



KAMARAJ IAS ACADEMY
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Illiberal Democracy: Concept and Contemporary Debate

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The concept of illiberal democracy has gained renewed attention following political developments in countries like Hungary, particularly associated with Viktor Orbán. It highlights a growing global trend where elected governments function in ways that weaken liberal democratic principles.

Meaning of Illiberal Democracy:

Illiberal democracy refers to a system where elections are held regularly, but key democratic values such as civil liberties, rule of law, and institutional independence are undermined. The term was popularised by Fareed Zakaria, who argued that democracy without constitutional liberalism can lead to concentration of power and erosion of rights.

Key Characteristics:

Such systems maintain the outward structure of democracy but often exhibit centralisation of power in the executive, limited protection of fundamental rights, reduced independence of the judiciary and media, and the rise of majoritarian politics.

While citizens vote, the space for dissent and opposition tends to shrink.

Democracy vs Liberalism:

A crucial distinction lies between democracy and liberalism. Democracy focuses on the process of electing governments, whereas liberalism ensures limits on power through constitutional safeguards and protection of individual freedoms.

Kamaraj IAS Academy

Plot A P.127, AF block, 6 th street, 11th Main Rd, Shanthy Colony, Anna Nagar, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600040
Phone: 044 4353 9988 / 98403 94477 / Whatsapp : 09710729833

Illiberal democracies emerge when electoral processes exist without strong institutional checks.

Global Trends and Examples:

Countries like Hungary are often cited as examples where democratic elections coexist with weakening liberal institutions. Such trends reflect a broader global shift toward nationalism, strong leadership, and reduced emphasis on pluralism and minority rights.

Implications for Governance:

The rise of illiberal democracy can lead to weakening of checks and balances, decline in press freedom, erosion of judicial independence, and potential drift toward authoritarian governance. It raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of democratic systems.

Conclusion:

The concept of illiberal democracy underscores that free and fair elections alone are not sufficient for a healthy democracy; protection of rights, institutional autonomy, and adherence to constitutional principles are equally essential.