[Quality of democracy](https://nation.com.pk/21-Feb-2019/quality-of-democracy" \t "_new)

Atle Hetland February 21, 2019 the nation\

In today’s article I shall write about the quality of democracy, noting that democracy is about trust and participation, and that both citizens and voters, and those elected and representing people must have knowledge, commitment, training and values. In the ‘old world’, in countries such as Sweden and Norway, it is about keeping the interest going, getting young people on board, and having the public engaged, and also refining the generally good democracies. In many other countries, including Pakistan and the developing countries, which have young democracies, with less strong traditions and rules, it is more about getting democracy understood, accepted and deepened, assuring better quality and participation. Sometimes, only fifty percent vote in elections and that is not good enough.

Many principles of democracy can be learned from the West. Or should we say, since democracy was established in Europe a century ago, with struggles for another hundred years before that, their experience is longer and broader and therefore valuable to all countries. The young democracies may find new ways of doing things, yet, without diverting too much from the principles that have been established and developed for what we mean by democracy and democratic institutions and thinking. Today, it is also a fact that many Western democracies have new challenges, different from what they saw earlier; the populist groups and parties which follow ‘their own rules’ are part of the challenges. Hence, also Western democracies need to revisit and study the basic principles of democracy, including their political parties, old and new ones, so as to make democracy in general and the parties, more relevant, democratic and inclusive in future.

A few weeks ago, Sweden began celebrating the country’s 100th anniversary of universal suffrage, the right to vote for all adult citizens in the land. At such a juncture, many issues are being discussed, partly to rest on laurels and partly to discuss challenges – including how a country like Sweden can provide advice to other younger democracies in our world.

The Swedish democracy is just one hundred years old. It was in December 1918 that the all-male parliament voted for allowing women to have equal voting rights with themselves and hold seats in parliament. Three years later, at first election after that decision, the first woman took her seat in ‘Riksdagen’, the Swedish Parliament. The Swedes will have many celebrations and meetings to discuss democracy for the next three years, being proud of its democratic history and knowing that democracy must be talked about, up-dated, and renewed all the time.

If democracy lacks trust and participation, it will decline – as it does in many countries, but not (yet) in Sweden, according to surveys carried out by the national and international election and democracy researchers in Gothenburg, Sweden’s second city, and elsewhere. Professor Emeritus Sören Holmberg, the main speaker at the first anniversary seminar held recently (which I also wrote about in my columns in this paper on 7 and February 2019), made it clear that democracy is strong in Sweden. Gothenburg University’s Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) has documented this in wide international studies, including 35 sample countries. The Swedish democracy is a high quality democracy, ranking number one along with the other Nordic countries. Quality means that voters and people in general trust the system and participate in it. In Sweden’s last elections in September 2018, 85 percent of eligible voters cast their votes.

Furthermore, the voters are well-informed, engaged and concerned, and the representatives who are elected to the parliament and the provincial and local councils, are also capable people. But even in Sweden, there is a decline in certain fields, for example, that fewer people than before are directly engaged, such as knowing who their elected parliamentarians are. Young people are less well-informed than older people, and women slightly less well-informed than men, along with people with lower education and the jobless. There is a decline in membership in political parties and also in various professional and interest organisations, hereunder labour unions. It seems that young people want to be members in loser and lighter groups, indeed just exchanging messages and tweets on social media. The latter does rarely enhance people’s information level, usually the opposite. It takes away time and energy from real exchange and learning, which are better done when working in membership organisations of various types, including political parties. All of us, especially young people, seem to want to skim information about many things in an individualistic way, being less concerned about having deeper knowledge and collective responsibility, which is essential in a democracy.

And then, when we talk about citizen and voter education, and the ability to use democracy to rule for the good of all, we must indeed include those that we vote for as our representatives and politicians. They too need to be educated, not only the voters that we so easily talk about. Today, that is not always the case; in the West, I believe that many populist right-wing politicians are not well-informed, making claims and policy-suggestions that are based in ignorance. In many developing countries, politicians and their parties have scant knowledge about political ideologies, and that shortcoming makes their analyses and solutions superficial, rather based on common-sense, which doesn’t always work, not on knowledge, ideology and principles.

As I mentioned above, I have the understanding that the principles of democracy has a Western history and foundation, which is universal, staring, sort of, in Greece some 2400 years ago. However, it must be modified and made relevant to local conditions and current challenges. Young countries and regions may also have experiences that can teach the ‘old masters’ in the West new things.

On Tuesday this week, I had the opportunity to attend an excellent seminar organised by the Jinnah Institute in Islamabad, where the report ‘Democracy and Inclusion’, was presented. The seminar focused on the different groups of underprivileged that need to be given space and influence. That was right and it is certainly important in order to expand and deepen democracy. The speakers questioned why leaders and the state haven’t seen the importance in including the under-classes. The woman sitting next to me at the seminar, a retired senior civil servant, whispered to me that sometimes there is a limit to how much the leaders really want people to understand and know; suggesting that the state and leaders everywhere in the world may not always want people to understand ‘everything’ because they may then demand too much. True, and that is part of any democracy’s development.

Let me end my article today, admitting that I have only shed light on some few aspects of the quality of democracy. I want to underline that it is in dialogue between the citizens and the voters that leaders learn. Those that we elect to represent us in local, provincial and national governments should come from below, be educated at trained in educational institutions, at work, and through political parties and organizations, including labour unions. They represent citizens, the collective, not their own individual interests. Democracy must be ‘for the people, by the people’.

Pakistan has some mileage to cover here, so that the majority of the leaders are not only well-connected and well-to-do people, but people who come from the lower classes and can represent those who need help. There are such leaders, too, who come from below and reach leadership posts, even the top. We should be impressed that Prime Minister Imran Khan has actually done this. He is the exception that proves the rule. That is indeed promising for the land; the quality of democracy is moving in the right direction.

Again in today’s article, I made reference to Sweden, a land where democracy truly works quite well. But let us remember, that that land’s democracy, too, is just one hundred years old, when women, half of the population, finally got the right to vote, and it took time to get into posts. But today, women have moved up and their participation has improved the quality democracy. I have no worry that Pakistan’s democracy will indeed develop, and probably faster than the Swedish and Western democracies did. True, it will only happen if we go on working for it to happen, if we participate and are inclusive. Pakistanis are as good as the Swedes. If anything, take that from a Norwegian; we used to be behind the Swedes in development, and they used to tell us that. But then, let me mention, as a Norwegian who has studied and lived in Sweden, I admire the Swedes – and the Pakistanis – and quality democratic institutions make us all succeed.