



International IDEA Annual Democracy Forum, Canberra, 26-27 November 2012

Beyond Elites: People Power, Popular Participation and the Integrity of Democratic Institutions

Opening address by Mr. Vidar Helgesen, Secretary-General, International IDEA

Senator Faulkner,
Distinguished Speakers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the International IDEA Annual Democracy Forum.

I have visited dozens of parliaments throughout my career, but none has impressed me as much as Australia's Parliament House. I want to extend my sincere thanks to the Government of Australia for hosting the Annual Democracy Forum in this wonderful building, whose design symbolizes the openness inherent in democratic politics and the ultimate ownership of Australian democracy by Australia's citizens.

International IDEA is grateful to Australia for your efficient and engaged chairmanship of our Institute during the past year.

As the Australian Government's recent White Paper – 'Australia in the Asian Century' – has clearly identified, Asia has changed the world. But this change is not just economic, and it is not just about China.

Many of democracy's success stories have occurred in Asia. The world's biggest democracy, India, is a long and rich tale of democracy's promise. Some - such as South Korea and the Philippines - began many years ago. Others – such as Indonesia and Timor Leste – are more recent. One of the most remarkable transformation processes in the world is underway in Myanmar.

Democratic Asia is changing the world. Regions like Europe and North America face challenges in adapting to the economic and political shifts of the Asian Century. Asian countries have built and begun to share frameworks and narratives, and have stories of innovation to tell – not least in democracy. For example, the Election Commissions of India and of the Republic of Korea are now at the forefront of sharing their expertise across Asia and globally. The Indonesian experience is a source of inspiration to many in North Africa. At the same time, the variety and resilience of Pacific nations in democracy building deserves to be more widely known.

It has therefore been an honour for IDEA to have Australia as our chair for 2012. Australia has a strong record of support for democracy in the Asia-Pacific and elsewhere, not least in strengthening electoral processes, the development of civil society's role in democracy and the participation of women in politics. The Australian Electoral Commission is an international leader and the hub for the partnership which has developed the world-leading BRIDGE training curriculum in election administration. IDEA's expertise in electoral processes has reached many more thanks to the innovative development of adult education methodology by the AEC.

International IDEA and Australia have worked together this year on several important areas such as: the development of the capacity of domestic election observers in the Commonwealth; and the *Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security*. The Global Commission was an initiative of International IDEA and the Kofi Annan

Foundation which has delivered a series of recommendations on how to improve the integrity of elections worldwide. Australia is also hosting IDEA's regional office, which opened in Canberra this year.

Through our Annual Democracy Forum, International IDEA aims to focus some of the best minds working within democracy - practitioners, politicians, academics and civil society on one of the key issues of the day. This year, the choice naturally fell upon the concept of citizen participation - one of the key building blocks of sustainable democracy. The institutions - or hardware - of democracy are essential; but these are not sufficient without citizen participation – the software of democracy.

I look forward during this Democracy Forum to identifying and discussing the challenges of fostering citizen participation; channelling citizen mobilization into democratic processes; and to coming up with recommendations on how democratic institutions and actors can more effectively capture and encourage citizen participation.

Democracy is a system in which the government is controlled by the people, and in which citizens are equals in the exercise of that control. Democracy comes in multiple forms and International IDEA does not adhere to one particular definition of democracy. At the same time, we hold participation to be a basic element of sustainable democracy: without citizen participation, and the rights, freedoms and means to participate, the principle of popular control over government cannot begin to be realized.

The other side of the coin to participation is representation – “If different groups of citizens are treated on an equal basis ... then the main public institutions will be socially representative of the citizen body as a whole¹.” Together, these concepts of participation and representation ensure that democracy and democratic institutions

¹ from the International IDEA 'State of Democracy' Framework

are not just about elites but are a genuine reflection of the will of the people and their role in decision-making.

This Forum is entitled 'Beyond Elites'. One of the most difficult challenges faced in Asia is how to ensure that democratic politics is not just a cosy cartel in which there is a choice of politicians who move in and out of government while essentially serving the same economic interests – licit or illicit. How does the citizen and the community make themselves heard? How can democracy deliver – and be seen to deliver – responsive development outcomes? These are some of the key questions which I hope will be addressed during this Forum.

Political parties are often key vehicles for citizen participation in politics. In fact they are the gatekeepers for participation in many countries as they guard the door for entry to democratic politics. Despite their importance, political parties worldwide are declining in popularity and trust. When citizens wish to engage on critical socio-economic issues, their first instinct is not to form a political party, but to take to the streets, use social media to mobilize, or form new movements.

At the same time, no democracy can exist without political parties as vehicles for participation and representation. If the political party is to remain relevant, it has to become more attractive to those who wish to make their voices heard, in particular young people. It must also be able to interact with alternative forms of democratic organization and capture lessons from those.

In emerging democracies, political parties are often viewed with suspicion as the remnants of old elites or the instruments of new elites. Yet unless citizen movements can mobilise to fight elections, they will lose their say in how their countries' democracy evolves – we saw this in Egypt where those who had led the revolution against Mubarak fared badly in the polls in the first democratic elections. And we see

these very days how mobilization in squares and streets tends to become the predominant form of opposition politics.

At this Forum I look forward to hearing from several of the speakers about how political parties are evolving to face the challenge of participation and to together drawing some conclusions about best practices in that regard. There will also be an opportunity to get into more detail on these issues at the roundtable hosted by IDEA and Australian political parties later this week. And I am pleased to see several representatives of parties here today.

Political parties are also a make-or-break factor for ensuring the full and equal participation of women in democratic politics. The under-representation of women in politics is a glaring global democratic deficit. There are few countries which can be proud of having equal participation of women in parliament and government – and few where there is equal participation in political parties or election administration. Globally, women comprise only one-fifth of members of parliament. The Asia and Pacific regions are below average in terms of women’s participation at 18% and 15% respectively – although recent elections in Mongolia and Papua New Guinea have been encouraging. [I wish to express how pleased we are to have in our midst today a trailblazer for women participation, Dame Carol: who for a long time was the only female MP in PNG.]

I know that Australia is working on this important issue in the Pacific region to mentor and train female members of parliament and candidates. International IDEA also engages in this work in countries as diverse as Haiti, Nepal, Liberia and South Sudan. IDEA has also connected the Australian Parliament with the newly formed Women’s Caucus in Mongolia. One of the key conclusions we have drawn from our work is that political parties often hold the key to inclusion of women in politics – this is why IDEA has focused in 2012 on helping political parties to see how their internal rules and regulations might work against the full participation of women.

The challenges to citizen participation in democratic politics, and the solutions to improving participation, vary depending on the context:

(I): In post-conflict states, the challenges relate to creating what the *Global Commission* has termed ‘a mutual security system’ – whereby democracy allows opposing factions to both win and, more importantly, to lose, knowing that there will be no violent repercussions and that they will have a chance to contest again at the next elections.

Citizen participation in post-conflict societies is also a particular challenge where there has been no tradition of political engagement and fledgling institutions lack trust and credibility. Yet citizen participation is critical for the integrity of the electoral process itself, for its credibility and effectiveness as a cornerstone of democracy.

The international community has important lessons to learn from its engagement in post-conflict situations. Too often a single-minded focus on creating short-term stability has laid the groundwork for long-term autocracy, because pluralism and political competition has been sacrificed in the quest for stability. The result in the long run is often neither democracy nor stability.

In IDEA’s work on constitution building processes in post-conflict environments such as Nepal, we have seen the value of inclusion in determining key elements of their future democracy. Excluded groups – such as dalits – and excluded communities – such as many in the Terai – insist that their voice and their interests are heard. The drafting of a constitution may move at a snail’s pace when the process is participatory. In Nepal it has taken four years for debate to work through many major issues, and the discussions on inclusive government at local level are still to be resolved. However, there is no doubt that ownership by the people of the final product makes a profound difference.

What seems like a crisis and failure during the process of transition may well in the long term be a delay that helps to build the legitimacy of the outcome. The impact of the Philippines Constitutional Commission of 1986-1987 is still vividly remembered and the constitution it produced is the basis of Philippine democracy. The high citizen participation in the drafting of the South African constitution is another very successful case. IDEA has shared these lessons about the need for participation in constitution building processes in post-conflict countries in the Arab world, for example Tunisia and Libya.

(II): In countries transforming from autocracy, the challenges differ in nature. Many of these countries have witnessed strong citizen mobilization which led to the downfall of a dictator. Yet how can these social movements transform themselves into competing organizations which can gather votes at election time and enter democratic political institutions? Across the Arab world, citizens – in particular young people - are asking themselves the same question.

I was struck recently in Tunisia by the energy and vibrancy of the debate among young people who wanted to build sustainable democracy in their country. Yet they were suspicious of political parties and their representatives had not fared well at elections. I look forward to hearing from some of our speakers at this event about how to bridge this divide between citizen engagement and meaningful participation in democratic politics.

In Myanmar, the impetus for the democratic transition process currently underway did not spring from citizen movements, but rather from within the existing elites. The inclusion and participation of the citizens of all parts of the country, taking into account the full diversity of the population, is nonetheless critical for the development and consolidation of democracy.

In addition, it is already clear that different ideas and approaches to such major issues as land, energy, development and labour are found across the whole of the Myanmar political spectrum, and the future form of the Myanmar political system is likely to have a major impact on the way issues are debated, citizens involved and decisions made. This is clearly one of the key challenges for the government of Myanmar, and International IDEA looks forward to being a partner with them in their work to build sustainable democracy for all their citizens.

(III): In established democracies, there is a need for democracy to evolve and constantly adapt to meet the needs of citizens. That which does not evolve will eventually wither and die. When huge citizen movements spring up as a response to socio-economic crises across all continents, this is a clear call that ‘politics as usual’ needs to be re-examined. This is highlighted in particular by the *Global Commission* which notes that – “in some longstanding democracies, citizen trust and confidence in democratic institutions have dropped precipitously”².

A profound challenge to participation in established democracies is that of money – how is politics financed, and is it financed in a way which leads to inclusion or exclusion. There has been a lot of discussion about the vast amounts of money spent in the recent US election – about 1 billion US dollars on each side of the campaign. This equals the annual GDP of a small country. When there is too much money in politics, political processes become captured by elites and citizens become excluded. Research has also shown that citizen trust in electoral processes declines significantly – more than 75% of Americans believe that members of Congress would be more likely to act in favour of an interest group which had funded their campaign than in the public interest. The *Global Commission* states in its report that “for all

² Report of the ‘Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security’; 2012: 15

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democracies, rich and poor, old and new, poorly regulated political finance is a grave threat to elections with integrity”³.

In recognition of the need for democracy to adapt to citizens, International IDEA is supporting a growing interest in the Asia-Pacific region in citizen-led assessment of democracy. Groups and organizations in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and elsewhere are using our State of Democracy Tools to develop citizen-inspired reform agendas.

We have a lot on our plate to discuss in the coming day-and-a-half and I look forward to a rich and lively discussion. We are privileged to have, not only a series of very distinguished speakers in the panel discussions, but also a number of members of IDEA’s Board of Advisors moderating the sessions. I want to thank you all for devoting your time to this Annual Democracy Forum.

It is a particular honour to have Ashraf Ghani, also an outgoing IDEA Board member, with his wealth of experience and insights, as the keynote speaker.

IDEA aims to distil some policy recommendations from the discussions and I look forward to trying to capture these with you at the end of our deliberations.

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³ Report of the ‘Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security’; 2012: 33-34