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Decentralisation and New Popular Politics of Representation: Recent Experiences and Old Lessons

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The early attempts at popular representation in post-colonial Asia were particularly dynamic in Indonesia, the Indian state of Kerala and the Philippines. In the 1980s, in all three contexts, setbacks and new contradictions generated democracy-oriented groups that opposed stateism, violence, clientelism and coercive accumulation of capital.

The new groups gave priority to civic rights and public action on concrete issues and interests in support of popular aspirations. In 1986 in the Philippines, such groups and visions were vital in the peaceful "people-power" movement that managed to do away with Marcos in spite of the Maoist prediction that nothing but armed revolution would do. In Indonesia a few years later, similar ideas were crucial for the new generations of activists that later on managed to oust Suharto. In Kerala, social, environmental and educational activists began reinvigorating local civic and popular organizations in campaigns for full literacy, group-farming and alternative local development on the basis of participatory resource mapping.

Soon, however, two major problems became obvious, irrespective of contexts. One was how to foster co-operation between the new rights bearing civic activists (in NGOs, action groups etc.) on the one hand and old and new popular mass based organizations and movements among people who were not always able to fully utilize their formal citizen rights. There was an obvious need to combine specific issues in broader agendas, to form alliances between different groups, and to connect workplaces and residential communities as well as local and central levels. The second problem was how to make a difference in organized politics on the level of parties, elections and government.

The Philippine groups were fragmented (politically and otherwise) and

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the people-power movements were captured by sections of the elite, including celebrities such as Corazon Aquino and Cardinal Jaime Sin. The Indonesian campaigners remained "floating" without firm popular constituencies and marginalised from elitist politics. The Kerala activists had difficulties in scaling up their campaigns because of insufficient support for decentralisation, even among Leftist parties and related popular movements.

The two dilemmas may be specified in a figure illustrating the distressed relations between movements and organised politics.

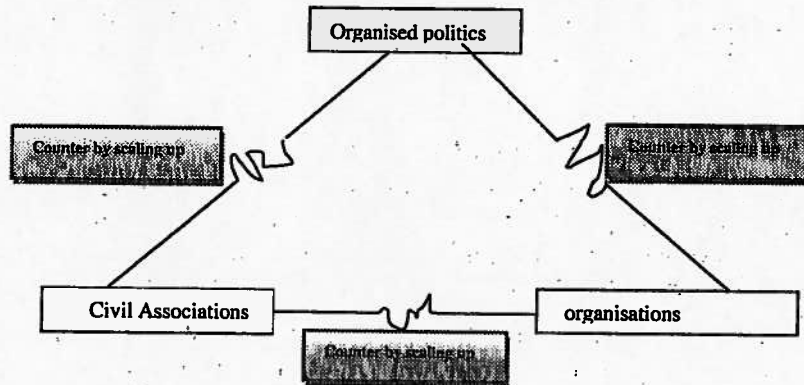


Figure 1:

The need to scale up issues, alliances and spatial links by improved representation in order to counter the distressed relations between movements and organised politics

The major challenge along each of the axes is to develop improved democratic representation to enable the scaling up of issues, groups, communities and workplaces. Structural conditions cannot be altered immediately. People need to get together and act collectively. If democratically, this calls for trustworthy representation in terms of solid chains of popular sovereignty. This includes authorisation, mandates, responsiveness, transparency and accountability. And this in turn calls for clear definitions of what demos are supposed to control what parts of public affairs to avoid polycentric confusion between factions of the demos.

Aside from deterministic sociological notions of social capital², the conventional answer to the question of how to go about this is of course to foster and work through co-ordinating institutions like state, party and ideology. However, according to the activists, many of the established institutions and perspectives had become part of the problem. Hence there was a prime need to reform and supplement them by way of more genuine democratic representation from below. Decentralisation was a crucial mean to this end.

The year of 1996 was the starting point for three exciting projects to address the challenges. In the Philippines, NGO campaigners, social movement activists, socialists, communists and former Maoists built a joint 'citizen action party' called Akbayan. In Kerala, the people's science movement (Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath, KSSP) and partners managed to scale up its own slogans by mobilising broad support for decentralisation and participatory local development and gaining political support for a state-wide People's Planning Campaign. In Indonesia democracy activists got wider following in confronting the Suharto regime. It is true that they were isolated again when the post-Suharto democratization was dominated by elitist pacts and civil society based alternatives, but as of late many of them are trying new ways to enter mainstream politics.

Recent outcomes in comparative perspective

In very brief, what are the major conclusions about these pioneering attempts to come to grips with the two major challenges of (a) combining the work and aspirations of civic and popular movements, and (b) making a difference in organised politics?

While not shying away from the contextual factors, it is impossible to address them here. Rather we shall first focus on a note about the problems and options that are in common, irrespective of specific contextual practices. These tendencies may thus be of wider relevance. Secondly we shall add possibly relevant experiences from a few relatively successful historical and contemporary cases.

In brief there are four general types of continuous problems in the three contexts. First, while basic freedoms remain it has become increasingly difficult for independent civic and popular oriented groups to affect public affairs. Much of the public affairs have been formally or informally depoliticized to

- (a) Technocratic governance,
- (b) The individual solutions on the market and
- (c) Patronage dominated ethnic and religious communities, political support systems and 'alternative patronage' via civic associations.

Meanwhile there is a shortage of institutionalized channels for interest and issue group participation, beyond clientelism and "good contacts". Even popular representation in formal government is held back by elitist control of party- and electoral systems. While the situation is worse in the Philippines and Indonesia than in Kerala, the basic trend is the same. As a consequence one might expect that it would be possible to gain fairly broad support for democratic representation through the opening and strengthening rather than reduction of the public sphere

Second, however, the elitist and centralist elements of the traditional Left have been a hindrance too. In the Philippines by way of Maoist violence and harassment; In Kerala through the subordination of issues of popular participation in governance and development to destructive party competition and factionalism; In Indonesia as part of persistent attempts at "unifying" (but in reality often dividing and disengaging) scattered groups and movements through competitive top-down leadership. 'Obviously, the importance of more independent and democratically institutionalized spheres for public discourse need to be re-emphasized, along with non-party dominated politics behind basic agendas.

Third, both hindrances in turn have spurred extra-parliamentary actions, litigation and the participation of special groups and targeted populations in the handling of specific matters of their own concern. This tendency is most dominant in Indonesia, where popular movements on basic social and economic issues and related political parties are weakest and de facto barred from mainstream politics. But the Philippines is not far behind and the trend is there in Kerala too. There is nothing wrong in this, but it is democratically insufficient. Emphasis must also be given to the scaling up civic and popular work behind concrete proposals and programmes in relation to both popular representation and direct participation in local governance.

Fourth, however, the pioneering attempts in this direction have suffered from insufficient political facilitation. The struggle for representation in government and executive institutions in order to build efficient and universal institutions for popular participation has been less prioritised than immediate experiment with participatory practices. Second, the 'top-down' facilitation and institutions need to be firmly in favour of democratic principles of civic and political equality, impartiality and unbroken chains of popular sovereignty. In the Philippines, progressive actors have not given sufficient priority to broad work for alternative local governance agendas but rather focused on activist struggles, including for power on the central level. In Kerala there has been inconsistent Leftist party and government support as well as insufficient non-party political back up among the propelling activists and engaged people themselves. In Indonesia, civic and movement activists "going political" have not managed to generate basic agendas and organization in-between specific groups and populist leaders.

' While demands for participatory budgeting and planning in decentralized contexts of Brazil are widely acclaimed, and while various institutional designs are discussed extensively, it should be possible to also venture into the necessary political facilitation and scaling up.

Historical experiences

In what way have similar challenges in other cases been handled with some success? Contextual factors must be compensated for, of course, but certain insights may be gained. The most celebrated case is the Scandinavian labour movement. How did it handle similar problems, thus being able to gain (Gramscian) hegemony behind its combination of welfare policies and economic growth? In view of today's dilemmas, three factors seem to be most relevant.

First, in the late 19th and early 20th century political co-ordination developed from below between civic and popular organisations and related leaders. This was on issues that called for organized political action, beyond self-help and mass-issue/interest struggles. The co-ordination gave birth to the social democratic parties. These initial basic ideas and experiences were also shared by the leaders and followers that later on formed Communist Parties. Recent comparable tendencies were at play in the rise of the Labour Party in Brazil. It is true that several already existing leftist parties were also involved, as well as several civil society groups, but the basic dynamics was among trade unions and other popular movements. Elsewhere, however, the typical pattern is that parties or party builders dominate the movements or sections of them. In such cases it may be fruitful to consider the relatively fruitful historical experiences and develop similar co-ordination on intermediate levels between movements and parties.

Second, alliances for sufficient majorities were always crucial. On the electoral and parliamentary level the alliances were initially with the liberals for civil, political, economic and other freedoms in addition to education and more; in Norway even national independence from Sweden. In Norway and Denmark, liberals were more outside urban areas than in Sweden. In the next phase (primarily from the 1930s) the emphasis shifted to farmers and the rural population in general. These people suffered also from the world economic crisis; and similar to West Bengal at present they had problems with industrial expansion. Ideologically it was possible to combine labour solidarity with deeply rooted peasant egalitarianism. The major interests in common included basic welfare politics for all and a compromise between decentralized local administration and universal rights. By contrast to most parts of continental Europe, this resulted in a broad front against Nazism and fascism. In the 1950s crucial alliances were added with the rapidly growing wage earning middle classes. The major issue was extended welfare - and the outcome was that the new groups were also included in the welfare state project. By now, moreover, new alliances are built with environmentally driven groups and parties to promote sustainability and attract a new generation of people. The general lesson seems to be the fostering

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of majorities for strong public resources at both central and local levels as a basis for collective action and welfare measures for all. In addition, alliances were built by (a) combining rather than contrasting universal rights and decentralization and by (b) supplementing liberal party democracy (with separate civic associations) with extensive institutions for democracy oriented interest group representation as well as direct participation in public governance. This is in contrast to support for the poor only as well as to special privileges for communal groups and/or interest groups, parties, patronage etc. and private middle class solutions.

Third, the primacy of social pacts between dynamic sections of capital and organised labour to promote rights based growth. These were not local or factory related pacts but collective national level agreements to link up with general state incomes, public welfare politics for all and Keynesian economic policies to generate demands for products from weaker industries that must also modernise and pay decent wages. Similar ideas are crucial in current attempts to handle the global economic conditions without adjusting to the neo-liberal schemes. One precondition is of course strong trade unions committed to general welfare, not just their own.

In short: (1) intermediate politics between movements and parties, to strengthen the former and discipline the latter; (2) issue based political alliances, interest based representation and direct participation for strong public resources and welfare policies for all, combined with decentralisation; (3) collective and all-level social pacts between capital and labour for rights based growth.

Contemporary relevance

Is the importance of these points reflected in the most recent and surprising case of popular advances; i.e. the transformation of the conflicts in Aceh into democratic politics towards peace and post tsunami development? They are as follows:

Comparisons with other disturbed areas in Indonesia as well as with post-tsunami Sri Lanka suggest that five factors were crucial in explaining why the positive outcome was possible in spite of all kinds of hindrances: First, decentralization and fledgling democratization in Indonesia countered the crumbling of the country (and thus the basis for separatism). This paved the way instead for political solutions. Second, people in Aceh identified themselves more politically and territorially than in relation to ethnic and religious communities. Third, the combination of neo-liberal and primitive accumulation of capital that otherwise dominates Indonesia and similar areas was partially contained through partnership between Jakarta and international donors and (later on) peace monitors. Fourth, the peace agreement was designed in favour of political and democracy oriented conflict

transformation. Fifth, these arrangements were to the benefit of the democracy oriented sections of the Aceh nationalists who were capable of utilising the new opportunities, especially to nominate candidates in elections, form local parties and even win elections.

Conclusion

Hence, while it is getting increasingly fashionable to argue that it is necessary to 'sequence' democracy by way of elitist introduction of 'strong' institutions of rule of law and 'good governance' ahead of altering power relations through popular sovereignty, Aceh is testifying to the possibilities of decentralization.

However, Aceh is not about liberal but social democratic peace! First, the process points to the need for strong politics, decentralized democracy, and regulation of business and for political capacity among people themselves to use democratic procedures. Second, to sustain these factors, there is an urgent need to foster citizenship (beyond political and territorial identity), to protect Aceh from integration into the normal Indonesian symbiosis of politics and capital when the current regulations may disappear with the donors, to develop genuine representation beyond quick transformation of combatant organisations and action groups into political parties, and to counter clientelistic and patronage driven 'direct' forms of representation by building alliances and campaigns towards democratic institutions for direct access and participation.

On the whole, the empirical evidence point to the need advance beyond liberal democracy and to combine decentralization with basic elements of social democracy.³

Notes and References

1. This paper draws primarily on my chapter 'The political deficit of substantial democratisation', in (Eds.) Harriss, J, Stokke, K, and Törnquist, O, *Politicising Democracy: Local Politics and Democratisation in Developing Countries*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004, my chapter 'The Problem is Representation! Towards an Analytical Framework', and with Prof. PK Michael Tharakan and Dr. Nathan Quimpo, 'Popular Politics of Representation: New Experiences from Indonesia, Kerala (India) and the Philippines', in (Eds.) Törnquist, O, Stokke, K, and Webster, N, *Rethinking Popular Representation*, Forthcoming Palgrave 2009, plus additional references cited therein, and (Eds) Törnquist, O et.al. *Aceh: the Role of Democracy for Peace and Reconstruction*, Forthcoming PCD Press 2009.
2. Törnquist, Olle C. F. (2006), "Prisoners of Social Capital", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(31): 3404-3407.
3. Social democracy does of course not equal the policies of predominant social democratic parties.