

Development studies and the rise of conservative nationalism

Once upon a time development studies were relevant, not least in the Nordic countries. It began after WW 2 when Keynesian economic policies were supposed to nourish democratic reconstruction in the North but also to contribute to modernisation and democracy in the South. This was in the process of decolonisation in Asia and Africa, and reduced dependency in Latin America, facilitated by the UN system. Much of it did not materialise, even decolonisation proved tricky. The old empires obstructed and the new built spheres of interest. But in northern Europe there was an interest in retaining national independence during the cold war, and to combine liberal and social democratic welfare-oriented development with international cooperation, along with likeminded actors in the emerging third world. So, there was not just a quest for area studies but also development studies. The daily news bulletins were still about decisions in Washington, London or Moscow but also about the developments in Vietnam, Brazil or South Africa. And amid the military coup in Chile, it was a matter of course for Olof Palme to take a telephone call in his kitchen from Sweden's ambassador in Santiago and tell him to immediately open the gates for the many people outside the embassy who were hunted by Augusto Pinochet.

But the times they are a-changing. It is fifty years since fascism in Portugal was crushed by a wave of emancipation and democratic rule by citizens with human rights. The wave emanated from the resistance in the African colonies. It spread around the world, until undermined by unequal globalisation. And now it is replaced by a conservative tsunami of autocratic rule of citizens defined by historical empires, race, appropriate cultures and opinions. Led by mercantile autocrats and oligarchs like Putin, Trump and Musk on the one hand, and party bosses like Xi with state-led capitalism in sweet union with free trade on the other. Together with pro-business ethnic and religious nationalists, like Israel's Netanyahu, India's Narendra Modi, and similar European leaders.

Sweden is a good illustration of the turning point. From 2014, a coalition government of social democrats and the greens tried to reinvent the "Nordic model", along with non-alignment, international cooperation, solidarity and struggle against climate change. But only after a year it began to crumble. First the doors were closed when increasingly many refugees from the Middle East and northern Africa reached Scandinavia too. Then conservative nationalist party *Sverigedemokraterna* made rapid advances, and the social democrats responded by adjusting. In early 2022, moreover, admirable support to the resistance against the Russian invasion in Ukraine was provided at the expense of cooperation with the global South. And Sweden's policy for decades of non-alignment and cooperation with likeminded partners, was scrapped in a few months, without qualified studies and democratic discussion, in favour of an application for membership in Nato. This prevented the conservative parties from turning Nato-membership into the major

issue in the late-2022 national elections. But they were victorious anyway, claiming to have been right on Nato for ages and that there was no alternative. Which the social democratic leaders could not object to, as they had already discarded the historical alternative. So, the field was open for the new government, along with *Sverigedemokraterna*, to follow up by additional reduction of the global development cooperation in favour of partners in “our immediate vicinity”. Promotion of human rights and democracy via civil society organisations suffered worst. The issue of climate change was ignored. Support for development research was dumped. The refugee and migration policy was further tightened. There was almost no critique of Israel’s invasion of Gaza. The support for UNRWA was trashed. The opposition against Donald Trump’s imperial conservative nationalism was modest, except on the issue of Greenland. And the social democratic leadership had little to add.

This is of course untenable, in view of our insights within development studies. Who share the responsibility for the conflicts and devastation that the refugees fled from? How could Putin gain power with popular support for authoritarian policies to “make Russia great again”? And how could Trump follow suit by “making America great again”? Or Modi turning India into a Hindu-nationalist state? What made *Alternative für Deutschland* expand quickly? Along with so many similar leaders and movements. And what is the difference between Putin’s and Netanyahu’s aggressions against neighbouring countries and people? Or between the slaughtering of ordinary people in Gaza and about a million in Indonesia 1965-1966 – in both cases without any responsibility for some activists’ deplorable terror? How was it possible to avoid critical studies of whether and how it would be possible to combine Nato membership with the hitherto successful efforts at internal and external security through international cooperation on human rights, democracy and welfare-oriented sustainable development? And what is the argument for compromising liberal and social democratic principles by concessions to Trump and conservative nationalism?

In short, I think that it is now a particular professional obligation for scholars of development studies and senior practitioners, to ask how this could happen and if there are any dynamics that might alter it.

It is not an easy task. Given that the global rise of conservative nationalism is not shaped by a major empire, like US-imperialism, but by local reactions to non-inclusive economic, social, cultural governance and politics, there should be many books in comparative perspective. Yet, the political tsunami is here and now. So, to contribute to the academic and public discussion in our own countries, concerned scholars decided in 2023 to pool and summarise the results in their regional and local case studies in two books, first in Norway and then in Sweden, in cooperation with colleagues in Denmark.¹ Our main question was

¹ The second updated and expanded book is Törnquist, O., Sundström, A. and Carmesund, U. (eds) (2025) *Egentligen är världen full av hopp. Trettiosex röster om det solidariska motståndet mot den globala konservativa nationalismen*. Göteborg: Korpen. A draft summary essay in English is at www.olle-tornquist.com

why and how conservative nationalism had gained ground in not just Putin's Russia, Trump's US and our own Europe, but also in the global South. And if there were signs of a counter movement.

But there was another challenge too – the issues are delicate. The problems are not limited to “bad guys” like Putin and Trump. They are also rooted in the negative effects of the old liberal world order, which must thus be separated from its positive aspects that need to be strengthened. As well as in the weakening of the “classical” progressive alternatives, which must thus be renewed. So, some potential partners hesitated, especially in Sweden. Yet, the books are out.

So, what are the major results? How did we get here? What happened in-between the positive post-war ambitions and today's tsunami of conservative nationalism?

From democratic development to political shortcuts and neoliberalism

There were three foundations for the initial success when, for example, the two major colonies of India and Indonesia gained independence in the late 1940s and built the largest and third largest democracies. Firstly, nationalism with equal citizenship based on universal rights. Secondly, the largest emancipatory popular movements in the world – Indian Congress Party and the Indonesian Nationalist Party, cooperating with reformist communists.² Thirdly, the UN, in which the new nations made a difference. The amazing vision was to create the economic and social conditions previously denied to the people of the third world – through democratic means, leaders like Nehru and Sukarno, and a new non-aligned movement.

Within a few years, however, the Cold War came to dominate. The western support to South Korea and Taiwan against China reminded of the Marshall Aid in Europe. But generally, the third world was plagued by uneven development with weak links between investment and consumption. Hence, the preconditions for democratic development differed from the historical cases in the North.

Instead, attempts were initiated to substitute shortcuts to development to compensate for the lack of necessary conditions. The recommendations that were based on the history of western Europe emphasised strong nation-states, but neglected the wars and colonialism that had nourished them. Moscow, on the other hand, recommended its own authoritarian primitive accumulation of resources for rapid investments, but neglected the importance of its old Russian colonies. And China acted similarly.

From the mid-1950s, these authoritarian varieties of shortcuts to progress came to dominate in the third world too. According to those who put on western styled liberal and social democratic hats, the middle class in the third world was not strong enough to promote market-driven modernisation and liberal democracy. Hence, democratisation in

²The Indonesian Communist Party, with its numerous branch organisations, was relatively democratic and the third largest after the Soviet and Chinese parties.

countries such as India and Indonesia had instead benefitted the Left, which their opponents did not trust.³ Ahead of democracy, they said, there must instead be more solid states with rule of law and strong institutions, so-called politics of order, soon theorised by Professor Samuel Huntington. But in the absence of actors who could build and implement this political order, the proponents usually relied on the military, which came out on top.

Meanwhile the eastern block and their allies said instead that the major problem was the weakness of the working and peasant classes, as well as nationally oriented capitalists. The idea of how to compensate for this, however, was reminiscent of the West's "political order" – that is, relying on the military. Albeit with radical nationalist officers at the forefront, in favour of state control and the nationalisation of foreign companies, so-called non-capitalist development.

Both shortcuts proved disastrous. On the one hand, in the form of Western-backed “middle-class coups” and dictatorships, as, for example, in Indonesia, the Philippines, Brazil and Chile. On the other hand, Eastern-backed national autocracies, starting in Egypt. Both paths were also characterised by repression and kleptocracy. The broad popular movements of reformist communists and radical social democrats were undermined or physically eliminated, the worst being the Indonesian genocide.

The city-state of Singapore remained an odd exception. Its socialist party managed to create a corruption-free judiciary and administration by authoritarian means that promoted export-based development and finance. The preconditions for this were the city's strategic location, imported cheap labour and the export of capital to Singapore from the plunder in the neighbouring countries. Plus, the desire among the newly rich in these countries for a next-door service and consumption paradise. Yet Singapore's good economy and administration did not lead to democracy. South Korea and Taiwan were also different, with their Japanese-influenced economies and historically stronger bureaucracies than in other parts of the third world. This allowed them to combine western-backed mobilisation against China with state-led land reforms and export-oriented development, in cooperation with domestic oligarchs and transnational corporations. Over the years, "ordinary people" got better off too, except human rights, until the democracy movement grew stronger in the 1980s.

This and new technology and faster communications was thus the foundations for the then new international division of labour between North and South, which gained strength in the late-1960s – along with even more extensive use of fossil fuels. And in the process, the post-war currency regulations, which had enabled social liberal and social democratic policies in the North, were scrapped too.

³The first free and fair election of a communist-led government in the world took place in Kerala in 1957, the same year that the Indonesian Communist Party won free and fair local elections in large parts of Indonesia and was expected to win the next parliamentary election.

Yet, it was not necessarily a disaster in the North that, for example, textile factories and shipyards were shifted to the global South – if the employees were protected and new investments were made in cooperation between the state, unions and entrepreneurs. As in Scandinavia. But then there was another shortcut to development in the South in the form of OPEC-cooperation between autocratic oil states to raise prices. This led to speculation rather than inclusive development in the OPEC states, which could also have increased demand for products from the North. So, the outcome in countries like Sweden was both inflation and stagnation. In other words, producers and consumers had become so far apart that it was difficult to keep national Keynesianism and Fordism going (that is, that the workers who produced the cars could afford to buy them).

By implication, the social democratic model in the North and similar ideas in the South must be internationalised to survive. Leaders like Olof Palme and Willy Brandt and their like-minded friends in the third world tried to find a solution in the form of UN-based alternatives to global inequality and the unequal division of labour. The slogan of the 1970s was “a new economic world order” through “partnership between North and South.” But the United States, its allies, and the financial and corporate world objected. Many within Palme’s and Brandt’s own parties were also hesitant, as were related unions that prioritised the export industry’s ability to pay good wages. Just as important, the allies in the South had lost steam or opted out. The non-aligned movement and the third world community was in decline. The liberation movements were economically weak. The oil states were happy. And the developmental states collaborated with transnational corporations for their own good.

Palme continued his efforts at peace until assassinated. Brandt stood tall but did not get anywhere. Gro Harlem Brundtland tackled the conflict between growth and climate. And experiments with new development models continued within the UN system, including in the form of Agenda 2030. But no one could put weight behind their words.

In the 1980s, Milton Friedman's Nobel Prize-winning neo-liberal economics was instead given free rein, with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the forefront, subsequently backed by the digital revolution and the unregulated information technology and social media. Privatisation and deregulation reduced the scope of democracy and the capacity of the state to facilitate fair structural transformation. In the early-1980s, for example, capital escaped Francois Mitterrand's socialist oriented reforms. Social democracy was short of countermeasures. "Structural adjustment" was considered unavoidable. In Sweden, the idea of wage-earner-funds was blocked, and in 1985 the credit market was deregulated, without Palme being able to resist. After which social democratic party leader Göran Persson adopted Tony Blair's combination of a market-driven economy and reduced welfare system along a "third way", on which the conservative prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt then practiced street racing.

Structural adjustment affected the third world countries even worse. Even South Korea was weakened, most clearly during the Asian economic crisis in the late-1990s. We shall return to the Chinese and Vietnamese exceptions.

Autocratic reactions, with popular support

As the new international division of labour and neoliberalism thus undermined the efforts at less unfair economic development and democratisation in the third world, as well as in the North, the frustration among those who did not benefit increased. Yet, social liberals and social democrats had little to say. The dream of a fair new world order somehow passed away with Palme, Brandt and their partners. The third world disintegrated. In the context of the neoliberal globalisation, the common expression became the global South instead. And “strong leaders” advanced by promising neo-nationalist protection.

The main successful southern cases in this respect were China and Vietnam, benefitting from being able to combine totalitarian rule and neoliberal global division of labour. In the Soviet Union, things were more difficult. The West did not support Gorbachev’s efforts to combine democratisation and economic reform, only neoliberal shock therapy. This slowed down democratisation and promoted a neoliberal kleptocracy along with oligarchs. The result was inequality, chaos and political disintegration. Which enabled Vladimir Putin to gain broad support for harsh measures against disorder and injustice, at the expense of rights and democracy. And to promise making Russia great again. Including by opposing the decolonisation of the old Russian empire, as now in Ukraine. By then the premisses for the promises made by both East and West at the end of the Cold War were undermined since long. In short, the story of the new reactionary world order did not begin with NATO’s support to the Baltic countries after the fall of the Wall, or with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but many years earlier with the West’s support for neoliberal shock therapy and elite-dominated democratisation.

Meanwhile in the US and Europe, leaders such as Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gerald Schröder and Göran Persson tried to mitigate the effects of neoliberalism in their own countries. As well as to integrate Eastern Europe in the EU. The already mentioned method was the “third way” of neoliberal economics along with “new public management”, including market-driven welfare. But both the scope of democracy and the capacity of the state had been reduced. So, while people with appropriate education and knowledge (about capital and property markets in particular) advanced quickly, entrepreneurs and wage earners with less opportunities suffered. Including those badly affected by the attempts to mitigate climate change by reducing fossil-based growth. And when neither social-liberals, social-democrats or the environmental movement could provide fair alternatives, support increased instead for discontented politicians and brownshirts with conservative nationalist arguments. Corresponding reactions were nurtured in the US, including in the “Tea Party movement” and then by Donald Trump. While globalised tech billionaires sought state protection, including against China’s increasing competitiveness.

Incomplete democratisation and its discontents

But it could have been different. Let us take a few steps back in history. For while the attempts to reinvent the ideas of liberal and social democracy by creating a partnership between North and South weakened, and global neoliberalism expanded, the already mentioned global wave of human rights and democracy began in Portugal in 1975. The military junta fell in Greece. A peaceful transition to democracy could be negotiated in Francisco Franco's Spain. The USA was defeated in Vietnam and elected a president who promised to promote human rights, Jimmy Carter. The wave rolled on to Latin America, with Brazil in the forefront, and then to the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan. As well as to Eastern Europe, with trade union movements such as *Solidarność* in Poland and civil society groups such as "Charter 77" in Czechoslovakia. After the end of the Cold War, the wave gained more strength with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the spread of economic and political liberalisation in the East. Mandela's South Africa was the great triumph in Africa. And in Asia, Indonesia became the world's third largest democracy again. This was thus a wave of aspirations and movements that might have renewed the classic progressive alternatives. But it did not – why?

Since the late-1950s, liberal democratisation was generally considered unrealistic in the South and East due to uneven economic and social development. From the mid-1970s, it was however deemed feasible again, based on four arguments. Firstly, because as the economy had become less state controlled, there would be demands for the rule of law and other freedoms. Secondly, because the international community, together with powerful reform-minded groups inside the countries, would thus also be able to negotiate democratic institutions – from freedoms, rights and elections to the depoliticisation of the military and a powerful legal system and administration. In the process, even old landowners, oligarchs, godmen and generals was expected to adapt to the new rules of the game. Even the experts who believed that non-corrupt state institutions must precede freedoms and elections agreed that if there could somehow be improved institutions the crucial actors would adjust and turn impartial. Thirdly the left-liberal and social democratic argument that institutional change presupposed more equal distribution of power – but that civil society organisations and popular movements should be able to push for this thanks to new freedoms and international support. Fourthly, on the contrary, the rightist argument that there should be “interventions against the enemies of democracy”.

Unsurprisingly, none of the arguments were entirely confirmed. But why did not even the democratic forces gain strength enough to nourish better conditions?

Democratisation was certainly weakened by the privatisation and deregulation of the economy. There was simply less to decide on in a democratic way. Equally important, the influential groups that negotiated democratisation could draw on their economic and other positions of power outside of politics to shape the new institutions and rules of the game to their own advantage. Elections and party systems thus discouraged new

progressive movement-based parties as well as candidates without higher education, even at the local level. And anti-corruption agencies rarely gained an independent position that could be combined with popular backup.

Furthermore, the neoliberal reforms reinforced the uneven economic development. This nourished differences in interests and organisational possibilities between permanent and temporary employees, freelancers and those working in the informal sector. It was difficult for trade unions and social movements to come together and agree on common demands and proposals. Meanwhile, the ILO's work and international trade union solidarity were often limited to the formal sector unions.

Similarly, social movements and civil society organisations focused on specific interests and issues, to lobby and exert pressure rather than mobilise members, and to avoid even non-party-political engagement. At the request of international donors. Political decentralisation was rarely accompanied by opportunities for the rise and scaling up of new local parties with alternative perspectives.

Consequently, even though the new freedoms and rights were good for liberal and social democratic-oriented movements, shallow democratisation made it hard for them to organise people, enter mainstream politics and make a difference with alternative proposals. So, when having tried and failed, increasingly many people and groups tended to support “strong leaders” instead. As well as to seek help in ethnic and religious communities. And to turn against alleged “competitors”, such as immigrants.

For a few examples, the centre-left Indian coalition that won elections in 2004 failed to modify liberal economic reforms by sufficiently comprehensive welfare reforms and popular participation. Instead, the coalition was mired in corruption scandals and lost in 2014 to the conservative national Hindu fundamentalists led by Narendra Modi.

Similarly, the liberal and social democratic Philippine coalition government that won the elections in 2010 lost in 2016 to the “strongman” Rodrigo Duterte who blamed all evil on criminals and drug addicts. (Whom he said should be killed, and then actually did kill.) In the next election, former dictator Ferdinand Marcos’ son Marcos Jr. won by rewriting the history of his father’s politics in favourable terms.

In Indonesia, from the mid-2000s, numerous civic organisations, trade union and social movements united behind alternative reform proposals, got several of them implemented, and facilitated the election in 2014 of the populist technocrat Joko “Jokowi” Widodo as president. Yet, the groups could not agree on how to proceed. Instead, “Jokowi” built broad support for a grand coalition of the country’s political elite, oligarchs and religious leaders – after which he ensured that dictator Suharto’s former son-in-law, the authoritarian ex-general Prabowo Subianto, was elected as the next president, based on a similar grand coalition and with “Jokowi’s” son as vice president.

In Brazil, Lula da Silva's policies were immensely popular when he in 2011 handed over to Dilma Rousseff, but then everything changed. The corruption scandals in the country's centre could not be prevented by the otherwise acclaimed local popular participation. And business as well as social policy had become dependent on incomes from the export of raw materials, which suffered from reduced world market prices. After which the national conservative Michael Temer could gain power and Jair Bolsonaro win the next election.

In South Africa, the trade union movement in particular criticised President Thabo Mbeki's version of the "third way" policy, but preferred Jacob Zuma, whose rule soon degenerated into an authoritarian kleptocracy with ethnic undertones. The democracy movement with a previously strong base in social-movement unionism has been unable to offer significant resistance.

The examples could be multiplied. And the situation worsened as the fourth argument for why liberal democratisation would possibly come to the fore – the interventions against "enemies of democracy". The "war on terror" led least of all to democracy. The UN was undermined, as was international law. Great power politics gained the upper hand, conflicts multiplied, repression increased, autocrats remained in power, and the Arab Spring protests were crushed, worst in Syria – before things got even worse in Gaza.

In the absence of local alternatives, the negative results extended to forced migration and refuge to Europe. In which the conservative nationalist objected and expanded rapidly by increasingly chauvinist and racist policies. The case of Sweden has already been exposed.

Counter movements?

What if any are the signs of resistance? From a historical materialist point of view, the standard argument is of course that social democratic-oriented development is inconceivable in the South given the generally uneven development and limited industrialisation (with the major exception of the unfortunately dictatorial China).⁴ But the fact that the conditions in the South differ from the industrial revolution in the North only substantiate the argument that progressive politics will not evolve in the same way. It is certainly an irony that so many people around the world who suffer from the negative effects of unequal globalisation support conservative nationalism and "strong leaders" rather than leftists. Yet, this does not prove that there have not been and cannot be alternative reactions and counter movements with promising potentials.⁵ In all the cases studied in our books, many people continued to fight for justice and equality and more. Most importantly, as indicated in the above examples, many people were only attracted by the proponents of conservative nationalism when the "old" radical ideas proved insufficient, and especially when the combination of neoliberal policies and limited

⁴ C.f. e.g. Therborn, G. (2012). 'Class in the 21st Century', *New Left Review*, 78: 5-29; (2014) 'New Masses?', *New Left Review*, 85:7-16; (2022) 'The World and the Left', *New Left Review*, 137:23-74; and (2024) 'The Future of the Left', *New Left Review*, 145:27-41.

⁵ C.f. Törnquist, O. (2021) *In Search of New Social Democracy. Insights from the South – Implications for the North*. London: Zed-Bloomsbury.

democratisation did not help. In other words, there must be alternative progressive politics and policies. And this is more an intellectual and political problem than a structural materialist one. So, there is hope. But are there any real signs of alternatives?

The most recent glimmer of hope is the Gen Zen revolts.⁶ Of course, mass protests of this kind are not new. One may for example recall the Arab Spring 2011, Hong Kong, Chile and the women in Sudan 2019, as well as their sisters in Iran 2022. The most recent cases include Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Serbia, Kenya, Peru, Madagascar, Nepal, the Philippines and Indonesia. It is hardly about youngsters against elders. In Bangladesh, for example, the students suggested the 85-year-old Nobel laureate Mohammad Yunus as chief advisor of the interim government. Many young people certainly feel that they have been “robbed of their future”, but there are also many elders who have been affected by unequal globalisation and neoconservatism. The fact that young people are at the frontlines is more because they meet on campus in a world of otherwise fragmented working conditions. That they have a few years of relative economic independence and shared frustrations. And the knowledge to understand what is going on in the world. Plus that they have the unique ability to communicate through the new social media, build informal “rhizome-movements”, sustain their autonomy, and avoid some of the repression. No, what Gen-Zen’s primarily address is not old people but unemployment, corruption and abuse of power – plus the lack of human rights and opportunities to make themselves heard by democratic means. And their criticism of rigid organisations and ideologies is also directed at powerful radicals, such as the Maoists in Nepal.

The entire Gen-Zen generation is certainly not progressive, especially not in our own countries. But most positively, those who do protest rarely link up with conservative nationalism and “strong leaders” but mostly scold local versions of Trump, Putin, Musk or Modi as much as neoliberalism. They want human rights, and they are sympathetic to refugees and migrant workers. Many protesters themselves, and their families, must migrate to get jobs.

However, one may ask how much support they have, and what politics and policies they want. It is one thing to form resilient networks instead of hierarchical organisations, as well as to protest and to put forward specific demands for jobs, housing, welfare and justice – but another to develop credible alternatives in terms of democratic organisation, governance and reform. In short, there are few signs that the Gen-Zen activists address the problems that have undermined the “old” progressive movements and the rise of new alternatives.

There may be widespread sympathy for the protests, but it is rarely tangible and certainly not organised. Furthermore, militant actions and riots often frighten “ordinary people,” despite the new ability to reach out widely via social media. During the struggle

⁶ The analysis of the Gen-Z protests after the collective books is mainly based on <https://olle-tornquist.com/onewebmedia/Olle%20draft%20paper%20SE%20Asia%20dem%20conference.pdf>

against Indonesian dictator Suharto's "floating mass politics" to prevent popular organisation there was a common (self-critical) expression that the opposition consisted of equally poorly organised "floating democrats." In much of the global South, this remains true.

Similarly, there are few signs that the Gen-Zen activists take up the task of building broader alliances between fragmented civil society organisations, unions and people with different working conditions – other than including some gig workers and highlighting outrageous conditions and decisions to storm forward. Earlier insights about the importance of developing genuine democratic representation are also ignored, despite undisputable lessons such as from the initially successful negotiations between activists and those in power in Tunisia during the Arab Spring. And, of course, from the previous (now weakened) social partnership governance in Scandinavia. Finally, there are few attempts among Gen-Z activists to create common platforms and strategies to unite people behind reform proposals for better sustainable and welfare-based development, democratic representation and governance. Plus, to engage in international cooperation to counter geopolitical interventions. The usual pattern is instead to produce long lists of often incoherent demands and populist mantras.

In short, the main dynamic of the Gen-Zen protests rather seems to be insurrectionary pressure politics. First, mobilising supporters online, plus on campuses and the streets, to compensate for the lack of a homogeneous working class with common workplaces. Then, intensifying the actions and convincing reform-minded officers to abandon the ruling politicians in favour of a transitional government of experts who are on speaking terms with key activists. And finally, hoping that the new government will later initiate elections – and that the activists will then have chosen leaders and formed competitive parties. But where, if ever, has this succeeded?

In the wake of Gen-Zen revolts, there have often been terrifying dynamics, worst in civil war-torn Sudan, and more recently in Iran. And one fears that there will be more but hopefully less devastating cases of military-backed consolidation of oligarchic rule, for example in Bangladesh and Nepal. Other worrying developments include the autocratisation of President Prabowo's Indonesia, while parts of the anti-corruption movement in the Philippines are being subordinated to competing dominant actors.

After 1974 when young Indonesian students staged a Gen-Zen-like uprising (*malari*) along with dissident officers against Suharto's dictatorship but failed, it took about ten years before the opposition movement came up with an alternative analysis. An analysis in favour of struggle for dual democratisation against the autocracy. On the one hand against the monopoly by military and oligarchs of public positions and resources, as in classical Athens, on the other hand for impartial justice and public governance based on equal citizens. Thus, what seemed to be Suharto's invincible dictatorship was finally overthrown in 1998, and the polity and society began to be transformed. Hopefully it will not take as long for the new movements to rediscover this perspective *and* address the

challenges of dual democratisation. In particular, this is what our Scandinavian development aid should promote.

Alternative entry points

What would then be the openings to address the problems of dual democratisation? Much of the research that we brought together in the collective books indicate that change is possible by building broad alliances *and* related democratic governance in favour of reform packages based on common interests beyond the conventional employer-employee relations.

There seem to be four major entry points. The first is rooted in *the historical struggle for equality, equal rights and popular education* (later depicted as human rights) against colonial as well as local repression and exploitation. In south India today, for example, this is the basis for the resistance against conservative Hindu-nationalism. The socio-religious reform movements for equal rights had already grown particularly strong in Kerala in the late 19th century. Much like the Scandinavian free church, temperance and educational movements at about the same time, the Kerala reform movements were vital for the then growth of associations of oppressed castes and Dalits, as well as their cooperation with labour and peasant organisations, along with library associations, in the early 20th century. Their combined strength nourished Kerala's celebrated human development. From the late-1980's, moreover, the emancipatory ethos of Kerala's educational People's Science Movement in resurrecting this broad historical work propelled much of the world-renown reinvention of social democratic-oriented development in the context of political and administrative decentralisation.

Another example is that by calling to mind the importance of similar ideas in Indonesia's struggle for freedom, cultural workers and journalists were crucial during the new efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to reinvent the democracy movement, which then did away with decades of dictatorial rule and which now objects to autocratisation. Similarly, the reinvention of the left in Chile in the late-2010s was not only about fighting neoliberalism but also the remnants of colonialism. Under harsher conditions, the movements in Myanmar that now fight the junta have certainly had to retreat to ethnic communal strongholds but aim at democratic federal state with equal rights for all. And the struggle for human and equal civil rights is certainly as fundamental in the Palestine-Israeli conflict as it was during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

The second entry point for broad alliances and democratic politics lies in *the quest for rights-based welfare and educational reforms*. One critical example is again from Indonesia, where the labour and other interest-based movements were scattered and where the pro-democracy movement was on the retreat after having done away in 1998 with thirty-three years of dictatorship. Yet, ten years later progressive actors proved that it was possible to develop a policy proposal and form a broad alliance for universal public health reform. Unions as well as urban poor, professionals and politicians from several political

parties, together with like-minded international advisors⁷, came together in 2010 to improve a public health proposal that had been shelved, to mobilise even broader support and to successfully persuade the parliament to accept the reforms. The progressives could have continued their work, but they were short of follow-up policies and politics and disintegrated. Yet, that failure was far from inevitable. Rather, it pointed to the importance of having a series of reform proposals, and to also include ideas and demands for the institutionalisation of democratic partnership governance.

The third more advanced opening for progressive alternatives is the *combination of broad alliances for welfare reforms and inclusive development*. Kerala stands out in this regard too. The challenge of relating the impressive local alternatives to the wider society and economy were addressed in 2018 when the effects of climate change and poor physical planning in the hill tracts of the state resulted in huge floods, followed by the pandemic. Decentralised government in cooperation with civil society proved crucial in handling the floods as well as Covid 19, but it did not generate and sustain a new wave of progressive popular engagement. While conservatives nourished religious loyalties, the left-front state government added resources for universal welfare schemes *and* invested in a new alternative, high-tech knowledge-based development that would be inclusive of unemployed people in the villages too. However, the innovative financing of these initiatives (by attracting private financiers while holding on to public decisions on what should be invested in) was blocked by the conservative nationalist government in New Delhi. There are new attempts to move ahead, not only by inviting direct private investments but also by improving the skills and organisational capacity of professionals and workers, and by nourishing cooperatives. Yet, it is an open question if there is sufficient popular engagement in face of the upcoming elections.

A similar positive example is the National People's Power (NPP) alliance of parties and movements in Sri Lanka that was formed by rethinking leftists after the popular Gen-Zen-like protests of 2022. The NPP in turn built an inclusive platform with a comprehensive reform program. This paved the way for the landslide victories in the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2024. It was even possible to bridge the ethnic conflicts in the Tamil north. Of course there are additional problems, including to handle the previously accumulated foreign debts to China and the IMF. Yet the formation of the NPP as well as the broad alliances behind democratic reforms point to the most crucial missing links that need to be addressed if new protests such as by the Gen-Zen are to contribute to democratic alternatives to conservative nationalism.

Meanwhile, *Partido dos Trabalhadores* and Lula da Silva in Brazil managed to counter conservative nationalism with an even broader coalition. This is in favour of pragmatic economic policies and welfarism, supplemented by a new emphasis on environmental sustainability and the scaling up participatory practices from local to regional and national levels. In South Africa it remains to be seen if the much weaker renewal-oriented

⁷ Including with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

progressives will be able to move ahead and overcome the corruption scandals of the ANC and the narrow-minded trade unionism. A vital aim is clearly to reinvent the social unionism that combined workplace and local society organising during the liberation struggle. Finally, the recent experiences in Colombia demonstrate that it is possible, in spite of remaining problems of implementation, to build broad alliances behind reforms (in this case designed by reform-minded activists and engaged scholars⁸) that combine welfare-based sustainable development, democratisation, and peacebuilding.

Alternatives from below and inevitable international cooperation

The primary strength of these efforts at new alternatives is that they are rooted in the ideas of modern enlightenment, critical reflection and emancipation, while also growing from within their own contexts and cultures, not from imperial policies or universal doctrines. As during the anti-colonial struggle, however, it is also necessary to converge with like-minded governments and movements around the world. Including on issues like climate change, international law and human rights, fair agreements on trade, taxation, work conditions and access to advanced knowledge and technology.

But is there any interest in the North in renewed cooperation with progressive actors in the South? The efforts to counter conservative nationalism in the North must of course also be grounded within our national contexts. However, as stressed in the beginning of this essay, this will reach a dead end if even the current leadership in the “actually existing” social democratic parties assumes that all misery can be combated through nationalist complicity in the matter of refugees and migrants, combined with some provision of welfare measures for “proper citizens”, and gigantic defence investments.

The world order that was created after World War II, as well as the UN, has been put out of action. Neoliberal financiers and oligarchs seek support and protection from nationalist strongmen. In an uncertain world, trust is falling below zero and everyone must be able to defend themselves and find partners, with or between the great powers. The risk is acute that politics, debate, culture and research in the peaceful Nordic countries will also be polarised and subjected to the same thinking in terms of friends, enemies, defeat and victory. That these ideas of power will penetrate domestic politics, social policy, school policy, cultural policy, migration policy and foreign aid policy. That the nuances, alternatives and ideas about solidarity, democracy, justice and sustainable development will be suppressed and marginalised.

It is often argued that solidarity beyond our “immediate vicinity” is an outlay. Politicians use military terms such as “front reduction” to avoid difficult issues such as solidarity within and outside the country and focus instead on what they believe will garner the most votes, such as security, restricted migration and the welfare economy. But cooperation between the global South and North for human rights, democracy and sustainable development is also necessary for our security, to reduce the climate threat, to

⁸ Including with the support of the Olof Palme International Center.

prevent conflicts so that less people must flee their countries, and to promote fair taxes, trade and welfare. Besides, migrants are needed to keep our own welfare systems going. Reduced cooperation and solidarity will lead to further conflicts and reduced dialogue.

We must not allow that. This is an equally urgent issue for researchers as for cultural workers, teachers, politicians and other citizens. Not least the younger generation whose future is at stake. We must show how international cooperation based on solidarity is a prerequisite for saving the climate, democracy, jobs and welfare even here at home. We must maintain and sustain the possibility of imagining ourselves in others, and work for a peaceful, democratic and solidary, inclusive and sustainable world.

In this respect, I would argue that there is a special obligation for us who engage in development studies and for related experts to stand tall.⁹

⁹ To that end, some of us who worked with the books have initiated an open Nordic network to carry on by way of interdisciplinary studies and public seminars on the preconditions for new forms of democracy and solidarity. You are welcome to join! See www.....