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Beyond Institutions: the Challenge of Revitalizing Democratic Processes

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Stockholm School of Economics, Friday 19 May 2006

It is almost one hundred and fifty years since Abraham Lincoln said that 'Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people.' The clarity of his words has rarely been matched since, but their content has acquired today an almost unique global hegemony, hardly matched by any other worldview in modern history. It transcends cultures, religions and languages; it takes multiple forms and survives in the most inhospitable environments.

More people than ever before are today governed by rulers of their choice. This is because the endurance and growth of democracy is the political expression of the basic human quest for freedom, equality and dignity – and of the understanding that these values, in society, need to be shared.

The uneven propensity to share, and the need to define rules by which one's freedom is limited by the freedom of all others, is what makes democracy-building so complex and time-consuming. Yet, the need and the willingness to share freedom is also what makes the process of democracy-building possible.

Defining the rules for sharing freedom and building the institutions and mechanisms to ensure their application is very much what human history has been about during the last couple of centuries. Why, such a long time? Well, democracy is not the "natural", "by default" state of society when a dictatorship is overthrown. Authoritarian regimes do not nurture the idea of sharing. It needs to be learned and assimilated, to become the dominant pattern of communication between citizens. And it needs a sophisticated and always delicate institutional network.

Time is running faster today and the world has become smaller. We have reasons to hope that what used to take centuries in the past may be done in a decade or two today. But let us be realistic. Democracies in the post-soviet world are still being built with uneven success. Two decades after the end of militarized authoritarian regimes, some Latin American countries are still experiencing crises of governance and

temptations of populism. Africa is moving forward but the terrain is still mined, both in the literal and in the metaphoric sense.

And there are challenges facing democracy in this part of the world too:

- The committee established to review the Swedish constitution and form of government, has been mandated to look at “strengthening and deepening the Swedish democracy, increase citizens’ trust in the functioning of democracy and increase voter turnout at elections.”
- In Norway, which has the second-oldest living written constitution in the world, there is an emerging debate about the need to reform it in order to revitalize the political system.
- In several countries, the issue of political participation, voting and citizenship status of immigrants is a huge and growing challenge for the sustainability of democracy. Look at the present “Latino debate” in the US, the Turkish community in Germany, North Africans in France, Russians in the “near abroad”, and the emotions presently at play in the Netherlands.

I have stated these examples to underpin my assumption that the sustainability of democracy depends on more than institutions. It depends on the process of interplay between institutions, and not least on the process of bridging the gap between popular expectations and viable delivery systems.

There is a constant and universal tension between how political leaders fulfil both their responsibility for effective service delivery by government, and their responsibility for democratic governance with protection of human rights of all citizens. They may indeed not seek to deliver on either. The task of supporters and promoters of democracy is to help to create not only the frameworks but the incentives for political leaders and participants to fulfil these obligations. Institutional reforms may change the relations between actors like political parties, state and society, with important consequences. But democratic political change does not take place simply by dropping supposedly independent technical institutional solutions from outside, be that in the form of constitutions, elections, or political party systems. Democratic political change results from changes in the space for debate and the climate of debate that can lead to change in the broader social and economic environment.

This leads me to my first proposition: **Democracy is a difficult process.**

The design and building of the framework and practice of democracy is a complex and interlinked process, about which more is known about some parts than others.

Any institutional framework such as a constitution, or an electoral system, is itself complex, and tailored to the constraints of the political and power dynamics in which it is formed and the negotiating skills of the parties involved.

Democratic institutions and processes are expected to increase transparency, to empower vulnerable groups and create incentives to protect the rights of the poor and marginalised, and create mechanisms to mediate conflict. However, the democratic process may also give more influence to already powerful elites, and can be used to mobilise ethnic and religious groups against each other.

While it is necessary to build and improve the institutional aspects of democracy, it is equally important that those institutions are supported by locally and nationally owned and highly political processes. These alone can legitimise a political system to its stakeholders in the longer perspective. A vital democracy is not accomplished by fulfilling a check list of items or delivering on a series of events – such as creating many political parties and holding elections. Democracy is more than just elections. Elections are a necessary but not sufficient component of democracy, not isolated events but a means to an end. The continuing cycle of elections needs to gain trust and legitimacy from local stakeholders and to be based on national human and financial resources. In this there is a message to international donors, who tend to spend big amounts on event-driven electoral observation and too little on supporting national capacities for managing the cycle of elections. In a post-conflict setting, it is important to get not only the first elections right, but the second and third. In the long term, it is national actors who must ensure that electoral processes are free and fair, open and transparent, providing a level playing field for all political actors. They need to be based on a system that aims at providing broad representation – not simply predestined winners and losers.

This scale of the challenge of building sustainable democracy is illustrated by those countries which still fall short of becoming established democracies in spite of holding a series of multiparty elections. When the opposition is allowed out of a box for a short period before each election and the ruling group monopolises the airwaves,

there is little if any democracy. Nor are established democracies immune from institutional design failures or weak mechanisms for ensuring political consensus or political progress. Because democracy is a process and not an event, countries must constantly work to sustain democracy even where it may appear to have consolidated.

This challenge applies not least to political parties. Outside microstates, democratic politics cannot be organised without participants coming together in political parties. But polls practically worldwide indicate a low, and often decreasing, level of trust in political parties. The development of strong and credible political parties that can articulate and represent social interests and needs, transform them into political programs and implement them effectively, is a high priority on the democracy agenda. Political parties are arguably today democracy's weakest link, including in this part of the world. As the political parties are the supposed bridge between popular expectations and the political institutions, the crisis of confidence in political parties should set the alarm bells ringing for anyone concerned with the vitality of democracy.

My second proposition is: **Democracy is a long-term process that cannot be achieved by quick-fix interventions.** Recent attempts of democratic engineering in Afghanistan and Iraq clearly and painfully demonstrate this fact. Sustainable democracy depends on an inter-generational commitment to democracy among political and civic actors and needs to be supported through multiple processes and initiatives.

For democracy to be vital in a country, its citizens need to believe in it – especially youth. In developed countries, young people participate in elections if they are engaged by the time they reach the age of about 30: if they are then engaged, they are likely to remain so. Most of those who are involved in other forms of political activity also participate in elections. Much the same may be true in developing countries, in which poor participation of youth may have far-reaching consequences, given the high proportion of young people. Moves to encourage political engagement may not show clear results for ten years – and may then take forty or more years to work their way through, whether or not they were successful.

My third proposition is: **Democracy is inherently local.** It must be locally owned, and its delivery must depend on the commitment of local actors. It will inevitably take

different institutional forms in different regions, countries and localities to resonate with local conditions and actors. This is possible and to be supported, even while recognising the universal validity of the broad principles underpinning democracy.

We see expressions today of democracy being under pressure, and that efforts to promote democracy are contested. The scepticism ranges from questioning the role and effectiveness of external assistance in general, via accusations of western double standards, to outright campaigns against democracy promotion. There is also a growing sense that the western-style paradigm for development and democracy does not work well for divided or non-homogenous societies.

I dare say that some of this scepticism is not ill-founded. And this prompts a need to find effective ways of addressing democracy's pressing challenges by stimulating action by national actors rather than by imposing solutions from the outside. In this context, I take the liberty of making some promotion for an IDEA product: the State of Democracy Assessment. While there are instruments out there that rank democracies based on indicators and measured from the outside, our methodology is designed to be conducted by citizens themselves and providing a multi-dimensional framework for assessing the working of democracy. This assessment does not privilege a single institution or process over another. A free media, credible political parties, the protection of human security, guarantees and actual enjoyment of minority rights are as integral to democracy as are electoral processes. In both developed and developing democracies, the assessments have found that the establishment of formal institutions of democracy such as constitutions and the conduct of regular elections is easier to achieve than, for example, securing effective inclusion of minorities, providing equal access to justice or minimizing corruption in public life. Assessments based on this State of Democracy framework have been found to strengthen local research and analytical capacity, to generate locally led debate which raises awareness on the state of democracy, and to contribute to advocacy for policy reform by political actors in the countries where they have taken place.

My fourth proposition is: **Democracy is a fundamentally political process.** It is the product of debate and dialogue of stakeholders, and is not amenable to purely technical solutions. Democracy is about politics, and about the distribution and management of power. While it is both an art (art of managing political relationships) and a science (where political science approaches are used to engineer and design

institutions) it is all about politics. That makes it dynamic, interactive and unpredictable. It is also why, even though democracy as a form of government provides the best conditions for stability, the process of democratisation can be destabilising.

Democracy involves political stakeholders and actors at local, national, regional and international levels. Some of them may be long term, inclusive and visionary in their approach, at least some of the time. Others may be short term, sectional, venal or not even committed to democracy. But they cannot be wished away by seeking to drop ideal solutions from outside as technical fixes, however well they might look as if they will work. Imposed frameworks are likely to be dismantled by local political forces later, either by amendment or by force. Angola's experience in 1992, with a winner take all institutional framework leading to the resumption of armed conflict by the loser, is as good an example as any.

My fifth proposition is: **While democracy cannot be exported, or imported as a package, it can certainly be supported.** Fifteen years ago there was much optimism about promoting democracy, not least based on the lessons from Central and Eastern Europe. While there are certainly lessons to be learnt from these transitions, we may have fooled ourselves into believing that the democratisation process in these countries can be easily replicated elsewhere. But these countries were fundamentally parts of European institutional traditions and culture, with high levels of education and technology which turned out to be enablers of economic growth. These countries also had the tremendously important political magnet of the European Union and NATO partnership and membership. And they had the enormous financial resources made available by the West.

Today, there is a different environment. One challenge is to make democracy work in the context of globalisation, where the areas of autonomy of sovereign states are blurred and their capacity to implement their national agendas in the political, economic and social sphere are constrained. Another challenge is to respond to the post 9/11 world – where democracy promotion as a US foreign policy objective has led to tensions and anxieties among sovereign states that they may be candidates for selective “democratization putsches”. This may create resistance which will delay authentic, nationally driven democratization efforts.

Comparative experiences help develop a learning process but democracy building must involve local actors at every stage - from the stage of design of their institutions and processes to their implementation.

IDEA has been actively engaged with political parties and civil society in Nepal to create platforms for informed and interactive political dialogues. Nepali political stakeholders have expressed interest in learning about the political transition in South Africa, how a political settlement and basic political consensus around democratic constitutional principles were developed, and how agreement was reached to a process for drafting a constitution through a Constituent Assembly that was bound by these democratic principles. In our activities in Bolivia, we see the same interest in the South African experience.

The recent developments in Nepal underpin my final proposition: **Democracy is a value and an end in itself.** Nepal is just the most recent example of citizens showing by their chants and slogans, and very actions, that they consider democracy as a value and end in itself. Putting their lives on the line, they defied the conventional wisdom of political analysts that the demands for democracy have been driven by donor supported NGOs. Ordinary, impoverished people, without recourse to political theory, endured food shortages, harassment and violence at the hands of the security forces and demonstrated in no uncertain terms that democracy was an end in itself to them.

This is a reflection of, and reflects on, the position democracy has as a fundamental principle of human rights in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. This makes it not only our mandate but our responsibility to work for the realisation of sustainable democracy globally.