

“STABILITY, DEMOCRACY AND RIGHTS: THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES”

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Let me begin by thanking the organizers for giving me the chance to speak at this distinguished gathering, which very aptly prompts us to *not* take for granted what democracy might mean, be it at home or in different countries around the globe.

In this presentation, I'd like to briefly introduce you to a new mode of collaboration which has recently been set up, or perhaps more correctly, is still in the making, namely the 'Building Stronger Universities' initiative of Universities Denmark. It is an initiative that seeks to bring together the otherwise competing Danish universities into a long-term partnership to set up new forms of collaboration with universities in a small number of countries in the global south. Apart from a very brief introduction to the structure and approach of the Building Stronger Universities initiative, and especially the embedded Platform for Stability, Democracy and Rights, I'll talk about some of the ideas that guide this Platform in the turbulent waters between 'democracy' as a semi-global political goal and democracy as research topic, particularly focusing on democracy in fragile states and the role of universities in this context. Since the preparatory phase is hardly over and we only expect to initiate real activities from the month of August onwards, I shall not boast of any accomplishments apart from the actual bringing a group of around 100 researchers on board this Platform so far.

INTRODUCTION TO 'BUILDING STRONGER UNIVERSITIES'

Building Stronger Universities, as I mentioned, is a recent initiative taken by Universities Denmark and it is based on a contractual agreement with Denmark's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Due to its unique emphasis on university collaboration rather than competition among Danish universities, it has – perhaps paradoxically – been welcomed by broad political support in Denmark, and an allocation has been earmarked for BSU on the Danish state budget. We are hopeful that this will indeed be a framework for long-term collaboration. The initiative consists of four platforms, namely Human Health, Growth and Employment, Environment and Climate, and the one I represent and will talk about, Platform for Stability, Democracy and Rights. A note on the name: The four platforms have been aligned, so to speak, with the recently revised Danish strategy for development cooperation, and Stability Democracy and Rights was initially called “Platform for Stability and Fragility, Gender Equality, Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights”. This rather monstrous name referred to three of five themes of the development strategy that were linked to this particular platform; hence, the platform's current and already rather ambitious name is but an acronym for an even broader agenda. Given the theme of this symposium, I'll focus on fragility and democracy.

IDEOLOGY OR RESEARCH

This brings me to an issue that is embedded in the initiative: how do we translate concepts that are defined as global policy goals in Denmark's development strategy into a meaningful research agenda? There is a difference between these concepts as developmental goals and as research topics. Whereas concepts such as freedom, democracy and human rights have global appeal and currently set the stage for dramatic changes in (potentially former) dictatorships, they are highly contested and used to articulate opposing positions. The ways democratic institutions may be

developed vary cross-culturally, and local reformulations of seemingly universal values are part of the cultural politics both during conflict and in post-conflict societies. The Platform sees these values as topics for research to be investigated and understood in their local political complexity. A number of institutions are crucial in this context, such as the use of mass media to control public opinion and the use of both mass and social media to conversely challenge the legitimacy of government and state, and the role of the Internet in this connection is still poorly understood. Also, the impact of various types of educational structures and strategies on development of democracy, and the role of different types of pedagogy and their capacity to stimulate (or suppress) critical thinking in different cultural contexts requires research to inform us about development of democracy over spans of generations.

The relationship between migration and democracy is another key issue on the Platform's research agenda. Both 'stable' crises such as poverty and sudden violent conflicts or natural disasters cause migration to increase, but migrants are often denied basic rights in their country of destination and may at the same time lose their status as citizens in the country of origin, if not officially then effectively. Both economically motivated migration and forced migration due to conflict characterize the partner countries of the Platform – albeit at different scales – and these key issues inform its strategic research agenda.

In recent years, security and development have become intimately linked in international development practices and discourses. As threats are defined in increasingly broader terms, the meaning of security has expanded accordingly to encompass not only military affairs, but also migration, food, and health, etc. A number of perceived threats, which are not only directed at poor and less developed countries in the global South but also, and significantly so, at the richer countries in the global North have thus become a defining aspect of development priorities and

policies. However, the consequences of the recent emphasis and expansion of security concerns are only beginning to emerge.

The focus of the Platform includes the role of universities as responsible contributors to societal development, including the role of universities in post-conflict transformation. Contexts of war and other forms of violent conflict, as well as short-term and chronic crisis, impoverish, violate and/or displace countless communities and individuals, often depriving access to both basic and higher education. Even if formal or informal institutions of learning continue to exist, they are often profoundly affected both in structural terms and in the sense of contexts of violence often being accompanied by authoritarian modes of governance that directly undermine critical thinking. But even under adverse conditions, kernels of capacity persist, including innovative attempts to sustain the institutions themselves and/or to retain independent knowledge production. The Platform sees it as crucial to support and expand such initiatives and capacities, since these are vital for ensuring a robust body of technical, analytical, reflective and visionary expertise. Thematically, the research initiated by the Platform will also explore the relationship between gender, peace and security issues and between gender, democracy and human rights through interdisciplinary research efforts and based to a large degree on research priorities defined by South partners.

INITIAL PARTNER COUNTRIES

Following a long and thorough process of ‘match-making’ between resources, needs and political feasibility, three countries have been identified as initial partner countries for the Platform on Stability, Democracy and Rights, namely Kenya, Uganda and Nepal. All three, but Uganda and Nepal more so, are post-conflict countries that struggle with redefining democracy. Echoing Michael Bøss’ opening remarks on democracy and (in)stability, in all three countries

there is an intimate link between violent conflict and democracy. In the North Rift Region in Kenya, where Moi University is located, violent riots evolved in connection with the 2007 election. In Uganda, the Platform collaborates with Gulu University, a small university placed in Northern Uganda, which is still in the process of recovering from the wounds of two-and-half decades of armed conflict. As we speak, government forces have cracked down on the political opposition using excessive force in a context of popular protests fuelled by uncontrolled inflation. Being placed in the middle of the conflict zone, Gulu University has become a particularly vulnerable institutional victim of the general trend to cut government investment in research and university teaching. Yet, Gulu University aims at placing the university in a position to contribute substantially to regional development – both by feeding into policy and programming processes that address human security challenges and the peace-building agenda in Northern Uganda but also by way of activities that are of immediate local relevance to help improve local livelihoods and face war-time exigencies and post-war challenges. An example of this is a plan to develop standards for, and pedagogical capacities in, special needs and early childhood education for children suffering from war trauma.

Let me turn now to Nepal. Since the 1980s, Nepal has experienced a prolonged period of instability. In 1990 Nepal became a parliamentary democracy, but failure to include minorities, women, and non-Hindus into political and economic processes paved the way for an armed conflict. Following up on Francis Fukuyama's comments about what triggers revolution, in Nepal as well it was not a result of poverty per se, even if social inequality surely was an element; but the exclusion of a large number of ethnic minorities from parliamentary democracy provided a fertile ground for recruitment in the Maoist army, supported by coercion and human rights abuses on both sides of the conflict. The steadily growing Maoists army fought an insurgency campaign to overthrow the Nepali monarchy

and establish a socialist republic. The killing of the royal family in 2001 and subsequent suspension of democracy by King Gyanendra caused the monarchy to collapse, leading to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006 by the Maoist and all major political parties with the intention to re-establish parliamentary democracy on the basis of a new constitution.

This is of course a historically interesting situation: Nepal is squeezed between India, the world's largest democracy (and I shall accept this on face value due to time constraints), and China, the world's largest "high quality authoritarian regime", according to Fukuyama. So, squeezed between India and China, but through a kind of reversal of logic, democracy in Nepal is suspended due to caste-based inequalities and a feudal structure that has deep historical roots in India, whereas the inspiration to reinstall democracy comes from the same political movement that historically installed the communist regime in China and that anyway has lost momentum, to put it mildly, in its original Chinese context.

The Peace Agreement has been followed by a stalemate situation between former opponents that attempt to arrive at a constitutional compromise that will define future democracy – but under the threat that a collapse will refuel the armed conflict; the Maoist army is still kept in strategically placed camps. A key issue is whether – or in what way and to what degree – ethnic and language groups will be considered the guiding principle when the remapping of a federal structure falls into place. Another issue of formative importance is the question of aligning democratic and civil rights given a population with a substantial proportion of the population engaging in transnational migration. The way these questions will work out in the new constitution will contribute to determining whether or not Nepal will be a successful example of a 'revolution that results in democracy', another of the recurrent themes of the present symposium.

What is the role of the university here? Enormous! The Nepalese university landscape is dominated by Tribhuvan University that covers the entire country with 60 constituent campuses and 186,880 students. The academia and leadership at all levels reflect the various conflicting parties and all levels of the organization are heavily politicised and affected by the same constitutional stalemate that currently colours the country. Students are also organised in Maoist, Marxist-Leninist and Congress organizations, who engage in extra-parliamentary activities including occasional attacks on academic staff and administration that are thought or known to represent opposing political sides. There is little overview of the distribution of roles across university campuses during and immediately after the armed conflict. There is, however, no doubt that the processes of social exclusion and the general concentration of power and resources in Kathmandu have been main motivating factors for joining the insurgency.

The structure of Tribhuvan resembles the state, with its massive concentration of academic resources at the centre and a large number of undernourished campuses outside Kathmandu Valley. The strategic collaboration with the Platform seeks not only to enhance research capacity but also create new opportunities at selected 'model' campuses to access research training opportunities, to engage in research activities and to set up an E-learning system that over time holds a promise to democratize access to knowledge at campuses far from the centre – initially at two campuses but if it works well and if there is interest and external funding to do so, it may be scaled up over time to cover the entire country.

The two examples from Uganda and Nepal represent different aspects of the role of universities as contributors to the potentially democratic development of the societies in which they are placed. In Gulu, Uganda, the Platform supports a small university that seeks to contribute to addressing the immediate and longer-term needs related to decades of conflict. In Nepal, while

the Platform also seeks to support research on focus areas such as the local formulation of what democracy may mean, the very university structure entails the same kind of centre-periphery conflict material that fuelled the insurgency, and the university will probably have to address these to assert its contribution to the New Nepal. Both university roles – the critical engagement with society; and the responsibility to enable access to tertiary education and to current knowledge discussions; remain of both universal and global importance for the university as a potentially democratic institution anywhere in the world, including in authoritarian regimes.

The specific role of the Platform at its current embryonic stage has been to bring together all Danish universities in order for them to take on a role of “challenging” – understood as describing, exploring, analyzing and researching – democracy in, initially, three weak states. This, therefore, is also a contribution towards strengthening the engagement of universities in North-South collaboration that will increase joint research output from both Danish and Southern partners concerning the challenges of democracy in fragile states.