

## Oslo 15' presentation 7 December 2021- Olle Törnquist

Dear friends and colleagues,

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 70's to counter neo-liberal globalisation by North-South partnership to internationalise the so far nationally confined Keynesianism and public welfare – that these failures, which have undermined Social Democracy in the North, are related to the weakening of progressive politics in the South.

But, in this seminar, we wish to focus less on the North and more on the insights from the South. So, the question is why most social democratic movements in the South lost out during the post-colonial as well as the third wave of democracy, and if there are there 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 a broad definition of social democratic politics in mind: interest-based movements, democratisation, welfare, and social growth pacts – plus related strategies.

The prime empirical cases have been in Indonesia, India, especially Kerala, and the Philippines. But I have analysed them in view of the wider literature about development and democracy. So I hope we can discuss the results in a broader context.

**On the most general level I'm arguing** that those who claim that 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 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 supported President Sukarno's 'Guided Democracy', gave up on elections 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 working classes were so weak that there must be 'politics of order' along with the military, before democracy.
- 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, successfully, to frame class-based demands for social rights with unifying quests for equal citizenship and democracy including elections.
- Today when politics in the South turns repressive and authoritarian once again – much like during the late-60s and the 70s' – this combination of struggle for democratic and social rights remains vital.

Let then turn to the third wave of democracy, which fortunately spread from Portugal, Greece, and Spain to the Global South in the late 70s, and gained strength with the fall of the wall in Berlin in 1989. Why didn't social democrats do better during this wave, in-spite of the more favourable conditions?

**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 thus constant difficulties to unify people with precarious work conditions. There is no doubt that there is a dearth of broad class-based collectivities.

Therefore, social democratic interest collectivities cannot only be built 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 are insufficient because they presuppose rather low unemployment. 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. Rather it 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.

- Even the celebrated examples of liberal democratisation in the Philippines and Indonesia have backslided.
- Even 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. '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, such as by the ‘Akabayan-party’ in the Philippines, 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 most impressive popular participation was in Kerala by civil society groups within the framework of decentralised governance, but until recently it has been difficult to scale up and relate 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 for urban development that consider the poor, and, as briefly in Delhi, for equal & 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. This was possible thanks to the decentralised public action that we mentioned earlier, that was 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 promising, but the negotiations are not institutionalised and made democratic. Instead, they often 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 Ninoy Aquino's government in the Philippines, which enabled Duterte to take over.
- Thirdly, 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 we have pointed to.
- In addition, the other problems should be addressed by international cooperation to facilitate design of series of transformative reforms, and of formats for *democratic* participation of all partners involved in drafting and implementation of the reforms.

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