**Democracay and participation**

[**Atle Hetland**](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/atle-hetland)

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Democracies are not stagnant. They keep changing as they have done for the last hundred years when they have been in existence in the West and have spread to the rest of the world. In those countries where democracies hardly exist, or not at all, the leaders keep being asked to explain the situation, and they have to make excuses for the lack of democracy. The fact that everyone wants to be democratic shows that democracy is the most admired system, even for those who cannot or will not implement it fully. As individuals and ordinary people, we also want to be seen to have democratic values. It is shameful if we use excessive power, hide information, manipulate, or behave in other undemocratic ways to reach results that are mainly in our interest, but at the expense of others and the common good. The right to speak and be heard is the lowest levels of participation in a democratic system even if those in power or the majority decide against us. But even majority rule can be undemocratic because the minority groups must also be accommodated and compromises must often be made—because consensus can rarely be reached. The expression of differences and arguing for opinions and solutions are strengths of democracies. If debates are stifled, that can lead to the harnessing of views which can boil over later.

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Currently, we see such situations in Iran about gender and other issues and in China over corona pandemic restrictions. In both cases, the governments seem to have loosened rules; if that had been done earlier, there would have been less reduction of trust, which is always needed between the rulers and the ruled, in democracies and countries on the way to democracy. But we should also realise that progress is always a struggle between people who have different interests, and normally, it is necessary for those who have the short end of the stick, being oppressed or disadvantaged, to fight for their rights and justice. Not even in highly developed democratic systems will right and equality be offered for free. Well, maybe in some fields, but not generally although universal human rights and other principles give us basic guidelines. Our religions teach us about equality and justice, but sometimes only within the religion and not always between both genders and other groups.

The basic principles of democracy don’t change, but some interpretations do and certainly modalities of implementation. For example, much attention is given to multi-party systems and the role of the political parties, established around ideologies and broad programmes, which in turn are discussed and agreed upon by the members of the parties. At local and national elections, which usually take place at some two to five year intervals, the electorate vote for political parties rather than for individuals. Before the elections are held, the parties prepare specific programmes and plans for the coming election period. In our time, the role of the political parties seems to decline and the membership goes down. In many countries, fewer people use their right to vote, but participation in elections is the cornerstone of democracy. Some countries have made voting compulsory, such as Australia and Argentina. That may be a way to keep up people’s involvement in politics. More important is that political parties modernise their ways of working, focus on issues of key importance to ordinary people, and become relevant to old as well as new members. In some recent articles, I have discussed that in the West and other countries, parties and politics have been ‘hijacked’ by a small fraction of educated middle-class people, often leaving ordinary people out. This is a serious problem even in the most democratic countries, such as the Nordic countries. Democracies must change and improve, among other things to avoid the further development of populist and extremist groups and parties.

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The University of Gothenburg in Sweden has several research milieus working on democracy and election issues. Its programme and database called ‘Varieties of Democracy’ (V-Dem) keeps a large database with indicators defining, conceptualizing and measuring democracy in more than 130 countries. It ranks countries, too, but more important are the many political and research efforts, and the broad debates that V-Dem facilitates. All countries seem to strive towards more and better participation of people in the rule of their countries, well, at least those countries that consider themselves democratic, hybrids and on the right path. It is worrying, though, that some countries slide downwards on the scale and become more undemocratic.

The lack of broadening of democracy in most democratic countries is worrying, including reduced participation in political parties and voting at elections. It is serious if the role models of democracy fail to renew their democratic cultures and systems so that more people will participate, and so that new ways of participating are developed. Social media is still in its infancy and lacks regulations and trust. But in the future, there is great potential for democratic participation through social and other media. There would also be new ways of soliciting people’s opinions more often than through the quite rigid and relatively rare elections. Also, opinion polls like Gallup and others can be developed further to be an indirect or direct part of democracies. I believe it is essential that all countries modernise political participation, and make it more fun and pleasant, especially to include more young people, to participate. Politics in general, and being members of political parties, must not be something that people shy away from, somehow wanting to be neutral and avoid conflicts. It must be something that we all feel welcome to be part of, as a right and duty—to ourselves, our community, the country, and the wider world. Let us not just be observers, benefactors, or victims. Let us be active participants and contributors and make changes and improvements in our democracies.