

# The Relevance of Democracy, Human Rights, Civic Liberties and Social Justice for the G20 Process

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## 1. Introduction

The G20 is mainly an economic forum while democracy, human rights, civic liberties, and social justice are political and social paradigms. One may debate whether it is appropriate to discuss the relevance of such political and social paradigms at a forum that deals mainly with economic issues. The answer to this question is not a straightforward *yes*. As we will see later in this article it is a tainted *yes*, because the G20 is a special case. It is a forum that brings together the highest political authorities of the major countries of the world. They constitute 85% of the global GDP and two-thirds of the world population. Such a gathering cannot easily put aside its responsibility to constitute an example or a role model for the other countries of the world on matters so closely related to good governance.

When I refer to human rights, civic liberties, and social justice, all three of them at once, I will use, in this article, a blanket terminology that covers three of them at the same time, namely the *fundamental rights and freedoms*.

The G20 also includes countries where democracy is far from being perfect. However, this imperfection should not be used as a pretext to give up the responsibility to stand as a good example for the remaining countries. The countries that have discrepancies in the field of democracy and *fundamental rights and freedoms* have to be encouraged to align themselves with countries that are doing better in these fields.

## 2. Definitions and Scope

### *a. Democracy*

The definition of *democracy* was made ages ago. However, many countries that label their regime as a democracy remained in practice far from complying with the basic requirements for democracy. Democracy cannot be reduced to holding elections. It is of paramount importance to see whether the general political environment in the country allows the citizens to form political parties without unnecessary restrictions; whether they are allowed to stand as a

candidate; whether they are allowed to run election campaigns without undue obstruction; whether all political parties enjoy equal opportunities when they run election campaigns. The way the elections are held and the way the votes are counted are equally important. If recourse procedures do not exist to settle disputes for electoral malpractices or if they do not function properly, it will only be a limping democracy. Therefore, democracy, whose relevance to G20 we will discuss in this article, is a political regime that fulfils all criteria mentioned above.

### *b. Human rights*

“Human rights” is a title that covers an extensive area. Furthermore the scope of human rights is in constant expansion. Slavery was not part of human rights a few centuries ago. Now it is. The concept of the right to internet access was not known until recent years, now it is being lively debated.

The most comprehensive documents that formalize human rights are:

- The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948, and
- The **European Convention of Human Rights** (or, with its official title, *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*) drafted in 1950 and entered into force on 3 September 1953.

Apart from these two major international documents there are several other documents that deal with more specific subjects within the framework of human rights, but for the purpose of this article it is neither necessary nor useful to go into the detail of the content of these additional international documents on human rights.

The rights contained in these two major documents are similar to a very large extent. They cover such rights as the right to life, freedom from torture, freedom from slavery, right to liberty and security, right to fair trial, right to full compensation for the damage or loss suffered by individuals, right to privacy, freedom of conscience or religion, freedom of expression, freedom of association, right to marriage, right of protection from all sorts of discrimination etc.

The list is long, but it does not cover other rights that have started to be considered as part of human rights by new conventions or other international instruments such as the rights of gays and lesbians, right to conscientious objection, in other words, the right to refuse to serve in the army, or the right to internet access that has become a lively issue only in recent years.

To the extent that it is relevant to the G20 process, it may be more appropriate to adopt a relatively conservative approach and not force the participating countries of the G20 too much to espouse human rights in its most extensive scope.

c. *Civic liberties*

There is a thin line between “*civil*” liberties and “*civic*” liberties. I will use the words “*civic* liberties” in this article for the liberties that stem for an individual from his/her status of being a member of an urban community. For an individual, these rights differ from the “*civil* liberties” that stem from his/her status of being a human being. Civic liberties are valid in the context of the urban community where the individual lives. Undoubtedly there is a huge overlapping between the human rights that I discussed under the previous title and the civic liberties that is being discussed under the present title.

d. *Social justice*

The term “social justice” is used in this article to explain the equal opportunity for individuals to benefit in an equitable manner from the wealth of the nation. In this sense, social justice is some sort of extension to human rights. If a difference emerges in benefiting, on an equitable basis, from the wealth of the nation this discrepancy has to be eliminated by the state by any means that it deems appropriate.

In a country where the income gap is big, social tension and unrests are more frequent. Unfortunately, this gap is growing in the developing countries as well as in the industrialized countries.

### 3. G20

a. *Evolution of the G20*

Now I turn to the G20. What triggered the founding of this group was the crisis in emerging economies that had begun in Thailand in mid-1997. The major industrial countries were able to address most global economic problems among themselves—by means of the G5 or subsequently the G7—during the 1970s and even to a large extent during the 1980s. However, this had become increasingly difficult by the late 1990s, as the weight of the G7 countries in the global economy declined as a result of the rapid growth of emerging economies, especially those in Asia.

The first concrete step was taken in September 1999 with a proposal of the Finance Ministers of the G7 countries “*to broaden the dialogue on key economic and financial policy issues among systemically significant economies*”.

They then invited their “counterparts from various regions around the world” to a meeting in Berlin in December 1999 with a view to working together to establish an informal mechanism for dialogue within the framework of the Bretton Woods institutional system. This is how the Group of Twenty countries (the G20) came into existence.

Moreover, as the countries and regions were growing more interdependent, the global economy was also becoming more integrated. The trade

liberalization under the auspices of the GATT and, subsequently, the WTO, caused marked increases in cross-border trade. World trade as a proportion of global GDP rose from roughly 40% to 62% in the years 1991-2006. The emerging markets played a key role in this improvement.

#### *b. Present situation*

All the factors mentioned above contributed to the establishment of the G20. At present it consists of 19 countries—Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mexico, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States—and the European Union. The group brings together systemically important advanced and emerging economies that represent roughly 85% of global GDP and two-thirds of the world's population.

The establishment of the G20 represented a direct response to the global repercussions of the economic and financial crisis in Asia, but it was also an acknowledgment of the striking changes in the international economic arena. Emerging countries have been turning into important economic powers. Besides, as a result of growing integration of economies and markets through globalization, domestic developments in these countries acquired special importance. The effective functioning of the international financial and economic system required the active participation of emerging countries as well as the more advanced ones in the governance of the global economy.

The founders invited to the group the countries with whom they did not agree on several issues, such as China with whom they had divergent views on global imbalances and India with whom they had divergent views on trade matter. The reason for this attitude was that they aspired to build a forum to focus on bottlenecks of politico-economic nature on global issues. The aim was to form a representative body, combining the world's largest economies (such as the US, China and Japan), with the appropriate regional powers. The result was not a very representative body, but the approach was more pragmatic than doing justice to everyone. For instance the composition of the forum failed to include some of the top 20 economies—such as Spain and Netherlands—whose region was already well represented—while some others such as South Africa and Saudi Arabia were included even though their economies were of a smaller scale.

## **4. Decisions Adopted During Various G20 Meetings**

Many important decisions were adopted in the five G20 summits that have been convened so far. They include a framework for sustainable and balanced growth, the reform of the international financial institutions, reform of the financial sector, global financial security networks, trade, development, energy, climate change, fight against corruption etc.

The Seoul Summit of November 2010 was the first G20 Summit where issues pertaining to development were examined in detail and reflected in the final communiqué. Within this framework it was agreed that the Seoul Consensus of G20 would complement the commitment undertaken by the G20 countries to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

It is worth discussing this subject in further detail because many of the goals contained in the MDGs are closely connected to the subject of this article, namely to the fundamental rights and freedoms. In other words a connection is already established between the work of the G20 process and the fundamental rights and freedoms by a decision adopted in the Toronto Summit and reconfirmed in the Seoul Summit of G20.

## **5. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)**

Seven out of the eight Millennium Goals adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2000 have a strong *fundamental rights and freedom* dimension. Therefore, a closer look at these Goals will be useful.

**Goal 1:** Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger

**Goal 2:** Achieve universal primary education

**Goal 3:** Promote gender equality and empower women

**Goal 4:** Reduce child mortality rates

**Goal 5:** Improve maternal health

**Goal 6:** Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases

**Goal 7:** Ensure environmental sustainability

Many of the above mentioned MDGs are, one way or another, related to the fundamental rights and freedoms. Four of these MDGs, namely Eradication of hunger (MDG-1), access to primary education (MDG-2), gender equality (MDG-3), and maternal health (MDG-5) are already in the two major international documents on human rights. The remaining 3 MDGs, namely reducing child mortality (MDG-4), Combat HIV (AIDS) (MDG-6) and environment (MDG-7), are not mentioned in the said documents but there is a growing tendency to consider them as part of human rights as well.

A distinction could be made between the following two sets of human rights: One of the sets is composed of rights such as right to live, freedom from hunger, and access to health care etc. I do not think that there will be any lack of will in all countries to protect and promote such liberties. The second set is composed of more sensitive rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of conscience or religion, conscientious rejection etc. These rights have a certain degree of political connotation as well. Certain countries may be less forthcoming in protecting these rights efficiently, because they regard for instance the criticisms directed at the government as a misuse of the freedom of expression.

## **6. Relevance of Democracy and Fundamental Rights within G20**

When we discuss whether democracy and fundamental rights are relevant to the G20 process, a blanket answer will not cover all the subtleties of the question, because the relevance of democracy to the G20 process may not necessarily be at the same level as the relevance of the fundamental rights and freedoms. We need to clearly define the specific human right whose relevance to the G20 process is being discussed, because human rights or fundamental rights and freedoms cover a vast area. Human rights may be relevant to the G20 process to varying degrees.

### *a. Democracy and fundamental rights and freedoms as a criteria for development*

Development cannot and should not be measured by the level of per capita income only. Democracy and fundamental rights are equally important for a country to be regarded as a developed country. Absence of democracy and fundamental rights and freedoms hampers social justice and equitable distribution of the wealth generated in a country and allows the rulers to escape accountability. The advice given by countries that do not fulfil all criteria of good governance will be taken less seriously than the advice of countries that fulfil them entirely.

The G20 countries have to set a role model for countries that are not included in the process for various reasons. Therefore, democracy and fundamental rights are relevant to the G20 process.

### *b. Absence of fundamental rights as a deviation from the MDGs*

The Seoul Consensus that was adopted in the Summit was regarded as a document that would contribute to the fulfilment of the commitments of the G20 countries to achieve the MDGs. Therefore if fundamental rights and freedoms contained in seven out of the eight MDGs are not achieved, the G20 countries would be failing their commitments. In other words the G20 has already espoused by this decision the fundamental rights and freedoms and made their fulfilment its own target. Therefore, their relevance to the G20 process goes without saying.

### *c. Absence of fundamental rights as a deviation from free competition*

Child labour, violation of the social rights of workers, denial of the right to strike and to collective bargaining for the workers, denial of decent working periods and fair wages are on the one hand the violation of fundamental rights and freedoms, but they are also a violation of the rules of free competition. The

industries of the countries that observe these rights cannot compete easily with the industries of the countries where salaries are kept unnecessarily low, where working hours are long and minimum measures for the safety of workers are not taken in the workshops.

We cannot ignore the conditions in many developing countries (or emerging economies). For instance it is of course not realistic to expect the authorities to become too generous in countries with high unemployment rates and with millions of workers ready to work even under dire conditions. Nonetheless, it is the duty of the state not to use these pretexts for exposing its own citizens or foreign labour working in its territory to unacceptable working conditions.

## **7. Conclusion**

The main concepts that are discussed in this article are closely related to each other. Democratically governed countries are less likely to initiate armed conflicts. As democracy becomes more widespread the likelihood of armed conflicts will be reduced and stability will prevail in the world with all the positive outcomes that it entails. The most important outcome will be the boost that it will give to global economic growth. Since global economic stability and growth are among the most important targets of the G20, the promotion of democracy and fundamental rights and freedoms have to be a major target that the G20 should be aiming at.

There is also a close link between peace and economic welfare, because conflict is not conducive to progress. Search for security is an innate instinct in human beings. They need peace and stability in order to improve their living standards and welfare. In other words, many of the concepts that constitute the subject of our discussion, namely democracy, human rights, peace, stability, economic development and welfare are all related to each other one way or the other. Therefore the G20 process should not turn a blind eye to the promotion of democracy, human rights, civic rights and social justice.

Having said this, one cannot lose sight of the *realpolitik* in international relations. If certain participating countries perceive the G20 process as a forum where their internal discrepancies are questioned every now and then, they may lose interest in the work of the forum. The elimination of such internal discrepancies should be achieved without alienating these participating countries. The promotion of the universal values should be carried out without being over-bearing.

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