



The World's first "crowdsourced" constitution is set to be adopted by the Icelandic Parliament as early as next year after a two year inclusive and participatory process.

Iceland became an independent state in 1944 but in the post-war rush towards independence from Denmark, the Icelanders merely replaced the word "King" with "President" in the constitution and added provisions on the election of a national head of state.

The constitution was for the most part the same constitution as the one "given" unilaterally to Iceland by the King of Denmark in 1874. For more than sixty years the Icelandic political parties could not agree on any major constitutional amendments so the constitution remained fundamentally intact until the financial crisis of 2008-2009.

The banking sector collapsed and Iceland – at the time world number one on the UNDP Human Development Index - faced national bankruptcy. A grass-roots movement organized daily protests outside parliament, triggering the fall of a centre-right government in early 2009. A new centre-left government launched the constitutional process to meet the demands of the protest movement.

Elections were held for representatives on a Constitutional Council without the participation of political parties and 25 members were elected out of 523 candidates who all ran as individuals.

"All our work was put online, on Facebook, and our website, and every Icelander could comment on our work there, or send us suggestions and thoughts," the youngest member of the Council, Ms. Ástrós Signýjardóttir, 24 at the time, told Epoch Times "We took into account all those comments and suggestions, discussed them, and some of them actually made it into the final draft."

An estimated 95% of the Icelandic population of only 320,000 has internet access and the Council attracted around 3,600 individual postings via the internet, notably social media, in addition to 370 formal proposals through traditional correspondence. All working documents were accessible online and all of its meetings were broadcast on TV and by direct webcast.

A referendum was held on 20 October 2012 as to whether to build a new constitution on the Councils' recommendations. Two-thirds of the voters said yes but voter turnout was disappointing at only about 50%.

Eiríkur Bergmann, who discusses the process in a forthcoming book*, was an elected member of the Constitutional Council. He says that it is perhaps an exaggeration to talk about the world's first crowdsourced constitution, quite simply because the Council had only four months to complete its task.

"The Council welcomed the focus on crowdsourcing in the media and even played on it and used it to its advantage in domestic politics", Mr. Bergmann told In Focus. "This was however, never a realistic description of the drafting. Despite this extraordinary open access, the Council was not able to systematically plough through all the extensive input as it only had four months to complete its task."

Even if it is debatable as to what extent the constitutional process was crowdsourced, it is clear that enthusiasts of open government around the world can -and already do - point to Iceland as a pioneer in an inclusive and participatory decision making process.

* *Eiríkur Bergmann: **Iceland and the international financial crisis: Boom, Bust & Recovery.** Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.*

□ *Illustration: A cartoon by Halldór Baldursson published in the Icelandic daily Fréttablaðið.*