

Check against delivery

Global Democracy and the Asia-Pacific Perspective

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mongolia

7 June 2011

Introduction

I am delighted to have the opportunity to visit Mongolia, a country which has gone through a remarkable exercise in democracy-building over the past two decades. I am delighted in particular to be here because Mongolia has recently joined as a member State of International IDEA. International IDEA is an intergovernmental organization, established in 1995, which supports sustainable democracy globally. International IDEA now has 27 member States from all regions of the world and operates in the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Africa, West Asia and North Africa. Our key areas of expertise focus on electoral processes, political parties and participation, constitution-building, democracy and development, as well as the links between democracy and gender, diversity and security.

State of global democracy

Democratisation waves have washed through history several times. Mongolia has, of course, been very much part of one of these waves in the early 1990s after the fall of the Soviet bloc. Post-communism, in the 1990s, there was an upswing in optimism about the inevitability of countries becoming democratic. However, there was a loss of faith in democracy in the past decade, not least due to the impact of 9/11 and the war in Iraq. There has also been a high level of dissatisfaction at how democracy has delivered in many new democracies. However, recent events in the Arab world have brought the spotlight again onto the need and desirability of democracy.

In the current decade, there has been much talk of the power shift from West to East. The democratic revolutions and uprisings in the Arab World help remind us that there are two power shifts underway: the shift of global power from the West/North to the East/South and the shift of power from the State to the people. Both these power shifts have huge implications for how we think about democracy.

There are many reasons to be optimistic about democracy globally: events in the Arab world show that democracy is a grass-roots value which people will stand up for; it is a universal human aspiration which has not receded. There are also many examples of successfully consolidating democracies, such as Mongolia, which provide excellent role models for other countries in transition.

On the other hand, democracy also faces many challenges: the persistence of autocracy, in particular in countries which have achieved high levels of economic growth; the lack of consolidation of democracy in transitioning states. We too often witness a return to autocratic tendencies; leaders who let incumbency trump democracy, manipulate constitutions or elections, for example in Cote d'Ivoire. There is also a lack of true participation among the youth, women and minority groups, even in well-established democracies. Many democracies face a low turn-out at elections and doubts about the representativeness of those elected. Political parties are also in crisis. Electoral and political reform hence on agenda in many countries.

The Arab world

I have just concluded a trip to the Arab world, which has seen huge people-led revolutions over the past six months. The initial enthusiasm in Egypt and Tunisia is now mixed with some concern and confusion as to how to take the process of democratisation forward, but the optimism of the citizens is still there. There are lively discussions on sequence and timing of constitutional change and parliamentary, as well as Presidential elections. Violence and conflict persist in Libya, Yemen and Syria. Domestic efforts towards reform are underway in Jordan and Morocco, although there remain big questions about whether these efforts are meaningful. For the long-term, there are many different potential scenarios, but it is certainly very likely that we will see future decades of turbulence in the region. We therefore need to take a long term perspective and to be patient and persistent in support of democratic forces in the region.

What have we learned from what has happened in the Arab world? We see that democracy is a local issue and an enduring aspiration. We can see that if a butterfly flaps its wings in Tunisia it can topple a government in Egypt or further afield. We can also see that the international community needs to be long-term in its support and revise its ill-advised policies of propping up semi-dictators in the hope of providing stability. We can also see the importance of the link between the desire for democracy and the need for democracy to deliver in concrete ways for citizens, including social justice, employment, equal rights.

Asia-Pacific

Through this global power shift which I have mentioned, we are witnessing a truly Asia-Pacific century. This is certainly true in geo-politics and in terms of economic and security strength. In addition, developments in Asia also key to the future of democracy. In terms of democracy, in Asia and the Pacific, the story is mixed. There has been much focus on China, and understandably so, but Asia is more than China. There are the examples of India, which has been a long-term vibrant democracy for the past sixty years; Indonesia, in which democracy has made remarkable strides over the past ten years and is now consolidating; and the Philippines, where commitment to democratic reform is evident. At the same time, there are democracy black spots also in the form of entrenched totalitarianism in Myanmar and North Korea.

I arrived in Mongolia from China, where it is clear that the picture of Chinese politics and the role to be played by political reform is a complex one. It seems that the current situation is marked by reformers being on the defensive. For the future the question remains whether or not China will undertake democratization with 'Chinese characteristics'. International IDEA believes that democratic accountability is essential for economic stability in the long-run and for the creation of a stable and more equal society. Democracy and development are therefore mutually reinforcing. This should also be the case for China, where the challenges it faces to its prosperity – for example through economic and social inequality or through corruption – could be addressed through political reform.

Through visits to Asia over the past year, I have been struck by the level of frank debate and self-criticism in democracies in India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and now Mongolia. Such debate is a sign of self-confidence in democracies, as opposed to authoritarian states which are scared of any dissenting voices about their political system.

Mongolian democracy

I have been much impressed by the frankness I have experienced during my short visit about the challenges to Mongolia's democracy. I have been impressed by your candidness in wishing to improve your democracy and your acknowledgement that, like all democracies, it is not perfect. This self-awareness and desire for self-correction is what I believe will allow you to strengthen your democracy in a way that benefits all Mongolian people. European democracies can learn from this: too many in the West tend to take democracy for granted

and get complacent. For example, a recent survey showed that about one fifth of Swedish young people would sell their vote if requested by a politician.

Mongolia was the first government to have the confidence to undertake a state of democracy assessment – this is a tool developed by IDEA under which a country can assess itself how democracy is functioning. This further demonstrates Mongolia's political will to expand and deepen your democracy. I have also been impressed by Mongolia's international engagement on democracy through your adoption of the achievement of democracy as a 9th Millennium Goal. Mongolia has also been active in the past in the International Community of New and Restored Democracies. Mongolia will soon take up a two-year chairmanship of the Community of Democracies, during which International IDEA looks forward to working closely with you.

International IDEA and Mongolia have enjoyed close collaboration for several years. I look forward to this continuing with Mongolia now as an IDEA member state. During this visit, we have agreed on a number of priority areas for cooperation, including on Mongolia's electoral reform, the further improvement of citizen participation, political party reform, and the Mongolian chairmanship of the Community of Democracies.

Mongolia is lucky enough to enjoy an abundance of natural resources. This is a wonderful good fortune, which I know that you are keen to manage to ensure sustainable growth over the years to come. Economic growth and democracy are mutually reinforcing and your economic development has the potential to support your democratic consolidation and vice versa. As a citizen of Norway, a country which has also managed significant natural resources, allow me to say a few words about this issue. The starting point is that the exploitation of a *natural* resource is a *national* resource which should benefit the people at large. There is therefore a need for strong national control, but also a focus on maximising profits. The way to ensure both in Norway was the creation of strong legal frameworks and high taxation, but also the welcoming of competition and international investments, companies and their technologies and know-how. Over time this led not only to high profits, but also to the development of national expertise: today Norway is also a world leader in subsidiary industries in the petroleum sector. Stable and predictable conditions for investors and actors were critical in achieving this. It was vital therefore to build political consensus about the basics of natural resource management: in a highly volatile business you cannot have legal and operational frameworks change with every new government.

On the revenue side, the 1970s and 1980s in Norway were marked by politicians giving in to the temptation of spending all of the revenues arising from natural resource exploitation. This naturally led to inflation, overheating of the economy, and an economic crisis when oil prices fell. After this, Norway turned to reform and established the State Pension Fund, which saves petroleum revenues for future pension commitments. Here too, it was necessary to build political consensus: whichever government is in place, the principles for revenue management remain. This is critical in order to ensure that the income from natural resources benefits the people as a whole and does not become a tool for those holding power at any given time. The key lesson, in my view, is that while legal, technical and financial frameworks are important, the real success story in Norway has been the building of political consensus on these issues. However, this success has, in part, been built on lessons learnt from failures. Mongolia now has the opportunity to learn from the mistakes made and successes achieved by Norway and others as you develop your own systems.

The Mongolian democracy experience over the past two decades provides a positive example for other countries undergoing transition to democracy, not least those in the Arab world. Mongolia has put a difficult past behind you and created a vibrant democracy. At the same time, no democracy is perfect. Corruption, participation levels and lack of female representation are all issues which Mongolia and other democracies face. Participation needs to be addressed, not just through consultation, which is very welcome and innovative, but also through systematic changes which allow all groups to enter political parties as candidates on equal terms. It is important to encourage younger people to be motivated to enter politics so the barriers to entry should therefore not be set too high.

Gender

Gender is a particular challenge. I was struck by learning today from the President of the Mongolian Women's Federation that out of Mongolia's 100 biggest companies, 26 have a female CEO. That is very high when you look at international comparisons. In politics, unfortunately, the picture is completely different. Of Mongolia's 76 parliamentary representatives, only 3 are women. This represents a mere 3.9%, far below the Asian average of 18.3%, and the global average of 19%. International IDEA has the firm conviction that the question of equal participation of women and men in democracy goes right to the heart of democracy itself. International IDEA's working definition of democracy has two elements: popular control over public decision-making, and; equality between citizens in the exercise of that control. On that basis, democracy cannot fully be realized unless there is equality between citizens, and this includes equality between women and men. In order to

achieve such equality, it is important to take care when designing electoral systems and in considering quota systems. It is also important to address the behaviours within political parties, which are globally known to be gatekeepers against women in politics. All the reform discussions currently going on in Mongolia are relevant in this context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mongolia's democratic reform process teaches us the very important lesson that democracy is never really consolidated: it needs to evolve and adapt as society changes and as citizens' expectations change. Many countries can learn a lot from Mongolia's ongoing debate about the need for improving the functioning of its democracy. International IDEA looks forward to partnering with Mongolia, as an IDEA member state, in the years to come, both as you consolidate your own democracy at home and as you engage multilaterally on democracy abroad.