[History and future of democracy](https://nation.com.pk/07-Feb-2019/history-and-future-of-democracy" \t "_new)

Atle Hetland February 07, 2019the nation

It is easy to talk about democracy as something that is given and as if it has existed for very long in our world, especially in the West. Well, in the former colonies voting rights came late, including Pakistan with independence in 1947 and voting rights for all since 1956; remembering, too, that in Pakistan, the military has interrupted democracy several times, but now steady democracy seems well on its way.

All of the world, democracy must always be protected, improved and developed further. It is not static since it requires people’s participation and depends on the moods and swings in people’s opinions and attitudes, values and aspirations, willingness to share, and so on. In the West in particular, the growth of populist, right-wing parties, sometimes getting a fifth or a quarter of votes in democratic elections, have made many politicians and people worried about the future of democracy. Some say we cannot allow extremist and uninformed people to decide about important issues. And others say that politicians cannot decide about many things, because they have too short time perspectives; experts must take more responsibility and given even more power.

Democracy, with universal suffrage, the right to vote in local, regional and national elections for every adult person, is only about a hundred years old, even in the West, which was earliest introducing it. In the West, there has been democracy for about a hundred or a hundred and fifty years; it began with America’s independence in 1776, and more so with the French Revolution beginning in 1789. But the right to vote was limited to men with a certain educational level, men with higher civil and military positions, and men with ownership of property and land. This often meant that as few as a quarter of adult men de facto had the right to vote. The right to vote was to begin with set at twenty-five, which was gradually lowered and today till eighteen, which is common in many countries today. It is indeed a stain on history that African Americans could not vote till the 1960s, and also that people in the occupied overseas territories, the colonies, were entirely ruled out of democratic participation.

Recently, I have learnt more about the history of women’s right to vote since we in several countries have celebrated a hundred years of women’s right to vote. New Zealand, Australia and Finland took the lead in including women in elections from the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s, with the Scandinavian countries and Russia following suit in the coming years and decades: Norway in 1913; Denmark and Iceland in 1915; Russia in 1917; Sweden in 1918; Canada and USA in 1920; UK in 1928; and among the latecomers, Switzerland in 1971, and Portugal in 1976.

It should be noted that women were not just given the right to vote on a silver platter; they had to fight for it, establishing organisations and movements and only achieving results step by step, such as first given the right to vote in local and regional elections, and to study at university and hold posts outside the home, and so on, and then finally reaching full rights equal to men. The right to vote did not automatically lead to women being elected; for several decades, national assemblies and cabinets were made up almost entirely of men; even local councils would have just a small number of women as recently as in the 1940s and 1950s. There is still a gender gap in politics till this very day, less so in Scandinavia, European countries and Canada than in USA, and other non-Western and developing countries. Reserved seats for women are sometimes used, including in Pakistan.

Two weeks ago, a grand seminar was held in the elegant former second-chamber parliamentary hall in the Swedish parliament building from 1905, now not used because it is too small for the increased number of parliamentarians in a one-chamber parliament. But the historic hall was indeed a good venue for last week’s seminar, opened by the Speaker of Parliament, beginning the 100th anniversary of the women’s right to vote in Sweden, thus universal suffrage, decided in the Swedish parliament in December 1918. But the first woman, Kerstin Hesselgren, was only elected and could take her seat in the first chamber and four more in the second chamber, after the next elections in 1921, with the parliament opening in January 1922. In the last parliamentary term, the cabinet said it was a feminist cabinet, and that label was renewed this time. Today, 188 parliamentarians are men and 161 women; yet, some of the parties have major gender imbalances, such as the Green Party with about three-quarters women, and the Christian Democrats with three-quarters men. The new PM Stefan Löfven II cabinet, formed in January 2019, has roughly 50-50 gender balance.

The main speakers at the seminar, Professor Emeritus Sören Holmberg from Gothenburg University and Docent Katarina Barrling from Uppsala University focused on the future of democracy, with some references even to the cradle of Western democracy, of sort, notably the Greek democracy some 2400 years ago. True, there were several limitations in participation; women and slaves were entirely excluded. Holmberg said the Greek democracy had lasted for 185 years, but it was not given that democracy around the world, at least not in its fairly fair form and good ideals of our time, would last for another 85 years, to beat the Greeks. Humorously, he added that none of us would be alive to verify the truth in this prediction.

There are several major threats to democracy, the seminar concluded: Firstly, experts (and bureaucrats) get more power and have better (sector) knowledge for making solid decisions. If politicians will be willing to transfer more power to the experts, leading to meritocracy, eroding the basis of democracy where commonsense and reasoning are essential. But today, we want more and more decisions to be fact-based, as we term it. Secondly, this trend is also a reaction to the opposite, the current right-wing populist movement, where facts are questioned or ignored. Thirdly, in many countries, young people may be reluctant to join politics and be active in political parties, employees’ or employers’ unions, interest organisations, and so on, fearing for their security, privacy, and for other reasons. Fourthly, many voters are less knowledgeable about who and what they vote for, if they at all bother to participate. Holmberg said that in his recent research, it was clearly seen that young people are more ignorant about societal issues than the older, to a large extent caused by young people getting information through social media, not the more solid print and electronic media. Social media has no gatekeepers and professional journalists and educators to assure quality of what is shared.

The seminar in Sweden, the book that was presented, and my (long) column today will not solve the future of democracy! But such contributions are important so that we all can do more to make the quality of democracy better and more inclusive, not for the select few experts, but for all of us. However, my prediction would be that we will see a time with growing populist and nationalist parties and movements, most of them quite futile and damaging, but sometimes also with some points that mainstream politicians can learn from. The politicians are to be blamed for having become so academic and high on their horses that ordinary people don’t understand what they say and do, giving space for populism.

It is a key point that experts must not be allowed to get more power than they already have. But to counteract that is not to allow low-brow, right-wing populism, and uninformed decisions. It is rather to make sure that voters and politicians are informed. There is need for counter expertise and common sense. The voters and politicians need to prove what is right and wrong. For example, that the rich and power full’s excesses must be curbed and their ownership of resources and profits controlled and reduced. All, indeed the rich, must pay taxes. The voters and politicians need to know what is morally right to do. We need knowledge and experts, with common-sense, even with some space for the populists. In future, people and politicians need to work closer together, sector-wise and in interdisciplinary ways. This is the sum of democracy; people must work together for the common good, at the lowest levels, in the neighbourhoods and the workplaces, and all the way up to national and international levels.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid