

## **Kerala presentation 8 December 2021- Olle Törnquist**

Dear friends and colleagues, sincere thanks for inviting me. Given all the exciting and senior commentators, and that I'm looking forward to the discussion, I shall limit myself to a brief 20 minutes introduction.

A central argument in the book is certainly that the crisis of Social Democracy is global. It's obvious, for example, that the failures since the 1970's to counter neo-liberal globalisation by Olof Palme's and Willy Brandt's North-South partnership, to internationalise the so far nationally confined Keynesianism and public welfare – that these failures, which have then undermined Social Democracy in the North, are related to the weakening of progressive policies in the South too. This is a crucial argument when telling today's inward-looking leftists in the North that they can't build Social Democracy in one country.

But, in this seminar, we wish to focus on the insights from the South, and especially on Kerala in comparative perspective. So, the questions are why most social democratic movements in the South lost out during the post-colonial second and the liberal third wave of democracy, whether and how it applies to Kerala too, and if there are any new options?

In the book, I try to answer by returning to studies during half a decade of popular movements and democratisation, and by reading them with the classical social democratic vision in mind – i.e., *development based on social justice, and now also ecological sustainability, by democratic means* – plus its four cornerstones – interest-based movements, democratisation, welfare, and social growth pacts – and related strategies.

The prime empirical cases have been in Indonesia, the Philippines and India – especially Kerala, which we shall pay special attention to. But they have all been analysed in view of the wider literature about development and democracy.

**On the most general level I'm arguing** that those who claim that thus widely defined Social Democracy is unfeasible in the South are wrong. Of course, they are right that the uneven and often extractive development in the South, along with many informal labourers and weak unions, plus weak states, differ from the more favourable conditions that enabled social democratic advances in the North. But their reasoning is just as mistaken as the modernisation theorists who assumed that development in the South must come about exactly as in the North. If we analyse instead the contextual political economy and movements, there are

both problems to learn from and options to explore. And in the book, this is substantiated by six conclusions.

**The first conclusion** *is that the advances during the anti-colonial wave of democracy were undermined during the cold war, when there was less emphasis on democratisation than on strong states – which in turn were captured by powerful groups. And that Kerala proved that this was not inevitable. What happened?*

- The anti-colonial focus on equal citizenship and democracy as basis for social rights was particularly successful in Kerala and Indonesia. But in Indonesia it was undermined in the late 50s, and there were similar dynamics in the Philippines. Why?
- On the one hand, reformist communists and leftist nationalists in Indonesia gave up on elections, supported President Sukarno's 'Guided Democracy', and focused on anti-imperial and anti-feudal campaigns, and a strong nation state. In the Philippines, Maoists added armed struggle.
- On the other hand, liberals, and western oriented social democrats wanted modernisation, but said that the middle- and workings classes were so weak that there must be so-called 'politics of order' along with the military, before democracy – 'middle class coups'.
- Hence, both strategies unintentionally supported the build-up of the political and military sources of power, that leaders like Suharto and Marcos used to hijack state and politics, and to build exploitative capitalism.
- Irrespective of strategies, the leftists even abandoned the focus on citizenship and democracy as a foundation for social rights – which would have allowed them to build broad alliances to counter the powerful politicians, bureaucrats and military that captured the states.
- Was this unavoidable? NO! The leftists in Kerala stood tall and continued, with ups and downs, to frame class-based demands for social rights with unifying quests for equal citizenship and democracy, including elections.
- Today when politics in the South once again turns repressive and authoritarian – much like during the late 60s and the 1970s' – this combination of struggle for democratic and social rights remains vital.

Let's then turn to the liberal third wave of democracy, which fortunately spread from Portugal, Greece and Spain to the Global South in the late 1970s, and gained strength with the fall of the wall in Berlin in 1989. Of course, Kerala had resisted authoritarianism in the 60s and 70s, and was already democratic, but now there was more pluralism and space for civil society initiatives. Why didn't the broadly speaking social democrats do better during this wave, in spite of the more favourable conditions? Even the people's planning campaign in Kerala lost out in 2001.

**The second conclusion** *in the book is that the new wave of democracy was never backed up by social democratic economic and social policies, and international support for it, as after the second world war in Europe. Hence, there were rarely inclusive growth and broad labour movements in the South. Instead, the limited industrial growth was typically combined with plunder, increasing inequalities, poor work conditions, unemployment, lack of class-based community and organisation – and constant difficulties to unify people with precarious work conditions. There is no doubt that there is a dearth of broad class-based collectivities. This affected Kerala too.*

Therefore, social democratic interest collectivities cannot be built only at the level of production through unions, no matter how important. Temporary and informal labourers and professionals tend to be ignored. This also means that social democratic growth strategies from Scandinavia that presuppose low unemployment are insufficient. There must be broader agendas to rally behind. We shall return to this. It's not impossible.

But couldn't the very wave of democracy compensate for the weak socio-economic policies and scattered interest-based collectivities? **The third conclusion in the book** *is that the liberal wave of democracy was never really fostered to do that. Where dictatorships were replaced with democracy it instead turned shallow and dominated by elites and oligarchs who were short of interest in including others in politics and fight corruption. This was rarely resisted by the mainstream international democracy support. Instead, it mainly encouraged pacts among the elites about new rules of the game – which in turn meant that pro-democratic movements rarely got a chance to make a difference. Kerala was a partial exception; we shall return to that.*

- But typically, even the celebrated examples of liberal democratisation in the Philippines and Indonesia have backslided.

- Even the left in West Bengal stagnated and the ANC in South Africa faces similar problems.
- And military interventions as in Afghanistan made things worse, while popular protests, as during the Arab Spring, were short of both organisation and international protection.

But wasn't it possible to promote more meaningful development and democracy 'from below'? *The fourth conclusion in the book* is that *the attempts by civil society groups, innovative unions, and social movements to build democracy on the ground and combine and scale up scattered interests and issues were important but proved very difficult and rarely made much political difference. I know, I was part of it myself. Kerala did better, but 'bottom up' is simply not enough.*

- The democracy movements in the Philippines and Indonesia lost out in the transition to internationally supported elite democracy. In spite of impressive attempts, most activist driven movements turned scattered pressure and lobby groups. They couldn't even take advantage of progressive reforms such as local budgeting. And they were insufficient to fight authoritarian populists like Duterte.
- Similarly, the strong civics in South Africa were marginalised within the ANC-dominated polity.
- Even the acclaimed participatory budgeting in Lula's Brazil did not help to fight corruption on the national level, so Bolsonaro gained power instead.
- The social rights activism and reforms facilitated through Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Council was promising but short of both coordination and roots in mass movements. The BJP could gain power.
- The most impressive popular participation was in Kerala by civil society groups within the framework of decentralised governance. First campaigns like on literacy and resource mapping from below, then the state-wide people's planning, co-ordinated by the Planning Board. But as you know, there were not just advances. Little could be done to institutionalise and foster sustainable production. There was political resistance, including within the Left. And until recently it has been difficult to scale up and relate local initiatives to other levels and actors.

In other words, the difficulties seem overwhelming. But as mentioned initially, contextual analyses of the problems generate new insights, and some new experiments are promising. So let's turn to them now.

**The fifth conclusion in the book** is *that in spite of the problems of uniting people on the level of production as well by bringing various popular and civil society groups together – it has proved possible to build broad alliances of progressive politicians, unions, other popular groups, and civil society activists, including media, in favour of equal civil rights, combined with potentially transformative welfare and development reforms.*

- One example is local alliances (as in Solo in Indonesia) for urban development that consider the poor, and, as briefly with AAP in Delhi, for equal rights to welfare and non-corrupt service provision.
- Another is the successful alliance a decade ago for Indonesia's public health reform.
- A third example is the recent Left Front landslide election victories in Kerala because of universal health and welfare measures in the struggle against Covid-19. These measures were possible thanks to the decentralised public action initiated 25 years ago – now supplemented by state level programmes. Plus promises to promote knowledge-based development.
- If such comprehensive reforms are combined with democratic participation by the parties concerned, it is also possible to contain populism in favour of democracy. Remarkably, Kerala has at least resisted India's chauvinist and religious identity politics.
- At best, broad alliances for rights and welfare may even generate strong enough collectivities to negotiate social growth pacts, such as for knowledge-based development in Kerala.

*However, **the sixth and final conclusion** is that there are three political obstacles: scattered reforms, populism, and insufficient international cooperation.*

- Firstly, there is a shortage of not just one comprehensive reform to rally behind but series of them. When activists have won the battle for one reform, they often return to their regular diverse activities – such as after the vote for Indonesia's health reform – instead of developing

and uniting behind new reforms that gradually strengthen people's capacity.

- In other words, they thus miss out on social democratic struggle for transformative reforms that step by step can nourish Democratic Socialism in terms of as much social equity, equality, and welfare as possible as a foundation for sustainable development.
- Secondly, there is poor democratic representation when the alliances negotiate with employers and the governments. Direct negotiations between populist leaders, on the one hand, and unions and civil society groups, on the other, are often promising, but not institutionalised and made democratic. Instead, they tend to turn into transactional horse trading, cause divisions among the movements and make shrewd leaders more powerful. As in Indonesia when the movements lost out in their cooperation with President Jokowi. Which paved the way for Jokowi's allies among the elite, as well as for right wing populist contenders and religious groups. Something similar happened during Noynoy Aquino's government in the Philippines, which enabled Duterte to take over.
- In view of the international experiences, it's essential in Kerala too that a new democratic framework is institutionalised for participatory governance of all parties concerned in designing and implementing the new promising efforts to combine local and state level programmes and to foster knowledge-based development, including state agencies, entrepreneurs and unions and professional organisations.
- The final problem is that international partners tend to support democratic institution-building and civil society groups that fight for separate issues, plus unions with specific demands. This is fine as such – but rarely contributes to the viable openings in terms of unifying broad alliances, series of reforms and democratic partnership governance.
- To foster the promising openings, a baseline principle for cooperation should be that the institution-building, the special union demands, and the concerns of civil society groups, relate to promising common agendas and alliances.
- In addition, the other problems should be addressed by international cooperation to facilitate design of series of transformative reforms, and

formats for *democratic* participation of all partners involved in drafting and implementation of the reforms.

Thanks, that's it. What do you think?