**Democracy in an unequal world**

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A week ago, President Joe Biden hosted a digital ‘Summit for Democracy’. Interpretations of the purpose and outcome have varied, and for good reason, because the US is no longer the only and obvious world leader, so maybe the meeting was held in an effort to make sure that the US is still seen as that, not only economically and militarily, but also morally and politically. In the first two fields, China is becoming a challenger, and in the other fields, the ‘old world’ challenges the ‘new world’.

A few decades ago, the US was the world leader in all fields, and that time, the Soviet Union challenged the US, or at least the propaganda wanted us to think so as the Cold War went on till 1989-90. Today, Russia and the CIS countries don’t have a similar status, and the US doesn’t live up to its former glory either. A main reason for that is that inequalities have grown much both in Russia and America, the ‘land of opportunities’, in recent decades. Now the prospects of climbing the socio-economic ladder are much better in other countries than the US, especially in Scandinavia, and there, the safety network and services for those at the bottom are much ahead of those in America. Sadly, in America, the political regulations have failed, and the country is not looking well after the poor and the outsiders. Also, the very rich have been allowed to run loose and wild; they live in their own world without having to pay back to society in taxes as they should, they reap the fruits selfishly, either they are individuals or multinationals.

[NATO says ready to take 'CBMs' if Russia makes de-escalation steps](https://nation.com.pk/17-Dec-2021/nato-says-ready-to-take-cbms-if-russia-makes-de-escalation-steps)

At Biden’s summit, a handful of foreign leaders had been invited to give short statements about what they would give the highest priority to in order to strengthen democracy in our time. One of the leaders invited to speak, albeit just for a few minutes, was the new Prime Minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre (60) of the Labour Party. He stressed the overarching importance of trust between the leaders and the people, the voters and citizens, and even beyond to include the civil service and the private sector. Trust can only be built and won through honesty and openness, and it can be lost if scandals occur, where the leaders have been self-serving and lining their pockets rather than standing up for those who elected them, and those who work for them in their factories and other companies.

The Norwegian PM mentioned it this time, namely that Norway a few years ago had a major scandal in the Social Services Department (NAV), when it had interpreted wrongly its own rules and law, instead accusing recipients assistance of having received benefits they were not entitled to; many had to pay back benefits, and some were even charged in court, making them criminals. However, the fault was on NAV’s and the government’s side, not those who had received benefits. Such cases lead to serious distrust in government and civil service. Nothing happened to the NAV staff, they survived it all.

[Pakistan reports 277 Covid cases, 14 deaths in single day](https://nation.com.pk/17-Dec-2021/pakistan-reports-277-covid-cases-14-deaths-in-single-day)

When this could happen in a little country like Norway, ranking among highest on the democracy ranking list, we can only imagine how bad it is in many other countries, both poor developing and big rich countries. By the way, now Hadia Tajik (38) has become the new Minister of Works and Social Services, including NAV. She is the deputy chair of the ruling Labour Party, and she will be judged on how well she re-establishes trust between the leaders and ordinary people, indeed those several hundred thousand who depend on unemployment, disability benefits, pensions, and other benefits in the wealthy welfare state.

Furthermore, a few weeks ago, Masud Gharahkani (39) was elected Speaker of the Parliament, in Norway called President of the ‘Storting’, ranking number two in the country after King Harald V, who is the symbolic Head of State. Gharakani came in after there were scandals related to several politicians, including the former Speaker, for ‘creatively’ having submitted claims receiving government benefits for travels and housing beyond what they should have. The Norwegians are very sensitive to such issues, maybe even going a bit over the top in criticism. But it has to do with trust between the elected parliamentarians and the electorate.

[US blacklists eight Chinese tech firms for tracking minorities](https://nation.com.pk/17-Dec-2021/us-blacklists-eight-chinese-tech-firms-for-tracking-minorities)

A few days ago, when Prime Minister Imran Khan (69) opened ‘The Margalla Dialogue 2021’ in Islamabad, he likened inequality to a security threat, and he stressed the need for equal and inclusive development. He drew attention to the problem with the three-tire education sector in the country; the private English language schools, the Urdu government schools, and the religious madrassa schools for the poorest. The PM also discussed issues related to the ‘war on terror’ and Afghanistan issues, and he said that the financial aid from America to Pakistan had been miniscule as compared to Pakistan’s sacrifices. He said that there was a need for local researchers to study Muslim religious and other issues that foreign researcher may study, but that their focus and interpretations may not be right. The West may use such research, even use it for propaganda against the Muslim world. The conference was organised by the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) in collaboration with the National Security Division.

[More than 500,000 Americans without power due to strong winds](https://nation.com.pk/17-Dec-2021/more-than-500-000-americans-without-power-due-to-strong-winds)

Let me end my article where I started it, namely Biden’s ‘Summit for Democracy’. It was certainly important to hold such a conference with about a hundred countries participating, albeit only digitally. I have above drawn attention to what the new Norwegian PM said, representing the country in the world listed as the most democratic according to the ‘Global State of Democracy Report 2021’, prepared by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in Stockholm. Together with researchers at University of Gothenburg’s Election Studies Programme, they are specialists in surveying and thinking about democracy. Sweden ranks as one of the most democratic countries in the world, with high participation in elections. Yet, fewer are members of political parties than before, especially fewer young people, and that is worrying. Furthermore, rather than seeing more countries in the world becoming democratic, we have in recent years seen the opposite, and right-wing populist parties sometimes have up to a fifth of voters, often twisting their perception of reality and circulating fake news.

[Lassa fever kills 80 in Nigeria](https://nation.com.pk/16-Dec-2021/lassa-fever-kills-80-in-nigeria)

Pakistan’s history since independence in 1947 is chequered, with both military and civilian rule. Currently, though, Pakistan seems to be on a solid way to further democratic development, yet, with both the military and the judiciary, and also opposition parties, sometimes being in support of broader democracy, and sometimes the opposite. Politics is not only politics; it is also civil service and administration, the private sector and people’s values, the mindset and attitudes of people, religious institutions and more.

On the way to deeper and broader democracy, everyone must work towards reducing corruption, improving and making the tax system fairer, and taking part in political parties, labour unions, civil society organisations, media, and so on. It is essential for old, solid democracies, like those ones in Norway and Sweden, and young ones, like the one in Pakistan, that people at all levels play a constructive role, that we all are bothered about everyday and long-term issues where we live, especially such that benefit the poor and those who need our help. The recent health insurance initiative in Pakistan is certainly an important step towards a more inclusive and better society.