

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's Closing Remarks to the Ministerial Warsaw, Poland, June 27, 2000

Professor Geremek, Madam Secretary of State, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to associate myself today with a new coalition of democracies, dedicated to expanding the frontiers of freedom and to ensuring that, wherever democracy has taken root, it will not be reversed.

The principle of democracy is now universally recognized. The right of all people to take part in the government of their country through free and regular elections, enshrined in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is not peculiar to any culture. People of all cultures value their freedom of choice, and feel the need to have a say in decisions affecting their lives. Increasingly, they understand that democracy, properly implemented, provides the best guarantee of a climate of free discussion, in which people can learn from each other's ideas, and reach agreement on solutions to their common problems.

One of the greatest challenges to humankind in the new century will be the struggle to make the practice of democracy equally universal. In that struggle, nations in which democracy is already well established will need to be vigilant in preserving that achievement, and to work together to help those where democracy is still new or emerging. That, I know, is the main purpose of your new coalition, and I warmly salute it.

Allow me also to salute the Government of Poland, and Professor Geremek in particular, for their leadership in hosting this conference. That this meeting is happening today in Warsaw is a tribute to the extraordinary Polish struggle for freedom in the 1980s - a non-violent struggle which inspired peoples the world over to believe that one day they, too, might become masters of their own fate.

Poland's democratic rebirth in 1989 has been followed by economic progress. The state monopoly no longer exists, economic decentralization is the order of the day, and individual initiative is rewarded throughout society. Democracy is truly beginning to bear fruit. Poland has found new allies, and is on its way to becoming a member of the European Union.

These achievements are all the more remarkable given the sacrifices they have required from the population. Of course these sacrifices are connected with the transition from a state command economy to a market one, not with democratization as such. But those two processes often go together, and we must all be aware of the danger that democracy may lose support among the population because of the social costs associated with the transition. That is not a reason for slowing down economic reform. It is a reason for managing its social effects with great care.

As Secretary General of the United Nations, I am particularly gratified that this new coalition is meeting to support the founding values of our Organization, as set out in the Charter and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Indeed, the theme of this conference: "Towards a Community of Democracies" represents my own most profound aspiration for the United Nations as a whole. When the United Nations can truly call itself a community of democracies, the Charter's noble ideals of protecting human rights and promoting "social progress in larger freedoms" will have been brought much closer.

When the founders of the United Nations met in San Francisco more than half a century ago, they knew that no foundation of peace would be sturdier than democratic government. You who have taken the initiative to hold this Conference--the Governments of Poland, the Czech Republic, Chile, India, the Republic of Korea, Mali and the United States--represent a renewed global commitment to making this century the century of democracies. Certainly at no time in history have so many people in so many countries had a say in the political decisions that affect their lives.

And yet this meeting is not just a celebration. You are here because you know that the work of democracy is never done--that too many people are still denied their human rights, while too many democracies remain imperfect and vulnerable to subversion by ruthless leaders. In Professor Geremek's words, you have recognized that "democracy is not granted us once and for all. Its foundations must be continually reinforced through national efforts and by means of international cooperation".

Indeed, we meet at a perilous moment in the development and spread of democracy since the end of the Cold War. Even as popular sovereignty has been established or restored in many countries over the last two decades, it is threatened today by a new danger, which I call "fig-leaf democracy."

Certainly, many young democracies are making quiet but persistent progress, with regular and legitimate elections and peaceful transfers of power. But this last year alone has witnessed a troubling number of cases where democratic rule has been subverted, or maintained in name only, while in reality authoritarian government has taken over.

In Africa, there have recently been challenges to democratic rule in a number of states--not least through the explosion of conflict--and even an outright coup in Côte d'Ivoire. In Asia, we saw Pakistan revert to military rule. In South America, democracy has been undermined by events in Ecuador and elsewhere, when some leaders resorted to populism, or to manipulation of the democratic process, rather than respect for the limitations of constitutional rule. And now the South Pacific, too, has been unsettled by coups in Fiji and the Solomon Islands.

At least these attempts to overturn democratically elected governments have been widely condemned. At last year's summit of the Organization of African Unity in Algiers, Africa's leaders declared that Governments which came to power through unconstitutional means could no longer expect to be received as equals in an assembly of elected heads of state. And earlier this month, the Commonwealth strongly condemned the coups in the South Pacific and suspended Fiji's membership.

I welcome the principled stand taken in these cases--indeed, I look forward to the day when the General Assembly of the United Nations will follow Africa's lead, and apply similarly stringent standards to all its members. But we must be no less vigilant in

condemning those who would overturn democracy in more subtle, yet equally destructive ways. Nor should we be deceived when rulers attempt to legitimize themselves, after an illegitimate seizure of power, by holding flawed elections which are not really free.

Constitutional rule is not always reversed suddenly in one dark night of terror. Sometimes it is done slowly and incrementally, institution by institution, under the guise of defending democracy itself. Rulers claim to be acting in the best interests of the people, even when showing contempt for their choices.

By seeing through these ploys and ostracizing those who would claim a place in the community of democracies on false pretenses, the members of that community can help each other to restore democratic government where it has been overturned, and to strengthen it where it is in peril.

Democratic accountability requires more than an electoral mandate. For elections to be genuinely free, and for people to feel genuinely represented in government, much more is needed: institutional checks and balances, an independent judiciary, viable political parties, a free press and the freedom of each individual to express his or her ideas without fear of retribution. Democracy is betrayed, even if its forms are respected, when elected governments allow corruption to thrive, and fail to address the basic needs of the population.

Indeed, the forms of democracy can be abused to harm human rights, especially when minorities are excluded or marginalized--whereas inclusive democracy is the best mechanism for advancing and securing human rights. That important point is made in this year's Human Development Report, devoted to the theme "human rights and human development," which will be published by the UN Development Program in two days' time.

The United Nations works to strengthen democracy, in this broad sense which includes good governance and the rule of law, in many areas of the world. Indeed, UNDP devotes more than fifty per cent of its resources to promoting better governance and management of public resources.

We are engaged in programs designed to combat corruption and ensure transparency and accountability in the management of public affairs; and to support political pluralism and freedom of association. We also encourage effective decentralization of power, notably through the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities. All these things are necessary for a healthy democracy, in which social and economic development must benefit all the people, not only some.

Intimately linked to all these efforts is our work to promote human rights--one of our most important mandates, and a theme that runs through all our activities. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has, over the last five years, carried out more than thirty technical cooperation projects, in such widely varying countries as Burundi, Cambodia, El Salvador, Tanzania and Togo.

But, while democracy must be more than free elections, it is also true, as one scholar has noted, that it cannot be less. And therefore the UN also assists many of its Member States, at their request, in holding free and fair elections. Over the last eight years, since

the establishment of our Electoral Assistance Division, we have done this in around 150 Member States, both through election monitoring missions and in the context of peacekeeping operations.

At the international level, we have helped organize the Conference of New or Restored Democracies, the fourth of which--but the first in Africa--will be held in Benin in December this year. I am pleased to note that your report will be submitted to that Conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

There are many good reasons for promoting democracy. Not the least--in the eyes of the United Nations--is that, when sustained over the long term, it is a highly effective means of preventing conflict, both within and between states.

Certainly, the record shows that democratically governed states rarely if ever make war on one another. But even more important, in this era of intra-state wars, is the fact that democratic governance--by protecting minorities, encouraging political pluralism, and upholding the rule of law--can channel internal dissent peacefully, and thus help avert civil wars. Conversely, authoritarian and highly personalized forms of governance, ethnic discrimination, human rights violations and corruption are among the root causes of many of today's internal conflicts. In such highly polarized societies, the effort to create a democratic political order falls victim to a climate of winner-takes-all, where consensus and compromise find little support.

The same point applies when societies that have succumbed to conflict have to be rebuilt. It is vitally important, if often difficult, to promote human rights, to protect minority rights and to institute legitimate and representative political arrangements under the rule of law, through free and fair elections.

Of course, wounds that have festered for a long time will not heal overnight. But if society is given the political and economic breathing space--through democratic governance, human rights and sustainable development--there is a real chance for it to escape the cycle of violence.

Thus democracy offers us a double promise--as an agent of peace as well as liberation. I am confident that meetings such as yours can make an invaluable contribution to the fulfilment of that promise, and I wish you every possible success.

Thank you very much.

Source:

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