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Lecture by Vidar Helgesen, Secretary-General, International IDEA

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THE CHALLENGES

Democracy Holds Opportunity

Today, more people than ever before are governed by elected representatives. Democracy—the idea that people have the right to control their government and that a government is legitimate only if and when it is controlled by the people—has acquired an almost unique global position, 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. Democracy is an expression of the very basic human quest for freedom and dignity and of the understanding that these values need to be shared. Therefore, the most powerful opportunity for the future of democracy lies in its ability to grow from within and below.

Democracy is Widespread but Uneven in Quality

Despite the progress of democracy, there are too many superficial democracies in which patronage and autocracy are excused for economic or security reasons. Constitutions which should set the stage for participatory democratic practices are often treated as tools for rulers rather than instruments for checks and balances. Elections are in too many cases staged events with predetermined outcomes rather than expressions of true democratic processes. Political parties, so crucial for the well-functioning of democracy, are among the least trusted institutions in all parts of the world.

Key Challenges Facing Democracy

Conflict: There is widespread agreement that democracy is the best tool for the peaceful management of social and political conflicts and hence lays the most solid foundation for political and economic development. Yet, since democratization involves profound changes in the distribution of power and in the relationship between citizens and the state, democracy often generates violence before it becomes able to manage conflict. For societies coming out of conflict, priority to

immediate imperatives like rebuilding state institutions and strengthening security and financial systems can put at risk the need for developing democratic practices serving long term stability.

Development failures: In some parts of the world there is evidence of declining support for democracy, due to the perception that democracy has failed to improve peoples' lives. Democratic institutions such as legislatures, executive branches and political parties are seen as ineffective in representing the citizenry's demand for economic and social progress. Even in countries or regions where democracy was believed to have deep roots, popular discontent with the lack of economic and social development can lead to the emergence of populist and extremist politics.

Persistent authoritarianism: Failures of democracies to establish stability and development are at times used as a pretext by authoritarian or fundamentalist regimes to consolidate their hold of power and undemocratic practices. In the context of global efforts to fight terrorism, national security needs are claimed to legitimize infringements on citizens' basic freedoms and to resist political pluralism and the rise of potential opposition.

Globalization: Public trust in democracy is also challenged by the fact that external factors are ever-more dominant in the political life of any nation. Global economic trends, world market prices, foreign direct investment, multilateral or bilateral trade frameworks, loans from international financial institutions, and donor aid all impact domestic policy and the freedom of manoeuvre for elected authorities. The increasing number of international actors in development and democratization processes adds to the perception that such processes are initiated and led from the outside.

The impact of globalization on domestic politics also poses challenges to democratic life in countries with a high level of economic development. 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.

Short-term nature of politics and popular expectations: The sustainability of democracy depends on effective policy-making processes and a democratic conduct of politics. On many policy issues the time horizon of the policy-making cycle, from agenda-setting to policy deliberation, enactment and implementation, does not often coincide with electoral cycles. In the age of globalization and with increasingly

complex societies, major challenges can only be addressed by long-term efforts transcending normal electoral cycles: an evident example is environmental problems. The ability of democratic politics to deliver on public expectations is increasingly questioned, and at the same time popular expectations are difficult to meet within the timeframe of one electoral period. The competitive nature of democratic politics can at times contribute to unrealistically raising public expectations for immediate and short-term impact of new policies. The frustration with governments perceived as not delivering may lead to discontent-driven and frequent changes of government, resulting in a self-reinforcing loss of public confidence in democracy. This dilemma gives reason for concern, not least coupled with the patterns of declining political and electoral participation with younger generations in older democracies less engaged with democratic institutions than their parents were.

Exclusion: Genuine democracy can only be sustained through inclusive processes. The lack of appropriate frameworks that lead to the inclusion of minorities is a challenge that democracy faces, not least in fragmented societies. Exclusion of women, youth, as well as ethnic and religious minorities, from public life increasingly alienates large segments of societies against democratization processes that are seen as a new way of perpetuating the rule of dominant groups.

Women's participation: A continuing challenge is the political participation of women. Decades after the introduction of equal suffrage for men and women, equal participation in political activities and as elected representatives is still not a reality.

Democracy-Building is Complex

Democracy-building and democracy assistance had its honeymoon after the Cold War, with the relative success of supporting democracy-building in Central and Eastern Europe. However, the critical factors are different in other parts of the world, and the experiences from Europe can not easily be replicated elsewhere.

Inadequate approaches: It is increasingly recognized that Western-style governance paradigms do not always work well in societies with other traditions of political identification. Donors are seen as having been too focused on the building of executive branch institutions and too little on involvement of poor and marginalized people still ruled by patron-client relationships. Democracy-building is a long-term, non-linear, multifaceted and intensely political process, and technocratic approaches

not taking account of this can produce autocracy with appearances of good governance.

Effectiveness and legitimacy is questioned: There is tension between the perceived "giving and receiving" ends of development and democracy assistance, and frustration that many international efforts are short term, event driven and fragmented in nature, leading to incoherence and ineffectiveness. As a category of aid, democracy assistance is lacking even basic information-sharing tools or agreement on basic principles of action, something which makes coordination between actors weak and creates confusion even at country level. There are calls for a critical examination of the assumptions and motives of donors. In line with this, the role, effectiveness and legitimacy of external democracy actors are questioned. On the other hand, there is disappointment among donors that massive support for national and local civil society based organizations has contributed only in a limited manner to democratic, political reform or improved access to or functioning of representative institutions.

Democracy-Building Meets with Resistance

Democracy-building is not only more complex but also more contested today. While the promotion of democracy is more central in foreign policy debate and conduct than before, it is also true that democracy-building is increasingly viewed by many with suspicion. There is increasing polarization over ideas and activities in the field of democracy assistance and democracy-building, and undemocratic regimes are exploiting this situation.

Accusations: There are accusations levelled against democracy-building efforts for being a façade behind which other foreign policy agendas are hidden. Often linked to this are allegations of double standards on the part of key actors in democracy promotion.

Resistance: Some states are disregarding calls for democratic practices, or are openly supporting campaigns against democracy support, declaring it offensive to their own sovereignty. When such approaches are taken by states that carry global significance, it severely impacts the conditions for democracy-building worldwide.

FACING THE CHALLENGES

The challenges facing democracy and democracy-building form a framework within which democracy-building actors have to seek opportunities for making progress. The complex and long-term nature of these challenges self-evidently implies that meeting them is beyond the capacity of any one institution. Acknowledging the challenges is nevertheless important in order to define relevant and coherent responses in partnerships with other actors.

Multilateral Credibility and Approaches are Needed

The landscape of democracy-building actors is busy and dynamic. Since the creation of IDEA many new actors have developed strong capabilities on democracy-building issues, have diversified dissemination and training capabilities, and field presence. Known actors are still defining and expanding the scope of their activities. New actors keep emerging, including nationally based institutions in IDEA member states.

The multitude of actors testifies to the growing global importance of democracy-building, but has also prompted concerns over fragmentation of actors and approaches. Furthermore, in the increasingly complex and polarized landscape of democracy-building, too much of the thinking and action are seen as Northern or Western, unilaterally driven democracy promotion.

Hence multilateral credibility is needed more than ever in the field of democracy promotion. It is critically important to inspire dialogue and common action on democracy-building in a multilateral way.

New Approaches are Needed

More diversity: A wide variety of democratic practices exist throughout the world. At a time when democracy-building urgently requires multilateral dialogue and practical thinking, more diversified views on democracy and how to develop and sustain it should be promoted. A key issue is that of inclusion and involvement of potential beneficiaries in the process of identifying needs and remedies.

Political processes owned by those concerned: Democracy-building is a fundamentally political process. Hence the underlying politics of democracy-building

must be understood, through a political analysis of the structures of power which are affected by efforts to strengthen democracy. Democracy-building is more than creating institutions. Policies to support democracy must therefore be long-term, comprehensive and responding to a home-grown demand. Today, there is too much effort which is short-term in scope, compartmentalized in approach, and oblivious to the diverse contexts of target countries.

Democracy and development: Democratization and socio-economic development are deeply interrelated. In many countries, not least in Latin America, the capacity of institutions to deliver and to be seen as delivering on development appears to be a key factor for confidence in democracy. At the same time, the effectiveness of democratic institutions and the soundness of democratic politics are acknowledged as catalysts for development. Democracy creates the enabling environment in which policy choices are subject to the control of free and responsible citizens, capable of holding governments and state institutions accountable for their implementation. Democracy therefore is seen as a tool to empower people to address issues of poverty and exclusion.

This relationship is acknowledged by the international community. Yet, in parallel, the opposite perception that authoritarian regimes have an advantage in promoting development still survives, superficially assessing the case of China and in spite of a number of dictatorship-induced economic disasters.

Likewise, in many countries, influential actors of political life that embrace formal democratic procedures, still fail to grasp the vulnerability of democracy to extreme poverty, inequality and social exclusion. There is a need for political actors to better understand the likely developmental effects of their political choices and the likely political effects of their developmental choices. Top-down governance capacity-building must be married to bottom-up accountability measures in a mutually reinforcing fashion.

Democracy and conflict: Internationally supported democracy-building is often an inseparable part of broader peace-building processes. In such situations, the design of institutions and processes of democracy needs to adopt a conflict management perspective. This typically involves an appropriate sequencing of constitution-building, elections and informal dialogue processes which can mitigate the conflict-inducing potential of elections. It also involves making appropriate choices with

regard to the electoral system and constitutional provisions so as to favour inclusiveness and participation and to allow all key actors to be represented in the new institutional frameworks.