



*Cairo, Egypt 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2011*

Opening speech at conference on:

## **"Civil Society, current role and foresees following the Arab Spring"**

Ladies and gentlemen, Dear friends!

The future is always at our feet. But we never know what lies in its bosom - more than that it will not be as it was before. Change is the only thing we are sure of. But we do not know how, in what way or in which direction. Repression has been followed by openness; openness has given way to repression, but then being followed by more transparency. The direction has always been clear. More and more of freedom.

The future we want to see means more freedom for everyone.

Religious Social Democrats in Sweden has for years been engaged in the Middle East conflict. Our starting point is really quite simple: Human rights and international law is the only working basis for all development.

The world can only be safe and free when international law is maintained!

Let me also state that the further development of the relationship between Palestine and Israel now demands that the parties become more equal, in legal terms. Palestine has to be recognized as a sovereign state! This is not only a fact but a precondition for peace negotiations to be pursued. Peace can only be concluded between States. Peaceful development in Israel and Palestine requires that Palestine is recognized as a sovereign country!

But we are also upset when human rights are violated. Repression against dissidents can never be accepted. The freedom to think is universal. But it may never lead to another person being oppressed. Human rights are a balancing act, where everyone has a responsibility, but where the state and society must focus on defending every person's right to express her opinion.

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This means that you have the right to live out your religion, no matter what religion the majority of the population of a country professes. In Sweden it means that society must defend the rights of both majority and minority, for example the right for Muslims to build mosques and all people's right to joke and to dress themselves according to their different manners and customs.

In Sweden and in Egypt this means different things. The question is, we think, how the society will do in order to give all individuals equal rights and equal obligations. To have laws for equal rights is a good and important thing, but is seldom sufficient. Let me illustrate: In Sweden, men and women have equally rights and possibilities by the law. But in Sweden one woman a week are killed in her home by a man she knows. The reason is often alcohol and broken relationships. This is a shame for our country, but is still a part of what we must fight with in order to give everybody equal possibilities to live full lives. In Egypt, you have your own struggles to pursue about everyone's equal value and rights. Let us speak more about this if you are interested.

Human rights are to respect each other, see the richness of diversity and opportunities for development.

Democracy does not mean that you get as you want. I belong to a political party, the Social Democratic Party, which for many years - after secret and free elections - had the people's trust to hold the government responsible. For five years - and it has also happened in the past as well - however, we have by the people been relegated to be the opposition party. We have a right wing government in Sweden. Not that I wanted it, nor that I think it is good, but because that the Swedish people voted for them.

The author Alaa Al Aswany commented a few weeks ago the first round here in Egypt as follows:

"Mubarak warned always for the Islamists. Oh, and now we are here and the election result is not like I wanted, but such is democracy. "I would say the same thing about the recent elections in Sweden; but such is democracy.

In the United States there is now underway a number of changes to the electoral system. Unfortunately it is not to facilitate people's ability to participate but rather to reduce voter turnout. In Russia, tens of thousands of people are demonstrating in protest against electoral fraud in the recent parliamentary elections.

U.S. and Russia are two examples where the power in different ways is trying to strangle democracy. I take it as an example to show that the struggle for democracy and freedom is not something that we in the West and 20 years ago also the East has behind us, while the Arab world has it in front of her. On the contrary, we have a common struggle to fight. It is often said that every generation must regain democracy. The examples from the U.S. and Russia show that this is a true statement.

The theme of this conference, the role of civil society in the Arab spring, is absolutely central. Functioning democracy needs strong and democratic people. A strong civil society makes people strong. People with the eagerness to change, and who feel the support from others, get the confidence they need to stand on the barricades. Because of that a functioning democracy needs a strong civil society.

In our country, Sweden, democracy and welfare was built largely around the strong popular movements.

Much of what has happened in the popular movements was at odds with those who had the formal power. The popular movements stood by the people against the power, regardless who was in power.

But civil society was in itself strong. The idea was to show each other mutual respect, to respect basic democratic rules, to build solidarity system in which all were interdependent. The revolution in Egypt has so far been mostly peaceful, and it is a key to its success. Violence give birth to violence, and it is a lot thanks to your peaceful work that to sow few persons been put to death. The leaders of Egypt are to be proud over you because of this!

With a strong civil society also women's voices will be stronger. The men, who historically has always been in power in the states and companies will get a difficult and skilled counterpart. In a democracy at least fifty percent of the votes are by and from women. In a democracy we, the men, just have to listen, understand, and especially make room for others, for example wise women, with better ideas and greater confidence from the many.

As General Secretary of the Social Democrats of faith and solidarity, I am very proud of the cooperation we have had for a number of years, along with CIVITAS. I have rarely experienced such a strong commitment to developing a strong civil society, where people get the right and opportunity to be taken seriously. It is very

stimulating to work with friends who always put the individual first, and tirelessly fight for openness and for every person's right to participate.

It is also very gratifying that CIVITAS now increasingly cooperate with MAAT. MAAT is an organization with a good knowledge of Egypt and has for long been working for transparency and fair elections and the strengthening of democracy.

The Arab spring was borne by people who yearn for freedom and democracy. Those people have together all the possibilities to make progress and a difference.

The road ahead will be paved with setbacks and problems. Nothing builds itself. This conference brings together people who know that this is so, but who are convinced that it is possible to change. Last spring there was clear evidence that reality can be influenced.

Now you build - together with colleagues throughout the Arab world - a future where democracy, human rights and international law should be used and followed.

I am looking forward to follow the coming discussions at this conference!