Opening address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a seminar on democracy and human rights
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It is a great pleasure for me to be able on my last day of the visit to Sweden to participate in this seminar on democracy and human rights and thus obtain a better understanding of the current academic debate and research on these very important issues of our times.

Being with you here today I am reminded of my first introduction to international scholarships in the 1960s when I was invited to take part in the first research project devoted to democracy in Europe. Leading political scientists at that time, Robert Dahl of Yale University, later president of the American Political Science Association, and Stein Rokkan, the leader of the social sciences in Scandinavia, formed a research team to undertake a project called "Smaller European Democracies." I had the good fortune as a young student in 1964 to become a member of the academic team working on that project and was associated with it for the next five years.

The European order at that time made it easy to define the subject area: there were then incredibly few democratic states in Europe. Central and Eastern Europe was not the only group of nations outside the borders of democracy; Spain and Portugal were also victims of dictatorships and Greece and Turkey were dominated by military regimes for a while.

In today's discussions about the speed of democratic evolution in countries which were once under some forms of dictatorship there is often a tendency to forget how few countries in Europe have enjoyed

democratic government for the whole of this century. We can almost count them on the fingers of one hand.

Like most of you assembled here today I do not consider myself to be old. But, at the year of my birth the majority of peoples in Europe, both western and eastern, lived under military dictatorships. The cruelty of those regimes was of unpresented proportions; all fundamental freedoms were violated. During the 20th century tens of millions of Europeans have been killed and tortured; and a number of European regimes have also been responsible for severe human rights violations in other parts of the world.

We Europeans have had to learn the democratic lesson the hard way. Therefore when setting timetables for states that gained independence in the post-World War II era, especially states in other parts of the world that were ruled by the colonial powers, we should in all humility recognise the breakdown of democracy, the dictatorial rule, that occurred in many western European states during tragic periods of this century. Thus while we tend to consider our continent to be a model for others it is worth remembering that for an important part of this century European governments which violated human rights outnumbered those that could truly be called democratic.

I mention these familiar facts here because they are sometimes ignored when impatient and critical voices from Western Europe demand that the nations which were oppressed during the tyrannical era of the Soviet Union and its satellites or during periods of colonial rule in other parts of the world should almost immediately, in the space of a few years, emerge as fully-fledged, flawless democratic societies.

Historical experience ought to have taught the people of Western Europe moderation, patience and tolerance in this regard. We are now reaching the end of a century which has been characterised by more human sacrifices, bloodshed and suffering in the battle for democracy and human rights than have ever been seen before. As we greet the approaching millennium, it is healthy for us all to contemplate these historical lessons.

Two world wars, dictatorships and times of tragedy, economic depression and political oppression, millions of lives sacrificed – unfortunately these can almost entirely be attributed to the larger nations on the European continent, which continually have insisted on a

leadership role for themselves and still are vying for the place of honour and influence either within alliances or outside.

The democratic heritage, the society of tolerance and human rights, has this century primarily been preserved by smaller nations, most of which – in particular the Nordic nations – also have an outstanding record in terms of welfare, living standards and economic prosperity.

Although this century has been the bloodiest in the history of Europe and the world, it is also the century which has seen the greatest advances of democracy and human rights, of scientific and technological progress which has brought man into space and close to the core of the genetic creation.

The forces of change have fundamentally altered the economic and political map of Europe and the world, and brought social transformation which affects every aspect of our daily lives, alters the family and the workplace, the schools and the seats of power, in the village and in the regions, in state and global institutions alike.

Northern Europe has indeed seen dramatic demonstrations of these changes. New states and regional organisations have been created. For the first time in our history there is now in existence an interlocked network of organisations embracing the entire area from Russia across the Baltic States and the Barents Sea through the Nordic countries, over the Atlantic Ocean and Greenland into Canada and the United States of America.

These three regional organisations – the Baltic Council, the Barents Region Council and the Arctic Council, all of them created in the present decade and all advancing in relevance and scope from each new year to the other – are a clear demonstration of the political transformation which has taken place in Northern Europe, not only bringing into being new states and new territorial bodies within states, but also creating for the first time exclusive forums for co-operation between the Northern European states and the two most important states of the twentieth century, the United States of America and Russia.

Although the Baltic, Barents and Arctic Councils are all different in composition and purpose, they constitute together a new structural reality in Northern Europe. They show how the end of the Cold War has fundamentally changed the political and economical landscape in Europe and brought the northern regions into key positions, influencing strongly the

success of the new Europe and the stability of the Russian – American relationship.

I therefore maintain that the tasks of universities and research institutions in the Nordic countries should not only be to study the democratic processes and human right problems in Asia, Latin America and Africa but also to face squarely and honestly the problematic democratic evolution of Europe, an evolution which is still going on, and especially to look at the new political realities in Northern Europe, the demands for new forms of democratic influence made by indigenous populations, minorities, specific territories, regions and immigrant populations in our own and neighbouring countries.

Despite the almost unique characistricts of the Nordic countries with respect to democracy and human rights our tasks in the furtherance of democratic reforms should also be directed towards our own nations and homelands and the evolution of the new institutional frameworks in Northern Europe.

Through the formulation ”We the Peoples”, the Charter of the United Nations acknowledges ’popular sovereignty’ as the fundamental principle. The State is for the people, not the other way around. This interpretation is reinforced by listing human rights which place restraints on the traditional sovereignty concept, through the regulation of what the states and governments can and cannot do with regard to individuals and groups living within their jurisdictions.

The terms ”domestic jurisdiction” and ”internal affairs” to which governments often refer in defending their behaviour have been restricted in both theory and practice. Individuals, groups and peoples have rights as well as procedural access to legal and political forums at the international level and the international community is entitled to and indeed does monitor the compliance by states with the international human rights standards.

As for the concept of democracy, article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 25 of the International Convenant on Civil and Political Rights are of great importance. It is a human right to run for office and to vote in real, periodic elections with a secret ballot.

Other human rights provisions in these and other instruments establish the freedoms of opinion, expression, information, assembly and association

which most of us would connect with democracy. It is also easy to establish the links to good governance, accountability and transparency in government. The freedom of association extends clearly to political parties and labour unions. These and other freedoms, however, come with duties for the holders of the rights and the freedoms can sometimes be restricted by law.

Most would agree that still other human rights are essential to democracy. These would include equal rights, the rule of law, independent and impartial courts, and due process in criminal justice proceedings.

To what degree, if at all, is respect for still other human rights necessary or the relevant for democracy? What about economic, social and cultural rights which are sometimes referred to as the second generation of human rights after civil and political rights? The economic, social and cultural rights tend to be formulated in a softer, less absolute manner in the international instruments. The texts don't usually say straightforwardly that everyone has the right, but rather that states undertake to ensure this or that right in a progressive, step-by-step approach.

Is such an approach satisfactory? What about UN proclamations to the effect, like in the Vienna Declaration from the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, that all human rights are of equal value, universal, indivisible and interdependent?

Isn't it reasonable that the right to education be considered necessary for democracy? Doesn't voting in elections require knowledge, like being able to read the press and party platforms, for informed decision-making? The same could be said about human rights education in terms of people knowing and being able to pursue their rights.

What about the rights to food, housing or shelter? Why should individuals in developing countries be interested or even involved in democracy when these and other basic needs go missing? Or can the argument be turned around to say that democracy is necessary to make sure that governments are accountable in distributing wealth and avoiding corruption?

I am indeed looking forward to your comments on some of these questions and appreciate highly the opportunity to benefit from your discussions here today.