

# *The Future of Democracy*

*the challenge from without and within*

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## Abstract

The introduction focuses on two challenges to the future of democracy:

- The need to support young democracies to build a strong network of democratically governed states as the best guarantor of security and prosperity
- The need to reinvigorate the primacy of politics in managing the global common goods and interests

The paper discusses two relevant contextual dynamics:

- The need to modernize modernization theory
- The challenge of the paradox of globalization vs. glocalization

The presentation concludes with three recommendations:

- The need of an European Consensus on democracy support in its external relations
- Focus on support for young democracies and invest in strong international network of democratically governed states
- Invest in the search for a global social contract to democratically govern the global common goods and interests

« *La démocratie est d'abord un état d'esprit* »

(Pierre Mendes France)

## Introduction

It is a pleasure to address you this evening about the challenging theme of '*The Future of Democracy*'. The pleasure for this opportunity is profound in recognition of the fact that Portugal is celebrating the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that memorable Carnations Revolution this year. What started as the uprising by the military against dictatorship and its colonial wars was soon overtaken by the massive support of the Portuguese people. The images of Lisbon streets full of people are still fresh in my mind, as are the recent images of the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities full of people demanding a fair choice of leadership in Iran. Over the past 35 years, in fact, the list of people driven revolutions in demand of democratic governance is long.

In April and May of this year we have witnessed successful general elections in India, the biggest democracy in the world in which 740 million people were eligible to vote in 828.000 voting stations using more than one million electronic voting machines. These elections were preceded by the Indonesian parliamentary elections. Indonesia is the third largest democracy in the world and 86% of the population is Muslim. Presidential elections in Indonesia will follow in July. In April, South Africa held successful elections, the fourth since apartheid came to an end in 1994. Recently, successful elections were also held in Malawi, a much smaller and poorer African country.

In all of these elections a tangible eagerness to cast one's ballot could be observed, an eagerness to proudly exercise one's right to choose representatives. Demonstrations of democracy alive in countries far and between.

In an other way, support for democracy around the world is demonstrated by authoritative polling, asking people whether they think democracy is the best form of government. At the question "Democracy may have its problems, but it's better than any other form of government", people in various regions around the world overwhelmingly respond positively. In the West the percentage is 92, Eastern Europe 88, former Soviet Union 81 (the lowest %), Latin America 88, Asia 85 and Muslim Middle East 88. It underlines, that given a free choice, people around the globe have a strong aspiration to be governed democratically.

Of course, we have also witnessed the recent elections for the European Parliament in the European Union. Of the 375 million eligible voters, only 43.5% participated in this election, a figure that did not even reach 40% in most EU countries. It was difficult to detect the same eagerness in the established democracies of the European Union. Obviously, the comparison is not really fair because elections for the European Parliament cannot be compared with elections for a national parliament. Nevertheless, the answer to the *Future of Democracy* may face different challenges depending on how passionate or deep the value of democracy is rooted in the consciousness of the populations and how democracy is perceived to function in the eyes of the population..

In this introduction I shall argue the view that in the current international context, from the position of someone deeply committed to democracy, we face two challenges.

1) The *first* challenge is to support young democracies to form a strong international network of democratically governed states. Such support would be in recognition of an important cornerstone of the EU external policy, the presumption that a democratic world is a secure world.

2) The *second* challenge is the necessary investment into global democratic institutions to govern the global common goods and interests, and to address the global crises that we are encountering today. The current unprecedented global financial and economic crises are a wake-up call for democrats that the ‘primacy of politics’ needs to be restored or reinvigorated. The financial and economic crises are in essence political crises with impact on the prospects of the *Future of Democracy*.

### **Without democracy nobody fares well**

In this distinguished gathering it is not necessary to make the case for democracy. For many of us, democracy is both a core value and a means to an end. As many recent studies indicate, democracies create environments conducive to successfully fighting poverty, to protecting people’s rights and to making the world a safer place. From the perspective of established democracies, it is in our own interest to help young democracies to consolidate and to become trusted partners in the international network of democratic states. Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated: (quote) “*helping democracies to take root and flourish is as important a project as any of us could possibly undertake. It matters, because although democracy is no miracle cure, it is still the best medicine we have for treating ills that range from terror and corruption to poverty and social injustice.*” (unquote)

As the recently deceased German/British scholar, politician and European Commissioner Lord Ralf Dahrendorf correctly observed, it is the road to a consolidated democracy, the transition from authoritarian to democratic governance, that is problematic. He described this transition as a journey through the “valley of tears”. Or, as is often the case, the politics of democratization tend to undermine the democratization of politics. The transition of Portugal, Spain and Greece in the 1970s and, more recently, the transition of the former Central and Eastern European communist countries to democracy was successfully supported by the accession process and subsequent membership of the European Union. However, the same support is not available for countries in transition or for young democracies for which membership of the EU is not a perspective. How can they be meaningfully assisted? The answer to this question is beyond the scope of the present presentation. However, for some successful examples of democracy support I refer to the websites of the two organizations which I represent, NIMD and EPD.

The current Czech EU Presidency, in cooperation with the European Partnership for Democracy, has taken the initiative to launch a discussion with all 27 EU Member states and the European Commission to prepare a future European Consensus – a common EU policy – about the EU support for democracy in third partner countries. It is an effort to enhance, and hopefully to expand, in future, the effectiveness of the EU contribution to democracy support.

Earlier this week, the designated EU Council task force on this subject met in Brussels on a first draft of a future European Consensus, a draft about which the discussions will be taken forward by the forthcoming Swedish, Spanish and Belgium EU presidencies. I consider this an important development within the EU, recognizing that whereas democracy is the foundation on which Europe's peace and prosperity is based, the support of democracy outside Europe should be a more visible core value and instrument in Europe's external policy. A more effective and explicit EU policy, to be undertaken alongside the efforts by our partners across the Atlantic and increasingly by partners on other continents in this world, is much needed to strengthen the international network of democratically governed states.

Such expanded democracy support should counter the set-backs in democratic transitions experienced in countries such as Russia, Egypt, Venezuela and Pakistan. What we have witnessed over the last few years is that autocratically governed states are better organized nowadays to resist and abort transitions to democracy. Hence the obligation on the EU and other democracies to improve and increase their democracy assistance.

### **Changing context for democracy's development**

Tonight, I like to highlight and share with you two major dynamics for the *Future of Democracy*.

The first is a shift in the path of the evolution of democracy. Most thinking and policies are still imbedded in the 'modernization theory', as advanced by Seymour Martin Lipset. This theory holds that democracy has a better chance of surviving in countries with a higher socio-economic development. It has been translated in shorthand: *economic development first, democracy later* (sometimes referred to as the 'Singapore model').

For that reason, local and international policy makers often favoured strong executive governments over democratically legitimized government. But in the interconnected world with the advancement of ICT reaching every corner of the globe, the human aspiration to be governed democratically can not be pushed back until economic development has sufficiently advanced (this could be labelled the successful 'Indian model'). Of the poorest half of states, about half are democracies, many of them for periods between 10 and 20 years, longer than most theories considered for possible. Economic Nobel Prize laureate Amartya Sen concluded: "Democracy is not a luxury that can await the arrival of general prosperity (and) there is very little evidence that poor people, given the choice, prefer to reject democracy". In his opinion, and I concur, democracy is not an extravagance for the poor but a necessity.

Whereas the democracies of Europe and North America developed over a couple of centuries, the new democracies don't have the comfort of time. Yes, time is needed for transitions and for the consolidation process, but time has become severely compressed. Modern ICT has given people voice to demand their rights and they use it. In my opinion, we need to amend (modernize) the 'modernization theory' and its related policy prescriptions and elaborate a new 'theory of simultaneousness'. With this term I try to express that we need to shift from thinking in causalities, from thinking in sequences, to thinking in processes that need to be supported in parallel. We need smart governments that are both effective and legitimate if we are to avoid new violent confrontations in the

democratization processes. Following peace agreements it is not reconstruction and economic development first and democracy later, it is all of this in parallel.

### **Globalization vs Glocalization**

For the second dynamic which I like to highlight tonight, I have to return to Lord Dahrendorf. He likened the crisis of democracy to the crisis of the nation-state. In the evolution of democracy, the nation-state and democracy became closely intertwined. It was the state that assumed the monopoly of violence to enforce – if needed – decisions. The concept of a demos that was sovereign became directly related to a fixed territory, mostly the nation-state. Democracy, as we know it, needs a defined political space to function. A space in which the ‘social contract’ between people about the way they are governed finds expression and meaning.

Today, however, we live in an era in which the nation-state has been weakened by a shift in power to multilateral corporations, institutions, and off-balance financial markets in cyberspace. As Lord Dahrendorf noted earlier, many important collective decisions are taken in today’s world outside of the classical space of the democratic arrangement.

The financial crisis that hit the world, and already resulted in 100 million more people lacking sufficient food pushing the number of people living in absolute poverty on this planet to over 1 billion, is one of the results of decisions taken outside the realm of democratic politics.

Lord Dahrendorf recognized a new elite, a global class which benefits from its competence to use all options of modern technology. According to Lord Dahrendorf, this new elite has the natural tendency to free itself from the traditional democratic institutions. They are the new “global nomads without borders”, nomads without a global ‘social contract’. What does this tendency to free itself from the traditional democratic institutions – and this is now about us – mean for the future of democracy?

Not long ago Robert Putnam, the political scientist, who researched the phenomenon of social capital and how the degree of social capital in a society relates to the stability of democracy, described another dichotomy in what he called the ‘diversity paradox’. He researched the effect of immigration within established democracies and found that the more the diversity of people increases in a neighbourhood, town or society, the more social networks start disintegrating and the more people start to distrust each other.

According to his research, diversity in population composition tends to result in people becoming more home-bound, withdrawing from participation and turning their backs to the ‘other’ in their societies. Conventional explanations such as a reference to xenophobia may no longer be applicable. Perhaps too big a diversity can be too much for the average human capacity to cope with. With how much diversity can a human being cope, he asked?

This question is the more pertinent in the context of Europe’s greying population. In 1959, the OECD countries had 7 people aged 20 – 64 for every 1 of 65 and over. Today, this is 4 to 1 and on course to be 2 to 1 by 2050. Immigrants from poorer countries account already for much of what little population growth there is in Europe. Once ageing gets properly under way, the shortfalls in the labour force are expected to become so large that the flow of immigrants would probably have to increase to many times what it is now.

On the other side of the equation, the diversity paradox found that at universities, in globalized corporations and in non-governmental organizations, for example, diversity functions as a stimulus for creativity and entrepreneurship. Higher educated people generally have a positive attitude towards multiculturalism whereas the lower educated feel threatened. Today, the drama of the higher educated with their global orientation lies in the fact that their projection of society does not fit with the perceptions of a substantial part of the population in established democracies.

It is for this reason that established democracies are not immune to the effects of globalization. The globalized market economy has affected the employment and the social and retirement security of large sections of the electorate in Western democracies. Because the forces of globalization are beyond people's control and comprehension, they have resulted in defensive responses within the electorate of established democracies, in what can be understood as a 'withdrawal from modernity' (back to local communities) and in a resurgence of nationalistic sentiments among a section of our electorates - at least such seems to be the case in countries within the EU. The faster the world integrates, the more people appear to huddle in religious, ethnic or tribal enclaves, in glocalization as someone has coined it. Integration and disintegration feed on each other. That poses a tremendous challenge to our established democracies for which solutions still have to be found.

Globalization, understood as the growth in global and regional governance, increases power over people's lives by institutions that are neither internally democratic nor democratically accountable to the world community of states. As a site of political self-determination, the nation-state is increasingly exposed to the trans-territorial and supra-territorial governance and a bewildering array of intergovernmental and non-governmental institutions. Therefore, it has been observed, that in today's world *nation-states are too small for the big issues and too big for the small issues.*

The core democratic institutions such as representative democracy and majority rule date from the time of the steam engine in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They are still the dominant institutions in a profoundly changed and changing world. The role of the media and of the new technologies for 24-hour instant interactive communication substantially influence the way democracy functions. It has resulted in the cleavage within the electorate as described above. The well-educated, globally-oriented class, familiar with the working of democracy, and - at the other side of the cleavage - the less well-off knowing that the representative democratic institutions within their countries have limited influence over the dynamics and decisions that affect their lives. Hence the profound distrust of the less well-off in the traditional political institutions and their tendency to vote for new populist leaders who mobilize support on the back of anger against the ruling elites.

The audacity of hope of Barack Obama could well be the much needed antidote for this rift within established democracies. He reversed the trend introduced by Reagan and Thatcher that government was the problem not the solution. His actions leave no doubt that he is restoring the primacy of democratic politics over the markets, not arguing for big government but for smart government. Obviously, it is much too early to know what the lasting effects of his policies will be on the future balance between government, the market and society at large.

Within the 27 Member states of the EU we need a similar audacity to connect with those that feel insecure about the effects of globalization. But as argued before in this presentation, this needs to go hand in hand with what Zygmunt Bauman, the Polish/British sociologist and philosopher, observed, namely, that an effective response to globalization can only be global. And the fate of such a global response depends on the emergence and entrenchment of a global – as distinct from inter-state or inter-governmental - political space in which the voice of the poor and underprivileged of this world is well represented and counted.

If we are not more alert and more pro-active in reinvigorating – and perhaps reinventing - democracy in a global perspective, globalization and liberal democracy may well turn out to be at odds with each other. Social scientists so far say remarkably little about how democracy can be preserved, let alone enhanced, in a more globalized future. At the same time democracy assistance practitioners have yet to begin to pose the relevant questions. It is a pertinent challenge for such networks of academics, policy makers and students as assembled annually by my friend Prof Joao Espada in Estoril, Portugal.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations:**

Ladies and gentlemen, as many have observed, we find ourselves in a transitional era moving from a uni-polar world into a multi-polar world. Multi in the sense of a plurality of power-centers; multi also in the sense of very a-symmetrical power distribution in different fields that express power (military, economic, technological, scientifically, etc.), and multi in the sense of state, non-state and cyber-space actors. It all constitutes a very complex network of relations, interactions and dynamics. We live in an era in which conventional wisdom is challenged by new realities that affect the basics on which democracies function. The future of democracy will only be assured if we are willing to invest in it since democracy can never be taken for granted. In my view, complacency and cynicism are the enemies of democracy from within.

### **Three general recommendations to take democracy into the future:**

- 1) At the level of EU member states and EU institutions, the effectiveness of and resources for democracy support need to be increased by preparing, agreeing and implementing an EU Consensus on democracy support in external relations;
- 2) The investment in the consolidation processes of young democracies need to be stepped up to prevent their backlash and, thereby, to strengthen the network of democratically governed states. This is the momentum of new multilateralism in which new commitment to assist young democracies should be fostered. One of the instruments on this road, the Community of Democracies, which Ministerial meeting shall take place here in Portugal in two weeks time on 11 and 12 July 2009; should be reassessed for this purpose.
- 3) Finally, we need to complement the current global efforts to address the financial and economic crises by initiatives to restore the primacy of democratic politics and the relationship between the governed and the governors over the big issues of our time. The environmentalists have within the UN framework an effective global academic network that has resulted in a wide consensus about what constitutes

climate change and monitors the pattern of climate change. Building on this example, we should consider a much stronger and wider global network of democracy practitioners and social scientists – building on existing networks such as the World Movement for Democracy amongst others - to search for answers for a global social contract to reinvigorate democracy in a globalized world.

I wish to conclude this presentation by quoting the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a quotation that has not lost any of its validity in today's world:

*Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible,  
but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.*

Thank you very much for your attention!

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