

## **The many faces of democracy**

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Over the past few months I have had first-hand experiences of the run-up to parliamentary elections in three different countries, all with an electoral system that we associate with the concept of democracy i.e. parliamentary democracy.

We take it for granted that parliamentary democracy as it is practiced today ensures majority control over political policy through periodic elections. Many of us therefore see it as a duty to go to the polls and cast our vote with the aim to influence policy.

I think it is time to seriously develop the democratic ways to express the will of the people, to broaden the political conditions, and to build the better world that many desire and need.

I base this statement on the combined experiences gained from the recent alternations in the political rhetoric in Sweden, the former warlords' positions ahead of presidential elections in Afghanistan, and the erosion of the legacy of Nelson Mandela in South Africa, whose population also goes to the polls this year.

### **The political rhetoric and a contrasting reality in Sweden**

Over the past few years we have had an alliance government led by a party that calls itself the New Conservatives. Not so long ago this party was also characterized as the new labour party by its own representatives. They launched the slogan that it should pay off to work. This was a rhetorical justification for the introduction of a series of tax reductions, called job tax deduction. At the same time the government allowed privatizations to accelerate not only in the health, education and welfare sectors in order to create as it was called freedom of choice for citizens. Today, we know the effects of a tax relief and free market policy. It has brought us to a situation with greater inequalities, an enhanced segregation starting already at school age, and dysfunctional social services. But above all it has led to a situation where support for such a policy has declined among voters according to Gallup.

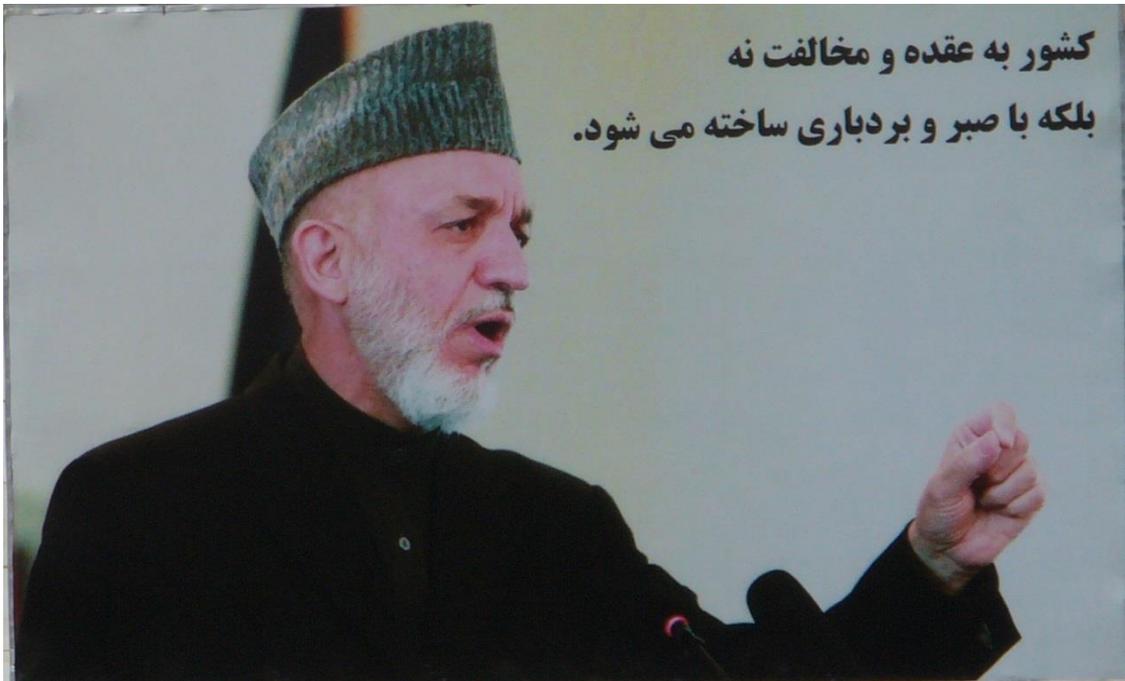
Therefore, with the elections coming up in six months' time the conservative government has changed its rhetoric and talk now about the increasing of taxes for example on alcohol, tobacco and petrol as a way to set things right again. When it comes to angling for votes all seem to be allowed. It is very easy to give promises on rhetorical level, but what does the conservative government really want to accomplish for the people when everything is boiled down to the core of welfare, whatever they mean with that?

The majority of politicians from the opposition largely join the ranks of those who do not want to see reality as it is, but is content to complain vociferously on the conservative's policy. No one is talking about a society that is beginning to crack but call for different cosmetic measures to restore some kind of order. Other politicians live of disarray and foment dissatisfactions for their more reticent political purposes.

Nothing will improve when political wrangling continues as diversions, where straight answers to questions seem to be banned. The public has already fallen asleep due to the boredom in the political debates or has abandoned the political arena and turned to the

market for their more individualistic needs. Metaphorically, no political bombs have detonated in the Swedish election run-up except for the leader of the racist right wing party who recently transformed his memory from childhood to fit his political agenda in a TV show.

### Warlords and democracy



Outgoing President Hamid Karzai

Afghanistan is a different story but is still approaching a presidential election in April, according to the official rules of parliamentary democracy. As a temporary visitor in Kabul with a peaceful mission, namely to introduce action research to a group of Afghan educators, the threats that surround people in Kabul become the first impression.

Iron rings of checkpoints in Kabul are the immediate impression of danger, not to mention the many personal bodily searches taking place wherever you are. In the entrance to the grocery store on the other side of the street, when you arrive at work, or while traveling out of the country when personal bodily searches are frequent.

A disturbing reflection is that you start to consider the security procedures as a natural part of reality after a few days. It is in this way that routines and repetitions are transforming our thoughts into the taken for given.

If the political debate in Sweden is largely characterized by fatigue and an eternal speechifying in tight circles, is the prelude to the presidential election in Afghanistan significantly tougher, at least on one level, namely as regards the palpable scaremongering. Explosions and armed attacks are increasing in number according to the messages received via mobiles which always end with the call - avoid the area.

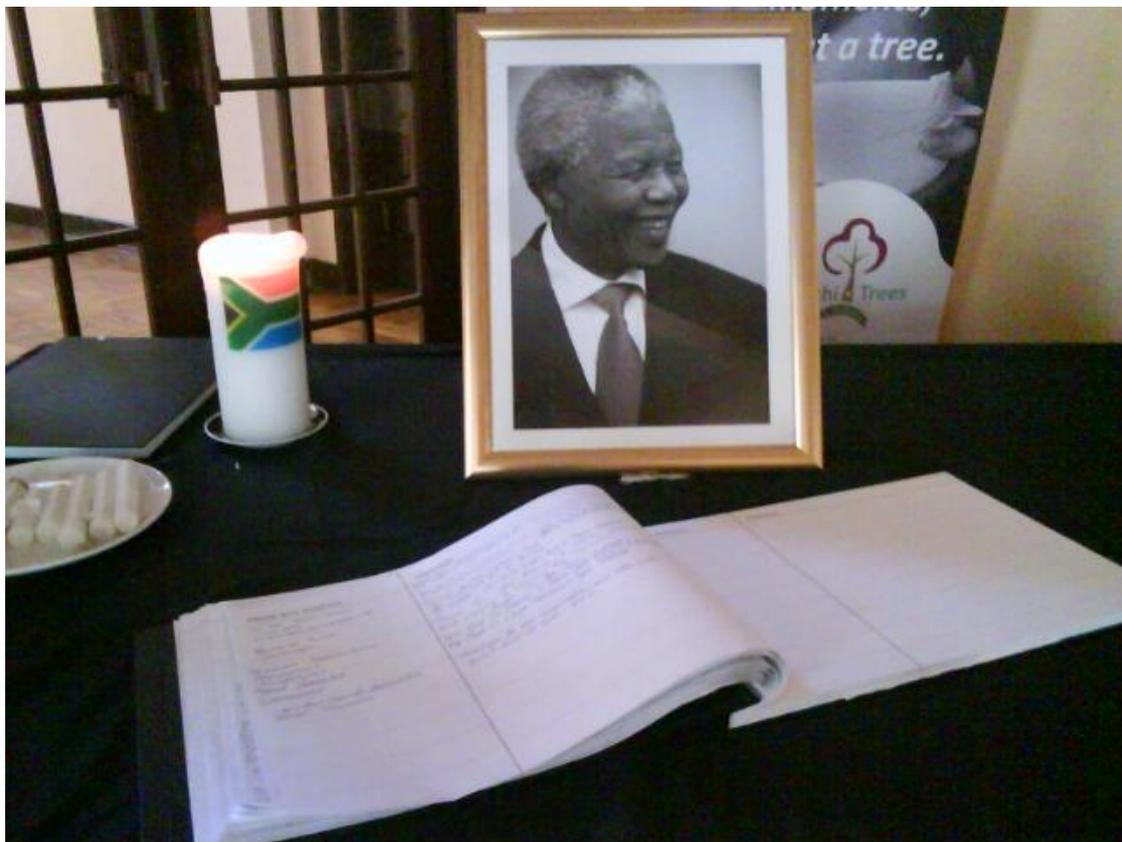
Soldiers are sometimes killed but the victims of these attacks are mostly civilians. And the message is clear: do not vote for anyone who happens to be in power because he and his minions are not to be trusted. And the one in power is a man!

The current President, Hamid Karzai, has been elected twice and may not be re-elected again, but has a brother among the eleven male candidates for the Presidency. The group of candidates is a diverse collection of bearded men, often well-educated and in the age between 49 and 72 years. All have thus survived the life expectancy in Afghanistan which is at 48 years. This is in itself an effect of their already established social class affiliation or the fact that many have lived and been educated in the West.

In addition, all presidential candidates belong to the majority group of Pashtuns. Many have a past in the Mujahedin, i.e. the groups of warlords who led the resistance against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the early 1980s and also as former Ministers or partners with the current President Karzai.

Some are also using their good contacts with the Taliban as a positive argument in election campaigns to point to prospects for a peaceful future in Afghanistan, while others try to create different types of alliances between candidates to be able to create an election victory. This is a well-known political trick when power overshadows politics and ideology.

### **What will happen in South Africa after Mandela?**



Condolences for Nelson Mandela

I have followed developments in South Africa for many years and my latest trip to South Africa coincided with Nelson Mandela's death on 5 December 2013.

Ten days of proclaimed national mourning hailed Mandela as a personification of mankind's good qualifications, and as a political leader elevated to an icon. This took place in a turbulent political time with the killing of the striking miners at Marikana in August 2012 in

recent memory. This event was a sad reminder of the political violence that we associate with apartheid and not with a free and democratic South Africa.

Furthermore, the current President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, was booed by the present South Africans at the memorial service in Johannesburg. This was a humiliating and embarrassing moment for Zuma, but also a sign of discomfort with Zuma's political practice as it do not live up to Mandela's level.

Both before and after Mandela's death the so called Nkandla scandal has been on everybody's lips. Nkandla is a town in KwaZulu-Natal where Zuma has his private home. This home has been upgraded for security reasons for nearly 250 million Rand from the government coffins, i.e. tax money. While the ANC spokespersons assert the opposite, an interim report from the Public Protector of South Africa has verified the huge costs along with several cases of breach of trust by President Zuma because he has failed to protect the State's assets.

Under these circumstances, South Africans go to the polls on May 7 2014. The ANC has won the elections in South Africa with an overwhelming majority since 1994. Many analysts believe, however, that this year's election could change the political balance of power in South Africa, not least because of Mandela's death and Zuma's lack of popularity.

Furthermore, two new parties have been established with influential leaders that can challenge the ANC. These are the former leader of the ANC youth league Julius Malema who has established the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and Mamphele Ramphela with a background in the Black Consciousness Movement who has started Agang SA (Build South Africa).

The main opposition party the Democratic Alliance (DA) is strongest in the Cape Province and made recently a failed attempt to create an alliance with Agang SA by suggesting that Mamphele Ramphela should be their joint presidential candidate. Political parties are trying to create alliances to access power also in South Africa.

However, the biggest threat to the ANC is their own inability to create a new and more just South Africa. This has provoked one of the larger trade unions in South Africa, NUMSA, to start their own political party.

Many official individuals in South Africa, including the respected scholar, Professor Jonathan Jansen, the Rector of the University of Free State in Bloemfontein, are doubtful whether they can continue to vote for the ANC, a party which in their opinion does not hold what it promises.

Slavoj Zizek, an international acknowledged critical scholar wrote the following in the South African newspaper Mail & Guardian, when he got the message about Mandela's death.

People remember the old African National Congress that promised not only the end of apartheid, but also more social justice, even a kind of socialism. The miserable life of the poor majority broadly remains the same as under apartheid. The main change is that the old white ruling class is joined by the new black elite. If we want to remain faithful to Mandela's legacy, we should focus on the unfulfilled promises his leadership gave rise to. Zizek continues and asks: how to push things further after the first enthusiastic stage is over, how to make the next step without succumbing to the catastrophe of the totalitarian temptation – in short, how to move further from Mandela without becoming Mugabe. (Extracts from Mail & Guardian, December 13 to 19, 2013, page 33)

## **To democratize democracy**

To democratize democracy is the conclusion drawn from these three examples to improve human living conditions according to a motto of solidarity and to distribute our common resources in a more democratic manner. Therefore, the concept of democracy and views on the scope of policy and politics need to be extended both internally and externally – we need to democratize democracy.

A further reason for the democratisation of democracy is that the turnout in general elections all over the world are dropping in all countries that still regard themselves as democracies. One of the reasons is that ideologies have been reduced to contributions in debates without ideological content and therefore perceived as variations of a common perspective. Another reason is that self-interest has become more acceptable and the concept of solidarity has been marginalised as an alien world has come closer through globalization.

An internal extension of democracy and politics is possible if we create political platforms at local, national, and global levels through available digital networks. This can include the majority of people as modern mobile phones are today often available even amongst the poor. These platforms will be used for mobilisations of people on current and future issues and as means to influence policy decisions. These political platforms can also be linked to physical meeting points.

Various efforts in this direction have already been carried out even though with mixed results. This is what we have learned during and after the Arab spring and during the conflict in Ukraine lately. However, if such systems are institutionalized and allowed to be included as parts of the democratic political systems, they may create more of inclusiveness and more respect for the will of the people.

A prerequisite for the success of an internal democratization as outlined above is to accompany it with an external democratization. Today we allow major societal functions to live a life of their own without greater transparency due to concerns for the private sphere and the sanctity of financial expertise. This applies to global financial assets as well as edicts from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

It is taken for granted to impose taxes on productive assets and the work that they create while the financial wealth at large is left alone even though we know that this wealth in many cases ends up in the shady archways of tax havens. These tax havens contain today one-sixth of the world's private assets. At the same time we know that the world's financial assets are ten times as big as the productive assets as measured by the gross domestic product. We can at least conclude that this situation is a huge social and economic loss for societies at large.

In addition, the global economy allows multinational companies to organize tax evasion in their dealings with developing countries. As a consequence, an amount of 6,000 billion dollars every year is removed from the economy of developing countries. Furthermore, the policy requirements that the World Bank and the IMF placed on developing countries over a ten-year period resulted in an estimated production loss of nearly 70 billion a year. We do not need to be geniuses to understand why they continue to be developing countries.

Both the creation of a more sustainable development and the total elimination of poverty can be achieved if financial resources are treated the same way as material and human resources through a democratisation of democracy.