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 clientelism, 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 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.

![Diagram](image)

**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. It 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 capital, 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.

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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
experience 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 framers 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 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 were 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 politics 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 syndrome 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.  

Notes and References


3. Social democracy does of course not equal the policies of predominant social democratic parties.

Regional Parties, Coalition Government and Functioning of Indian Parliament: The Changing Patterns

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One of the studies indicates, 28 percent of Indian people have great deal of trust in Indian Parliament, but at the same time the study also indicates, nearly one third of Indian people hardly have any trust in Indian Parliament. Looking at these figures we can conclude that, the an average Indian has lost trust in Indian Parliament and at the same time the Indian parliament has lost its relevance as an agency for bringing about social change in Indian society? It has become fashionable among many to mock at the parliamentarians, this is more amongst the urban educated middle class people. But when they do this they tend to forget, these parliamentarians are people's representatives who have been elected by people themselves.

Though there may be problems and shortcomings, but those who make a mockery of the Indian Parliament tend to forget that in-spite of shortcomings, the Indian Parliament had passed several legislations of immense social importance. Even if we do not wish to stress our memory and trying to look at some of the historical legislations by the previous parliaments, it would not be incorrect to indicate at least two legislations, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Program (NREGP) and the Right to Information Act (RTI) passed by the last parliament as historic. If NREGP in some way has changed the economic life of the people in the rural areas to some extent by giving guarantee of at least 100 days work in a year to the rural unemployed, the RTI had served as an important tool for the urban educated citizens in making government accountable for their each and every act. In the long journey of Indian Parliament such legislations are countless.

In this paper I will try to trace some of the broad changes in Indian Parliament and its impact on the parliamentary processes.

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