Is certain kind of multistakeholderism a post-democratic ideology? - Need to save NetMundial outcome documents from crossing some sacred democratic lines

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Abstract

Whether in stating principles for Internet governance or suggesting a roadmap for democratizing global governance of the Internet, it must be ensured at the NetMundial meeting, that;1. There is no mention of any kind of equal role of all stakeholders in terms of public policy making, and,2. No group of actors - whether it is the big business, a set of technical institutions, or even a self-selected group of civil society persons/ organizations - is given a veto over what issues may be taken up for public policy development and by whom.If democracy is to be saved, these should be the clear red lines for NetMundial outcome documents. We are laying such strong emphasis on this point because we suspect that it is the main objective of some groups to get some text into the outcome documents that crosses these sacred democratic lines. Some of these groups have already shown an exceptionally strong and deep strategic intent in this direction.

Document

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We have a lot of of positive expectation from the NetMundial meeting. As a part of the

newly formed *Just Net Coalition*, IT for Change had earlier submitted a statement of principles as well a roadmap to democraticize global governance of the Internet. We hope that this meeting will be a major milestone in the path of forming a global consensus on how to govern the Internet in global public interest.

Meanwhile, this present contribution focuses on, what can be considered, a negative issue. We find a large number of submissions proposing, in one form or the other, some kind of 'equal role for all stakeholders' in public policy decision making. Public policy making is a specific kind of political function that can only be undertaken by formally constituted political authorities, who draw their legitimacy from the people through clearly laid out political processes. Subversion of this arrangement through suggestions that various self-selected people and groups, including, prominently, the big business, should be able to exercise a formal political role in public policy making is a huge step back with regard to long-cherished democratic traditions, which are a hard won achievement after centuries of struggles and sacrifices.

Multistakeholder participation as expanding the consultative base of public policy making, and providing the much needed diverse expertise for it, is an immense positive development for deepening democracy. However, claims to formal 'equal roles for all stakeholders' in decision making processes in this regard is grossly anti-democratic, and need to be pushed back.

The principles to be adopted by the NetMundial meeting should come up with a clear affirmation that actual decision making in terms of public policies remains the prerogative of people's representatives, however imperfect and evolving the systems of representation may be at present. At the national levels, public policies are to be developed by democratically elected governments. At the global level, it is a more complex pattern of country government representatives together making global policies which are either enforced directly through international mechanisms, or through harmonisation of national level public policies. While these systems of representation need to be consistently improved, to bring in self-selected groups, even more so, representatives of big business, into formal political roles of decision making, is to reverse the evolution of democracy.

It is important to improve participation of non-government actors in global public policy making, including through formal processes. The UN Internet Governance Forum is an excellent innovation in this direction. The distinction between participation of non-

government actors in development of public policies, on one hand, and taking up a formal role in policy decisions, on the other, however, needs to be zealously maintained as a sacred line between democracy and a certain kind of post-democratic hubris.

Some other proposals, while stopping short of a formal role for non-government actors in public policy decision making, suggest mechanisms whereby non- government actors, including big business, get a formal veto in terms of which issues may be taken up for public policy development, and which not. Such mechanisms are also obviously highly undemocratic, and cannot be allowed. They favor status quo of existing power structures in global Internet governance, which goes against the interests of the less powerful sections and groups.

Whether in stating principles for Internet governance or suggesting a roadmap for democratizing global governance of the Internet, it must be ensured at the NetMundial meeting, that;

1. There is no mention of any kind of equal role of all stakeholders in terms of public policy making, and,
2. No group of actors - whether it is the big business, a set of technical institutions, or even a self-selected group of civil society persons/ organizations - is given a veto over what issues may be taken up for public policy development and by whom.

If democracy is to be saved, these should be the clear red lines for NetMundial outcome documents. We are laying such strong emphasis on this point because we suspect that it is the main objective of some groups to get some text into the outcome documents that crosses these sacred democratic lines. Some of these groups have already shown an exceptionally strong and deep strategic intent in this direction.

Lastly; we have no doubt that there are many kinds of technical level functions that may in fact need to be protected from ad hoc political interferences. The roles of different stakeholders will therefore be different for such delegated functions as against higher public policy functions. Here, the concept of equality of different stakeholders has a very

different context and meaning. Many models based on such formal equality of stakeholders have been working well in technical and operational areas, and should be supported and encouraged. However, even these functions need political oversight as per clearly laid out public policy principles.

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