the extent of how he can be categorized as a demagogue. The aim of this article is to examine the validity of identifying every ‘leader of the People’ in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens as a ‘demagogue’.

## Etymology

The etymology of the word demagogue is Greek in origin; 'demos' stands for people and 'agogos' for 'leading' which derived from the root "agein" - to lead (Collins Etymology Dictionary, 2009). Thus, the literary meaning of a demagogue is People's leader or the leader of the people. Connor (1992:10119, 10934) highlights the ambiguity of the term 'demos' in its use in the Greek context. He traces that in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens, it either referred to the citizen body as a whole or to the lowest strata of the society. From the later part of the same century onwards 'demos' was frequently used to define the poor citizenry. Thus, 'demagogue' can be identified as a term used to define a factional leader in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE who represented the 'demos' (Connor, 1992:101).

The earliest known use of the term demagogue was in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens. Aristophanes was the first to use the term demagogue in *Knights* in 424 BCE in which he criticizes the attributes of the leader of the 'demos';

"Demosthenes- That's precisely your qualification to be a Great Man...that you're born and bred in the Market Square, and that you're a brazen-faced rogue... You've not got any sacred virtues on your conscience, have you? You're not of good birth, by any chance?... That's just what's wanted for a politician. You don't think politics is for the educated, do you, or the honest? It's for illiterate scum like you now!"

(*Knights*, lines 157-210)

According to Aristophanes, a demagogue was a 'base-born', 'illiterate' and 'immoral fraud'. As stated by Finley (1962:165), Aristophanes established the model of a demagogue by his critical views in *Knights* with reference to the Athenian statesmen Cleon<sup>1</sup>. Thus, Aristophanes distinguished the demagogues from the rest of

the politicians in the classical period by the above-mentioned attributes in *Knights*. However, Finley (1962:21) mentions that the term demagogue was rare in the use in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The older and common term which was used to define a political leader in the early part of the same century was ‘prostates toudemou’, the one who stands before (Connor, 1992:110-113). This term referred to the political leaders who stood forward as the protectors of the ‘demos’ or the city.

### Origin of the Demagogues

The term demagogue was used in classical Athens to distinguish a new group of politicians. A class distinction in the new group of politicians can be detected in the account of Aristotle on the emergence of demagogues in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE;

“It was then that the people first took a champion who was not of good repute among the better sort, whereas previously it was always men of the better sort who were popular leaders”

(*Ath. Pol.*, 28.1)

As mentioned by Aristotle, the popular leaders of the recent past were from the ‘respectable classes’ whereas the successors of Pericles<sup>2</sup> were not from the ‘better sort’. Thus, these new groups of politicians were not from traditional aristocracy. They were from the class of manufacturers or tradesmen known as ‘agoraroi’<sup>3</sup> (Connor, 1992:153-154).

Most of the new group of politicians were often portrayed as impoverished and base-born in *Attic old comedy*. For instance, Cleon is called a leather-tanner (Aristophanes, *Knights*, lines 44/45, *Wasps*, line 39), Hyperbolus, a lamp-maker (Aristophanes, *Peace*, line 690, *Clouds*, line 1064, mentioned as a potter in scholion to *Knights*, line 1304) and Cleophon a lyre-maker (Scholion to Aristophanes’ *Thesmoporiazusae* 805, *Frogs*, line 681). However, it is apparent from the historical and

literary sources that this new group of politicians were either wealthy or from wealthy families (Connor, 1992:151-153).<sup>4</sup> Connor (1992:153) highlights the necessity of wealth for politics in the Athenian democracy as it provided leisure to indulge in political activity.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that these demagogues would not have been successful in their career if they were impoverished as *Attic old comedy* represented them. Moreover, Aristotle's (*Rhetoric*, 2.1387a) reference to the annoyance created in politics by the newly rich who had acquired office is an inference to the wealth of the new group of politicians. Even the Greek word 'neoploutos' which refers to the newly rich came into use with the emergence of the new group of politicians (Aristophanes, *Wasps*, line 1309, Connor, 1992:155-156). Thus, it is apparent that demagogues in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE were non-aristocrats from the class of manufacturers who were opulent.

As mentioned by Aristotle (*Politics*, 292a7), demagogues came into prominence in a democracy where people were the sovereign office. Thus, a demagogue being the representative of the 'demos' was with influential personal power as he ruled over the opinion of the people. It can be interpreted that demagogues emerged in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens when a non-aristocratic person became the leader of the 'demos' where people were the sovereign body of the democracy. The emergence of demagogues in classical Athens was hastened by the gravity of the Peloponnesian war, its financial pressures on the 'demos' and the threat of allied revolts (Henderson, 2003:163). The destruction of the countryside and its crop as well as the restrictions on importation and exportation of goods led to the poverty of the people. The subject-allies whose tribute was increased, revolted against Athenian imperialism. The above fears of the war led the 'demos' in the assemblies and courts to be forceful and rebellious. Thus, the opinions of the 'demos' could be easily provoked by the leaders of the people who aspired to ascend in power.

### Characteristics of the Demagogues

Apart from the non-aristocratic origin which distinguished a demagogue from the traditional politicians was his alliance with the ‘demos’. The aristocratic leaders influenced the policy of the state with the support of certain powerful associates ‘hetairoi’ and the friendship groups ‘philoï’ in the assemblies and the courts (Connor, 1992:92-94). Certain ‘hetaeroi’ in the 5<sup>th</sup> century assemblies and courts were moderate towards democracy and supported the politicians who were pro-people (Calhoun, 1964:16). Unlike the traditional politicians, these new politicians secured the partiality of the multitude, the ‘demos’, by the promise of securing their interest. Cleon’s repudiating of his friends in order to ally himself with the ‘demos’ is a distinctive instance of rejecting the support of the friendship groups and allying with the people (Plutarch, *Moralia*, 806 F).<sup>6</sup> Creating an alliance with the ‘demos’ contributed to the political advancement of the new group of politicians as the people began to consider them as their representatives or the leaders. Therefore, affiliation with the ‘demos’ became a distinctive attribute of the demagogues in the Athenian democracy. Contemporary reference to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE practice of the demagogues to create alliance with the ‘demos’ and promise to secure their interest can be detected in Aristophanes. A parody on the manner in which the demagogues win over the ‘demos’ by the promise to secure their interest is presented in Aristophanes’ *Knights* (lines 191-217). Thus, the modern connotation of the demagogue as a politician who seeks to win and hold office by appealing to the mass prejudice, has been derived from the Athenian practice of securing the interest of the ‘demos’ by the popular leaders (*American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, 2005).

A ‘screeching horrible voice’, ‘cross-grained nature’ and the ‘language of the market place’ are the attributes of a demagogue mentioned in Aristophanes’ *Knights*. The above attributes refer

to the skill of eloquence or the rhetoric of the popular leaders. 'Rhetor', 'one who speaks' was a term applied to the politicians in the classical period for their power of eloquence (Connor, 1992:116). In Athenian democracy, eloquent public speaking was an essential skill to become a successful politician. Fifth century Athens being a direct democracy in which every citizen had a vote and privilege to speak in the assembly, only a persuasive and a manipulative speaker could secure his leadership by moulding the opinions of the 'demos'. Finley (1962:172-176) who refers to the narrowness of time and space in a direct democracy states that politicians had to earn and exert influence directly and immediately. Thus, persuasive oratory was essential to win over the 'demos'. Moreover, the ideal Greek leader was a 'kaloikagathoi', a man of words and deeds. Therefore, the demagogues in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens were essentially rhetoricians as they could only attain the highest offices in the democracy by winning the partiality of the majority of the 'demos' by their persuasive speech. The necessity of the effective speech for politicians had led to the teaching of rhetoric by the Sophists who were the products of the time they lived. Thus, teaching rhetoric provided more opportunity for non-aristocrats with means to advance in politics by acquiring proficiency in public speaking (Bonnor, 1933:48-49). The fact which distinguished the oratory of the demagogues from the traditional politicians was their style with persuasive gestures. It is believed that Cleon introduced persuasive gestures into the oratory of the demagogues (Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.*, 28.3, Plutarch, *Nicias*, 8.3).

The strategy or the art of appealing to the masses by the promise of securing their interest using persuasive speech is known as demagogy. As mentioned by Thucydides (II, 65), the successors of Pericles used demagogy to secure the leadership of the people. The demagogues secured the loyalty of the 'demos' exclusively to themselves by inciting the people against the traditional aristocrats and the powerful 'philo'i' (Newmann, 1938:487-498). Cleon's using

the unpopularity of Pericles during the Peloponnesian war as a step to the leadership of the people was an instance of the demagogic strategy of winning the partiality of the ‘demos’ by incurring dislike and hatred towards the aristocratic politicians.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it can be argued that the demagogic practice of moulding the attitudes of the demos had resulted in the negative connotation of the demagogue as a person who advanced his own interest of the people (Cooper, 1838:99). Hence, Finley (1962:164-165) argues that demagogues, in leading people, were in reality misleading them, if demagogues were driven by self-interest to advance in politics. But was every leader of the people, a demagogue in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens led by self-interest? This was the central question from Aristophanes to Aristotle in attacking the demagogues. Thus, to identify a true statesman from a demagogue, it is essential to distinguish in whose interest the leader lead.

### **Demagogues in the 5th century BCE Athens**

As stated before, the earliest known use of the term demagogue to an Athenian politician was in relation to Cleon by Aristophanes in *Knights* (Finley, 1962:165). Though Thucydides (II, 65) does not use the term demagogue, the sharp distinction he highlights between Pericles and his successors is an implication that the demagogues came into prominence after the death of Pericles. It is further asserted by Aristotle’s (*Ath.Pol.*28.3) criticism on the unbroken line of men from Cleon onwards who were willing to gratify the many with an eye to immediate popularity. However, in the same account Aristotle traces the leadership of the people in Athens from Solon to Cleon. Aristotle’s regarding of politicians from Solon to Cleon as the leaders of the people raises the question whether a politician becomes a demagogue by merely becoming the leader of the people. It is apparent that the aristocratic leaders of the people from Solon to Pericles were appreciated by the writers such as Thucydides, Aristotle and Plutarch in contrast to the new group of politicians. Most of the writers in the classical



and late classical period being aristocrats, their animosity towards the new group of politicians was inevitable. Thus, it helps to assume that what made the 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenians to identify a politician as a demagogue was not only him being the leader of the ‘demos’, but his non-aristocratic origin and the use of demagogy as well.

According to modern interpretation (Finley, 1962:165, Connor, 1992:120-122, 142, Bonnor, 1993:48), Pericles had used demagogy for his political advancement. Pericles’ prosecution of Cimon<sup>8</sup>, his policy of the naval power which gave lower classes the audacity to take over the leadership in politics, his bribing of the people with their own money by the introduction of jury pay are considered as demagogic practices which brought Pericles to power. Thus, it raises the question that to what extent Pericles could be regarded as a demagogue. Plato in *Gorgias* (515 ff) identified Pericles as the first to corrupt the people by his introduction of jury payments and henceforth, demagogues had followed Pericles’ lead. Moreover, Isocrates (8.126, 15.234, as cited in Connor: 121, 142) identified Pericles as a demagogue. However, Finley (1962:16<sup>53</sup>) refers to Gomme’s comment on Plutarch’s division of Pericles’ political career sharply into two: first, in which Pericles used demagogy to gain power and secondly, his noble use of demagogy while he was in power. This is even apparent in Isocrates (8.126, 15.234, as cited in Connor: 121, 142) who distinguished Pericles’ noble use of demagogy for the interest of the state in contrast to the conduct of Pericles’ successors. Thus, it can be assumed that what made the writers to consider Pericles as a statesman instead of a demagogue though he used the art of demagogy was his aristocracy of birth and his noble conduct of securing the interest of the people for the goodness of the state. Pericles’ ‘known integrity’, ‘respect for the liberty of the people’, ‘hold them in check’ and ‘never seeking power from any wrong motive’ etc mentioned in Thucydides (II,65) distinguished him as a statesman. Thus, it is reasonable to accept Finley’s

(1962:165) view on Pericles as a picture of a demagogue in reverse. Moreover, Finley who identifies the demagogues as a structural element in the Athenian democracy, states that the term demagogue could be applied to all leaders irrespective of their class.

Thus, it can be defined that a demagogue in classical Athens was a non-aristocratic leader of the ‘demos’ who was from the class of manufacturers and opulent. Demagogues emerged in the 5th century Athens when a non-aristocrat became the leader of the people where ‘demos’ were the sovereign body of the democracy. The affiliation with the ‘demos’ and the persuasive oratory were attributes of a demagogue which were essential to become a successful politician in a direct democracy. The strategy of appealing to the people by the promise of securing their interest using persuasive speech is known as demagogy. The earliest known use of the term demagogue to an Athenian politician was in relation to Cleon. Pericles being aristocratic in birth and his noble conduct of securing the interest of the ‘demos’ for the goodness of the state led him to be considered as a true statesman instead of a demagogue, though he used the art of demagogy. Therefore, what distinguished a true statesman from a demagogue was, in whose interest the leader led the ‘demos’. Demagogues were a structural element in Athenian democracy. This is why it was inevitable for every politician to avoid the strategy of demagogy in securing the interest of the ‘demos’ in a direct democracy. Hence, it is rational to evaluate Athenian demagogues individually by their performance.

### Endnotes:

- 1 Cleon, a politician from 465-422 BCE, is recognized as the prototype of the demagogues in the 5th century Athens.
- 2 Pericles was an Athenian statesman from 460 to 429 BCE
- 3 ‘Agorario’ the men of ‘agora’: market place, were a long existed segment of the Athenian society who had acquired wealth from manufacturing/trading activity rather than from traditional agriculture. But it is apparent that ‘agorario’ had not produced many distinguished politicians before Cleon.

4. It is evident from the inscription IG II22318 line 34 that Cleon's father Cleanetus was a wealthy Athenian who owned a leather factory and was a 'choregus' in 460/59 BCE, a person who finances a chorus at a public festival.
5. The payments for jury in the 5th century BCE and the payments for attending the assembly in the 4th century BCE were measures used in Athenian democracy to increase the citizen participation in politics.
6. It is assumed that Cleon was a member of 'hetairoi' though he was a non-aristocrat as the moderate aristocratic clubs chose its members by their wealth, oratory and personal influence whereas class and age were given less weight. Cleon's repudiating of the influential friends led him to be regarded as the spokesperson of the 'demos' (Calhoun, 1964:18-28).
7. Pericles was denounced by Cleon for avoiding the battle with the Spartans when Sparta invaded Attica in 431 BCE. Cleon's attack on Pericles for his failure at Epidaurus in the following year, 430 BCE resulted in the deposing of Pericles. However Pericles was re-appointed as '*stratagoi*' in the same year (Plutarch, *Pericles*, 33.8).
8. Cimon was an Athenian politician and a general (480-450 BCE) who upheld pro-oligarchic ideologies.

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