A lecture
by
the President of Iceland
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for doctoral and master students
of Raoul Wallenberg Institute and
the University of Lund
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It was a stimulating and enjoyable experience to participate this morning in the seminar on Democracy and Human Rights and to gain a better understanding of the emphasis and directions influencing the important research undertaken here at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute and the University of Lund.

In my opening remarks this morning I referred briefly to the new political realities in Northern Europe following the end of the Cold War. New states and regional organisations have been created. For the first time in our history there is now in existence an interlinked network of regional organisations – the Baltic Council, the Barents Council and the Arctic Council – 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.

This political transformation has brought with it concrete problems regarding democratic reforms, the rights of national minorities and indigenous populations, the powers of local, territorial, state and regional institutions as well as more fundamental questions regarding the democratic boundaries of the nations states within the new networks of inter-linked organisations ranging for the local level up to the plateau of international and global institutions and forces.

It is important for scholars and students in Northern Europe to devote attention to these new developments on our own home front. We

should not only be concerned with studying democracy and human rights in far away countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa. The problems closer to home are also worthy of our attention.

It perhaps reflects the present viewpoints of Nordic researchers and scholars that the two books which my friend dr. Guðmundur Alferðsson send to me prior to my visit to Sweden dealt both with the problems of democratisation in the third world; the titles being ”Demokratisering i tredje världen” and ”Mänskliga rättigheter i svensk utrikespolitik”. Both books indicate the interest by Nordic scholars and governments in looking particularly at the problems of those who live sufficiently far away. My point is, however, that we should also be concerned with the problems of democracy and human rights in our own and neighbouring countries in Northern Europe and within the new institutions, including the regional organisations, created in the northern part of our world.

The Northern European states have now been given new opportunities for co-operation, both among ourselves and with Russia, the United States and the European Union, co-operation endowed with regional, national and global dimensions. It is therefore important that we in the Nordic countries bring our long and well-established tradition of co-operation and open dialogue into the new institutional frameworks created for northern European co-operation.

When describing these recent changes it is indeed strange to look back to my younger years when in the 1960s I became engaged in the pioneering project called “Smaller European Democracies” directed by Robert Dahl and Stein Rokkan.

Then the democratisation of Europe was still uncertain and restricted; fascist dictatorships dominated in the southern part of the continent; totalitarian regimes kept iron grips on central and eastern Europe. Now, over 40 democratic states have become members of the Council of Europe, which was founded on the ruins of the Second World War, primarily to keep France and Germany from fighting another war, but now effectively proving the advance of democracy and human rights.

Throughout this century the universities have always been highly influenced by the forces of political, economic and social change, both in their choices of research and areas of teaching, and in the formulation of conceptual frameworks and academic boundaries.

The Cold War dominated international and strategic studies. The emergence of new states from the wings of the colonial powers changed the scope of economics and research into development, customs and conflicts.

The protest movements of the sixties and the seventies brought critical perspectives to the studies of the environment, of the role of the women, of the equal rights of different races and indigenous populations; and recent discoveries in science and technology have raised fundamental questions on the role of interdisciplinary research and teaching.

In fact it is quite natural to wonder how the universities will be able to continue their contributions to innovation, discovery and pioneering thought when the world is being transformed so fast and in so many interrelated ways. Has the pace of progress become so great as to prevent reflective knowledge and social comprehension?

It is especially urgent for us in Northern Europe to give priority to research and teaching dedicated to furthering the understanding of the fundamental alterations taking place in our part of the world. The political, economical and social transformation in Northern Europe now challenges scholars, researchers and students to describe and interpret the multitude of change now affecting the future of the Northern European states, the potential of our nations and our communities.

Let us look at an area which urgently needs more research and deeper understanding, area where new questions need to be asked and new concepts and referential frameworks need to be formulated so our actions and decisions, views and conclusions can be directed by knowledge and wisdom.

I refer here to the political innovation – we could even say the political creation – which in the last 10 years has dominated the evolution of Northern Europe. New states have gained independence; increased rights have been given to local and regional institutions, bringing new dimensions to the relationship of the northern states to key partners in the future evolution of Europe and the western world. The decision-making structures are in a continuous flux. The classical academic and democratic question – Who governs, where and how? – now requires new answers, bringing into focus the nature of democratic accountability in the modern world. We could even say that Northern Europe has become a working laboratory of new political institutions and relationships: local, national, regional and global. A proper understanding of this dynamic reality can help to make the new Northern Europe a model which others could study and follow.

Of course we have seen recognitions of these changes in many academic institutions in Northern Europe. But more is required. We need an inter-connected network of sustained co-operation and dialogue among the entire community of scholars from Northern Europe and those specialists from other parts of the world who are interested in sharing in our explorations.

In reflecting on how to create such an integrated community of Northern European scholars dealing with issues, projects and problems related to the future of our countries and regions, an academic network which year by year would deepen and extend our understanding and provide Northern European institutions with sound substance for the democratic decision-making processes, I visited again in my memory the pioneering role of the ECPR.

The European Consortium of Political Research was established a quarter of a century ago by Jean Blondel, Stein Rokkan, Richard Rose, Hans Daalder and other farsighted and energetic professors and scholars in order to bring together the growing number of researchers interested in the social, political and economic problems associated with the emerging European integration and the changing political and social structures of our continent. The ECPR became not only an institution for pioneering research and studies, but it also brought into being a community of European scholars who otherwise would have been dispersed and even isolated.

The successful ECPR model might be applied to the challenging task now facing the universities and research institutions in Northern Europe. The creation of an annual or biennial forum which could be named the Northern Research Forum, NRF, would bring together in a systematic way the wealth of academic talent now existing in Northern Europe. It could provide regular opportunities for introducing research papers and holding workshops on the significant problems. It could further co-operation between scholars from different parts of Northern Europe and integrate the new institutions of learning and research in Northern Europe into the more established world of traditional universities.

The Northern Research Forum could bring scholars from the newly independent Baltic states into the established co-operation between Nordic scholars and thus contribute to the integration of academic research in the eight Nordic-Baltic states. The forum could facilitate participation by outstanding scholars from other parts of the world and allow American and Russian scholars in particular a convenient and regular entry into the academic world of the Northern European communities; thus furthering indirectly American-Russian academic co-operation and opening up avenues to American and European foundations which financially support research and academic co-operation.

I proposed the creation of such a northern research forum in the anniversary speech which I gave at the 20th opening of the academic year of the University of Lapland last September. I reiterate these suggestions here today because I believe that research on democracy and human

rights needs to be an important component of the co-operation between Northern European scholars, given the new political and democratic realities in our part of the world.

Let me in this respect mention some problems and concerns in the fields of democracy and human rights which I believe to be of particular significance both for us in Northern Europe and for the evolution of the global community.

In the opening article of the UN Charter, it is stated that human rights ought to be respected without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion. The corresponding article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and article two, together with subsequent instruments, lengthens the list of non-discrimination grounds. Equal protection of the law, equality before the courts and equal access to public service lend additional emphasis to the equal enjoyment of all human rights. The prohibition of discrimination in that enjoyment are undoubtedly fundamental rules of human rights law, binding for all states. Equality in law must bring about equality in reality and everyday practice.

However, democracy is not perfect and majority votes do not necessarily result in justice. Democracy also needs restraints set forth in the international human rights instruments. One example is the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples, the rights of small groups whose numbers do not give electoral leverage. In order to avoid discrimination, the legal texts often provide for special measures with respect to cultural indetity, language and education. These are often controversial and it is indeed an important question how far they should be extended.

Self-help is another contributing factor and therefore human rights education enabling people to know which rights they can claim and how has gained increased significance. In face of discriminatory practices, states are obliged under the international instruments not only to guarantee equal rights and outlaw discrimination, but also to introduce measures to set things right.

The reference to self-help brings up the crucial role and the contributions of non-governmental organisations. Without the NGOs, the human rights landscape in the modern world would be totally different. They speak when others, including governments and IGOs, are often silent. Organisations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Helsinki Federation, as well as thousands of other

international and national NGOs, deserve much credit for their relentless and untiring presentation of the facts highlighting concrete cases.

Instead of restricting the access of NGOs and the time allocated to them in international forums, efforts should be made both to pay tribute to their work and to strengthen it in innovative and imaginative ways.

In our part of the world, the possibility could be examined to allow NGOs significant access and input to regional organisations and areas of co-operation among the Nordic States, among countries along the Baltic and Barnets Seas and among Arctic countries. Elements of such input already exist but more could be done in a systematic way. The same applies to international and regional parliamentary assemblies and to autonomous and elected institutions of minorities and indigenous peoples, as well as to NGOs representing their interests.

All of these issues and questions lead directly to a discussion of technical co-operation between rich and poor countries, both in the work of international organisations and in bilateral relations. To what degree and in what manner should human rights and democracy considerations figure in such co-operation?

Reliance on internationally accepted and applicable human rights standards ought to help in avoiding claims which are occasionally heard about the imposition of Western ways of thinking and behaving. People everywhere seem to welcome the human rights message and the personal freedoms associated with it.

The same can be said about the recommendations coming from international development agencies and financial institutions about good governance, accountability and transparency. More difficult are the issues often connected to human rights conditionally to duties or responsibilities, and to universality.

As to conditionally, is it correct and justifiable to direct assistance to like-minded or well-behaved countries while by-passing or ignoring other countries, often at the expense of their populations? Three arguments in favour of selectivity have been made. First, the use of conditionally as a pressure tool for change; second, the long-term interests of the populations concerned; and third, the demand of tax-payers in donor countries that the money go to proper use and not down the drain under dictatorial or corrupt regimes. Another view emphasises the need to help populations otherwise denied assistance, that aid should go towards

immediate and direct popular benefits, including human rights education where it is allowed.

Most human rights come with corresponding duties, but to what degree should the duties or responsibilities of those who benefit from human rights figure in the human rights discourse? Article 29 of the UDHR says that everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his/her personality is possible. Another example is article 19 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, on the freedoms of information and expression, which says that they may be subjected to certain restrictions, such as those necessary for respecting the rights and reputations of others.

Claims are often made that greater emphasis should be placed on the duties. A recent draft declaration on responsibilities, prepared by a group of former Presidents and Prime Ministers under the auspices of the Inter-Action Council, is demonstrative of such an approach.

The universality of all human rights is however the core of the approach that all laws must be interpreted and applied in the same way under the same circumstances.

The Vienna Declaration adopted at the 1993 World Conference refers on the other hand to national, cultural or religious particularities which are intended to justify departures from the rule of universality. Yes, certain differences may exist, but one must be careful not to accept claims of particularities frequently made by rulers and the power elite merely for preserving their own privileges; any exceptions must be firmly based in popular culture and approval.

Part of the debate on democracy deals with democratisation within international organisations. The distribution of or objections to permanent seats and the right to veto in the UN Security Council are the focus of this attention. Questions concerning the fairness of one vote for each state in forums like the General Assembly and the constituent assemblies of many other IGOs also reflect this debate. Should small states, like Iceland and Sweden, carry the same weight as China and India? Should the small states take the initiative and curtail or concede some of their influence as a result? Or is democracy and the will of the people best preserved and expressed through the enhanced role of smaller states.

Is there a Nordic role model for the rest of the world? Certainly, we enjoy high profiles for strong human rights records for which we are known and respected abroad. Democracy at home, social welfare, social

justice and the ombudsman institutions share in this external image. Our reputation is reinforced by solid support for human rights abroad and generous contributions to various human rights causes. In the end, however, the record depends on credible domestic performances. Every effort must be made and every opportunity used to make sure that it is maintained at the highest level possible under the international instruments which the Nordic countries, by and large, have so enthusiastically endorsed.

Human rights have indeed in recent years been a significant success story. But there are certainly many who would like to stand on the breaks. Such voices may refer to duties, particularities, conditionalities, the right to development or some other values as well as the quest for stability and continuity, but these critics are unlikely to bring the human rights march to a stop. The enhanced respect for human rights will however take time and must often take place in an orderly fashion in order to avoid upheavals and unrest.

The contribution by researchers and scholars is of great importance for the evolution of human rights because the need for independent assessments is nowhere greater then in the field of the democratic progress.

I salute the work done here at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute and the University of Lund and especially the international perspective which has directed your efforts.

I have attempted to draw your attention to some developments in the Northern European regions because I believe very strongly that only if we honestly examine our own garden will we be affective in other far away fields.