

The Reforms of Middle Earth

Synopsis:

Our region faces many challenges that must be overcome if it is ever to narrow the gap separating it from the “first world”, not to mention breaking out of the poverty trap that seems a permanent feature of our landscape. Some of the key challenges are the famous three “deficits”; a deficit of freedom, a deficit of knowledge and a deficit of women empowerment.

This article, written as an interview with the prime minister of Middle Earth (a fictional yet representative country in our region), argues that a two-tier approach is required;

- A radical reform of the education system essentially liberating it from the shackles of state control. It creates a pure form of a market-driven education system that aims to provide the skills needed to acquire and apply knowledge regardless of where these skills come from. This should reduce the knowledge deficit without necessarily diverting additional resources from other sectors of the economy like infrastructure investment.
- A reform of the lowest tier of government, i.e., municipal and local government, to encourage participation of citizens in the running of their affairs. This has the distinct advantages of being both a necessary step in educating the masses in the benefits and obligations of the democratic process as well as being non-threatening to the existing regimes. Previous attempts at democratic reforms have failed because they were attempted only at the top level of government. Such attempts, lacking popular support or understanding, inevitably failed usually by the route of military takeovers.

It is argued that the above two reforms will also help solve the women empowerment deficit by providing women with better education and by giving them equal opportunity to participate in local government.

The Reforms of Middle Earth

Last week our correspondent had the honour of interviewing His Excellency the Prime Minister of Middle Earth to discuss the recent reforms of the education system and the steps taken to increase popular participation in the decision making process. The interview was noticeably frank and to the point. His Excellency answered all questions candidly. The text of the interview follows.

C:

Your Excellency, the announced reforms were met by disbelief and widespread condemnation by commentators in your neighbouring countries. How do you respond to that?

H.E.:

My government had the courage to face reality and say that we have repeatedly proved incapable of designing, running and paying for a decent education system that can lift us into the ranks of first tier nations. Almost eighty years after independence we still have illiteracy, and our educated masses are under-trained and under-skilled. All previous attempts to fix the education system have failed. A completely radical approach is required. An approach not under the control of the bureaucrats who have proved that they neither have the capability of fixing the system nor the inclination to relinquish control and let others carry out the task.

C:

So you opted for a two-path approach.

H.E.:

Exactly. The first path is to continue to try to fix our traditional government-provided education system and introduce new methodologies and performance measures. However as we have no confidence in the capability of our bureaucrats to succeed now where they have previously failed, we are also allowing a parallel path of totally independent private education. We are removing all controls and supervision of the private system. Private schools are free to choose any curriculum to follow from any country whatsoever. Those schools that succeed in producing employable graduates or graduates that get accepted into prestigious institutions of higher learning will prosper. Those who do not will wither and die. This is free-market Darwinism in its purest form.

C:

But what guarantees are there that low quality schools will not be established and that students will not suffer?

H.E.:

No guarantees at all. Parents can inspect the schools and check their performance records. If they are not happy with what they see, they can go elsewhere or put their children in the government school system. Remember that we are not dismantling the government system; we are allowing a parallel system to exist.

C:

But you are subsidising the parallel system with government money and therefore benefiting the rich.

H.E.:

Yes and no. Remember that every citizen is entitled to free government education. The real cost of this is over \$1000 per student per year. What we are doing is contributing to the private school chosen by the student half of this amount towards his fees in lieu of not using government schooling. The other half we put into a fund to provide full private school fees to the brightest students who cannot afford them. Far from subsidising the rich, we are taking about half of the money we normally spend on their schooling and giving this to the bright and poor. The beauty of our approach is that for no net additional education budget, we are allowing a larger percentage of students to get a better education. More students from moderately well-to-do families can now afford private schooling.

C:

But is it not easier to simply reform the government school curriculum?

H.E.:

Reforming the curriculum will not work by itself. Our problem is not merely the curriculum. Our school graduates are generally poor in their ability to apply what they have learnt, they do not have the capability to question assumptions or to seek and assimilate additional knowledge. The whole approach to teaching has to change and we cannot do this with our current teachers and bureaucrats. They need to be retrained and, dare I say, reprogrammed with a new outlook. Quite simply we do not have the capability to do that. We hope that over time the graduates of the parallel system will become the leading teachers and bureaucrats and they can then apply their new skills in lifting the standard of the government system.

C:

Your critics argue this will provide some segments of society with an unfair advantage.

H.E.:

This may be so, but the rich will always have unfair advantages in any system. What we are doing is expanding the slice of people with advantage. In choosing between total fairness in a poor and backward society or a less fair system that can help enrich the whole society over time we have chosen the latter. The world is becoming a more competitive place and we have no option but to try to catch up. Let me repeat again that we are not giving the rich more than they are getting now.

C:

What about the criticism that with no government controls the teaching of our language and cultural values may suffer?

H.E.:

It is possible some schools that follow a foreign curriculum may decide to skimp on the teaching of our language or culture. Others will respond to market demand

and provide a thorough teaching of these. What we are trying to do is create a more educated and productive society, and almost by definition this will entail the questioning of some of our fundamental traditions and values. There are bound to be many outcries about this or that subject or method of teaching. The bureaucrats will not be able to resist the pressure to do something about it. Their instincts are always to apply more controls. So, under the guise of protecting quality we will find ourselves reimposing curriculum controls that shackle the system. By legislating complete freedom of the education system upfront, the bureaucrats will find that while they may not like what they see, they are powerless to do anything about it.

C:

Your critics accuse you of not wanting democracy and that the reforms are your way of avoiding democracy while pretending to encourage it.

H.E.:

You must be referring to our reforms being limited to the municipal government level. Let us put this in a historical context. After independence we had a reasonably democratic system with regular multi-party elections. Still, the people did not feel properly represented. When we had our first military coup, the people not only did not rise to defend their democratic freedoms but also made national heroes of those who imposed a military dictatorship. The people were not ready to embrace an alien system of government operating at the top, even one that gave them more rights than they ever had before. For a democratic system to thrive it must be built from the ground up. Democratization has to start at the grass roots level and slowly percolate to the top. I get more popular requests for banning this or restricting that to protect our social values than I get petitions for more freedoms!

C:

So what are those reforms?

H.E.:

We are giving people almost total control over the aspects of local government that affect their lives directly. Cities and towns will be governed by elected councils with control over the council budgets and personnel. How the streets are cleaned, which ones are repaired, what are the building and planning requirements, how well are services being delivered and the like will be controlled by the people. Local education and health boards are also being established with a majority representation on them by elected local representatives. These boards will control the schools and health centres. People will learn the democratic process by actually practicing it at the daily lives level. They will learn the value and need for participation in the process of government. They will learn how to select representatives and hold them accountable. Slowly, we will create a society that knows the obligations as well as the rights conferred by democracy.

C:

What about the higher levels of government?

H.E.:

My cabinet and I will still control security, foreign affairs, defence and economic policy. I do not pretend this is not so. My point is we are not yet ready as a society to have and keep a more democratic system as was proved many times in our region. If I am being criticised for being honest about this, so be it. It is time we learnt to squarely face our shortcomings, admit them and work to remove them. Pretending they do not exist is no longer viable.

C:

You have studied the recent UNDP report highlighting the now famous three deficits. How are your reforms addressing these?

H.E.:

Our educational reforms directly address the deficit of knowledge. The reforms of the local government allow people more freedom to choose how their local environment is run, reducing the freedoms deficit indirectly. More importantly, it lays the foundation for a strong and real democracy in a few years time, which will ultimately address the freedoms deficit. The new generation of community leaders, graduating from the private school system fully versed in the democratic traditions of other countries and with the skills to apply this knowledge to our local conditions, will expedite this process.

C:

What about the deficit of woman empowerment?

H.E.:

This is indirectly addressed by the reforms. Better education of our young ladies will help them attain a more equitable social and economic standing. The local election laws provide women with equal opportunity to participate in the local government both as voters and representatives. My government will use its power to appoint members of the local education and health councils to appoint more women. Thus providing role models for our female population and getting the male members of our society used to the idea that women can and do fully participate in the running of our society.

C:

Are you disappointed by the level and vehemence of criticism of your reforms?

H.E.:

Not at all. Attempting a wholesale reform of society is bound to cause criticism by those used to the *status quo*. If there was no criticism I would have thought the reforms did not go far enough!

C:

Your Excellency, thank you for a frank interview. I wish you and your country success.