



**THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY
AND HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES**

LECTURE

BY

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Distinguished scholars, students
Ladies and gentlemen

The Nordic countries have achieved remarkable success in the development of democracy and human rights, and this form of government is so ingrained in our culture and society that on first impression it would seem completely superfluous to initiate a dialogue on the future of democracy in our countries.

Some might consider it more important to discuss what the Nordic countries can teach other nations, and let us not forget how difficult it has proved to put democracy on a firm footing in Europe, in particular in light of the widespread view that the evolution of Europe will be the main vehicle of change in the new century. I do not consider myself an old man, yet during the first years of my life there were only six democracies in Europe; all the rest of the continent was under dictatorships based on the ideologies of communism, nazism or fascism.

The 20th century was a time of great upheaval for European systems of government, costing tens of millions of peoples their lives or their freedom through terrible conflicts. The Southern European states were under military regimes for a long time after the end of World War II and Central and Eastern Europe have only known democracy for a decade. Europe is therefore perhaps not in an ideal position to dictate to the rest of the world about the best way to ensure democracy in the long term, but the Nordic countries, along with Britain and Switzerland, are still the part of Europe which can boast of solid democracy for the longest period.

Democracy has evolved in waves. The ideas put forward by British and French philosophers more than 200 years ago and the aims that the architects of the US constitution attempted to formalize have faced an uphill struggle all over the world and still do in many places. In the past three decades waves of democracy have risen in South America and Asia, as well as Europe, and increasing numbers of African states are now attempting to get their bearings on such a path. The 21st century is widely foreseen as the era of flourishing democracy: international movements will strengthen this form of government throughout the world, treaties and the will of the public will impose better restraint, and the information technology revolution will put more pressure on the powers-that-be to respect the fundamental rules of democracy and human rights.

We normally define democracy as the form of government which grants the public the right to choose a government for itself in regular and free elections: members of parliament, local councillors and in some places also the president – while the media and non-governmental organizations ensure open dialogue on decisions and policies, and the individual has extensive and active rights in practice. A number of variations have evolved within this framework, but it is a common feature that democracy is based on organized political parties as the driving force, and governments engage in regular consultation with organizations representing various interests.

In my part of the world a broad and deep-rooted consensus prevails about democracy both as a form and a goal. We have succeeded in implementing necessary reforms, for example creating equal rights for women to positions of leadership and responsibility in the main institutions of government and opening a dialogue on reforms of party political and election campaign finances and measures which will contribute to greater transparency in public decision-making. But we need also to ask ourselves with open minds what can be improved and what can be changed to ensure that democracy will keep pace with the transformation that lies ahead in many fields – in globalization, market developments, technological innovations – and with respect to new tasks and problems that our countries will need to tackle.

What actually lies ahead is that various democratic fundamentals which we have expected to remain solid and be taken for granted for the foreseeable future are now on the defensive, and the decades to come could prove decisive for them. I shall attempt here to shed light on several of the changes that will have an impact on democracy during the century that has now begun, and draw attention to problems that call for effective responses if our democracy is to adapt itself successfully to new conditions.

Firstly, globalization and market deregulation have caused the scope of political control to contract and democratic decision-making therefore plays a smaller role. An ever growing number of factors affecting our daily lives, work, living standards, family affairs and opportunities for advancement and personal fulfilment are shaped by international trends, the interaction of market forces and activities of major corporations whose influence extends to many countries. The fields controlled by government institutions, parliament and congress and local governments are proportionally smaller, and democratic power is now rivalled by forces which are firmly rooted in globalization and the market. We are increasingly led to wonder how democracy can continue at such times to be an effective engine for change. What will happen to the will of the

people, the essence of democracy, under such conditions? The fate of individuals and nations is increasingly determined by the management of global corporations rather than by the standpoints of democratically elected representatives in national assemblies.

For some time it has also been the accepted ideology that economic growth is strengthened by more market deregulation and greater freedom for companies to operate at global level. Politicians have therefore relinquished substantial degrees of power and thereby reduced the scope of the representative democracy in which we live. On a growing scale, politics revolve around creating favourable conditions for global capital and corporations, increasing the importance of the market and reducing the number of democratic decisions made about the public good.

Admittedly some scholars have pointed out the contradiction that, at the same time as globalization diminishes the influence of the nation state on which our democracy is based, one of its consequences is to spread democratic ideas throughout the world and extend the individual's right of self-determination. However, politics in the fora of democratic institutions is confined to specific regions, countries and municipalities, while the influence of changes does not stop at national borders. Hence, democracy is subject to geographical restraints which curtail its potential for responding to the global influences that increasingly shape our lives.

Secondly, the evolution of the European Union together with growing international cooperation on security, the environment and other issues, has transferred part of the power that was formerly vested in democratic institutions of nation states to European and supra-national institutions which are not tailored in the same way to the direct democratic power of the people, but are based instead on a system of delegation formulated on the basis of international cooperation.

Likewise, developments within both the United Nations and NATO, and also international treaties on the environment, human rights and other issues have served to impose further restrictions on decision-making by individual countries. Admittedly these restrictions serve noble causes and the future well-being of individuals and communities, but decisions are being transferred all the same on a growing scale from democratic institutions to international fora where the people and their elected representatives, organizations with vested interests and non-governmental organizations do not have such easy access to influence decision-making as within the democratic state. It largely remains for us to untie this Gordian knot and resolve how the positive interaction of democratic power and international cooperation will be organized in the future.

Thirdly, there is much to suggest that the position of political parties, which are key institutions in our democratic system will continue to weaken in the decades to come. Our democratic format has been built on organized and powerful political parties. If they weaken, it will have a substantial impact on the mechanisms of democracy.

Studies show that membership of political parties is declining and it is becoming increasingly more difficult to motivate people to work for them and design their policies. It was even forecast in Sweden a few years ago that if party political membership continues to drop at the present pace, there will be no one left in the Swedish parties by the year 2013. While I doubt this prediction, it is clear that political parties are having trouble in maintaining the position of influence which they held for the greater part of the 20th century. Their membership is dwindling, the media and interest organizations play more of a key role in discussions and policy-making, and greater opportunities for entertainment and creative leisure have weakened the appeal of political parties. In the simpler society of earlier times, political parties were often the key to advancement and rewarding personal contacts, while individuals today are confronted by a global market with diverse opportunities. Many are also reluctant to pay the opportunity cost involved, when the media spotlight is increasingly directed upon the personal lives and families of people in public service, and the tough approach of modern media detracts many people from public office.

This weakening of political parties will undoubtedly have a substantial impact on the democratic system, although it is difficult to predict the consequences. However, it is clear that policy-making will continue to be transferred elsewhere: to institutions, experts and organizations with vested interests. The mass media have also largely replaced political parties in informing the public about the background to decisions. And parties will in all probability find it increasingly difficult to attract talented people to run for seats in local councils and national assemblies.

Fourthly, it appears that the main institutions of the democratic system will be weakened because others – businesses, organizations, the media, financial institution and the civil service – will triumph in the competition to secure people with the education, skills and talents to excel and take creative initiative. Young people today have far more diverse opportunities to satisfy their ambition for fame and fortune, exciting jobs and good incomes. The political parties, national assemblies and local governments – these key institutions of the democratic system – will have growing trouble in holding their own in the rivalry for human resources. This democratic problem has admittedly been taboo to some

extent and there has been little in the way of proposals for countering it. If nothing is done to boost the position of democracy in this rivalry, however, there is a risk that these institutions will be weakened still further and power will gradually slip into the hands of others who are not subject to democratic restraints in the same way.

Fifthly, it is interesting that at the same time a spectrum of new organizations dedicated to different issues have emerged, whose share in democratic dialogue and the decision-making process is likely to grow in the future. Environmental organizations, human rights organizations, organizations associated with international issues and organizations of minority groups are some examples, many of them driven by very active involvement on the part of their members. These organizations have served to step up public participation in the democratic arena and thereby counterbalance the decline that has characterized the activities of political parties. If the functionality of these new organizations is to be used to strengthen the pillars of democracy, they must be given better access to the main institutions of authority in society – ministries, governments, national assemblies, local governments – because the powers-that-be often tend to confine their consultations to the older and more conventional organizations. The leaders of democratic institutions should applaud the impetus that these new organizations represent. The grass roots and dissidence are democracy's main sign of life, so relations with the movements that spring up there must not be neglected.

Sixthly, it is likely that the media will continue to have a growing influence on discussions, issues, strategies and selection of leaders, and make politics more personal. Our countries have an open media market, but we increasingly wonder about the democratic responsibility of the media. How will media access by individual political parties, non-governmental organizations and opinion groups be arranged? Will a balance between different viewpoints be ensured and will the media be sufficiently imaginative and responsible in imposing adequate restraint on the powers-that-be? The ownership of the media means that general democratic laws have little effect on their management and working procedures, so that in the future we must trust in the democratic sense of responsibility, in the ethics and professionalism of people working for them.

This development of the media is linked to the seventh factor in our democratic evolution: the influence of the Internet and information technology on the potential for individuals and groups to voice their opinions. Already, anyone can create his or her own medium and voice opinions instantly, put forward criticism, deliver news and seek to win support for a given cause. As we know, this technological revolution has

radically altered the position of individuals, groups and organizations to profile themselves in the democratic dialogue. It has opened new channels for communicating opinions which threaten accepted attitudes and has weakened the position that political parties, the media and often important organizations have had for controlling public dialogue. At the same time this development has forced more open and transparent government administration and easier access to information than before. New avenues have been opened up for activating the public in democratic participation, and it is important for us to take an open-minded view of such opportunities if we wish to try to strengthen and revitalize democracy in the years to come.

We need to ensure unrestricted and open access for all people to the new channels of information, and guarantee equality regardless of domicile, age or social class. Information technology must not become the privilege of any generation, education group or income group. Access to the Internet must be organized in such a way as to preserve democratic equality, just as public utilities were set up earlier last century for the public well-being. If we succeed in delivering IT in this way, it will give us a wealth of opportunities for renewing and strengthening the democratic system.

The final challenge that I shall mention here today is how, in the decades to come, our democratic systems will create easy and secure opportunities for minority groups, immigrants and others who are a prominent presence in our multicultural communities, to become fully valid participants at all stages and in all institutions of government which we have built on a democratic foundation. We in the Nordic countries have acquired different levels of experience in this respect, but hopefully we can avoid the mistakes that have led to serious problems among other democratic nations. This will put our democratic integrity more to the test than at most times in the past, and the outcome will reflect how strong the humanitarian foundation of our democracy really is.

These eight factors in the democratic evolution which I have briefly touched upon are by no means an exhaustive list of the changes, problems or challenges which democracy has to tackle in the decades to come.

It is difficult to assess how extensive the changes that I have discussed may become or the impact they will have on the overall character of our democratic systems. Growing discussion can be expected on responses to the problems faced by our democratic structures in the next decades, and it is important for the powers-that-be and scholars to discuss these issues with open minds. We need to acknowledge the problems we face, have the determination to face up to the weakening of

political parties, but also see the opportunities for boosting democracy which lie in the information revolution and in the growth of organizations dedicated to criticism of the status quo. We need to discuss changes positively in the spirit of the revolutionaries who paved the way for democracy in centuries past.

History shows us that democracy has been in the process of continuous evolution and that the form it took around the middle of the 20th century was significantly different from that of a hundred years before. Franchise had been radically changed, women and the poor had acquired full suffrage, organized mass political parties had emerged, the procedures of national assemblies had altered significantly, and interest organizations had become a crucial impetus in debates and policy-making.

Measured in decades and centuries, the development of democracy is really the history of continuous change, so we should be prepared to respond to the transformation that lies ahead, accept it as an enchanting challenge instead of greeting it with suspicion or fear, and not clutch the image of democracy which took full shape around the middle of last century as if this is the only true model for all time.

Democracy in our countries has firm roots and in many ways is inextricably connected with our social structures and cultures. Unquestionably it offers enormous benefits, given what has happened elsewhere in the world. We can certainly congratulate ourselves on the unequivocal success of our nations in this respect, and for this reason we are also better equipped to tackle the challenges that lie ahead. We have less at risk.

It is therefore a worthwhile task to discuss in detail proposals for reform of our countries' democratic systems. In this way we can also offer guidance to other nations about how to respond to the issues and tasks which democratic states everywhere will need to address in the years to come. Let us finally pose a few questions:

How should we preserve the scale of democratic influences in an age of globalization and market forces?

How should we redress the democratic deficit created by international cooperation and the increased influence of international institutions?

How should we attract new people to work in politics, counter the weakening of political parties and ensure that the main democratic institutions have talented and educated people at their disposal?

How should the government system be opened up for consultation with the new type of non-governmental organizations whose roots lie in idealism, criticism and dissent, by ensuring extensive participation in creative dialogue on policy-making?

How should the Internet and information technology be utilized to strengthen the rights to democratic participation by individuals and groups, make the decision-making process transparent and impose necessary restraint on the civil service?

How can we use direct voting, at local, regional and national level, to increase the public's participation and democratic power, to help provide a natural outlet for the intra-party spectrum of views on important issues?

How should the working procedures of national assemblies, local governments, political parties and international institutions be changed so that they better reflect democratic tendencies and keep pace with changes in accepted attitudes?

How will immigrants and other minorities be ensured open access to decision-making fora, in order to prevent the emergence of isolated social groups with no influence?

These questions are only some examples of the tasks that lie ahead for ensuring the natural regeneration and advancement of our democracy and the consolidation of human rights. We should take a positive attitude towards these tasks and welcome the chances for democratic innovation. We can look once again to the ideas of the philosophers and political thinkers who, in the past, shaped the democratic heritage and discussed which form of organization would be best suited to the essential concepts of democratic power. There may now be opportunities to give the people themselves control over what was previously considered to be unavoidably entrusted to representative institutions.

We Icelanders to some extent stood at such a crossroads in the buildup to the establishment of the Republic more than 50 years ago, when a choice had to be made as to whether representatives of the parties in parliament or the nation itself should elect the President of the Republic. Initially, political leaders wanted to have this power in the hands of the Parliament but widespread public debate created pressure for entrusting the election to the nation directly and without intermediaries. The outcome was that the President of Iceland was chosen in a general nationwide election, which was the first time that any democratic nation adopted a direct election for its head of state without the selection of

intermediary representatives or an electoral college like here in the United States.

Our countries have been forums for democratic innovation and initiatives and let us preserve this quality and strengthen it in the years to come, to equip our countries more effectively to play a valid part in the dialogue on the global evolution of democracy.

Although we take democracy for granted and consider it only natural, history contains many examples of the opposite, and a great deal of work still remains to be done in order for all mankind to be able to enjoy a form of government based on human values and a equal rights of all people to take part openly and freely in shaping their own destinies.