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Onwards!
Reinforcing Democracy for the 21st Century

By

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

As we come to the close of these intensive three days of discussion, it is relevant to remind ourselves of this exciting journey of exploration and discovery that we have undertaken in trying to better define what democracy means and how it has evolved over the centuries... How democracy serves as the best system to ensure our human rights and provide for a better society.. and also, how current models of democratic governance which matured in the last century may be improved in the coming 21st century.

I. Understanding what Democracy Means...

We have ranged far and wide on a journey of exploration and discovery on the complex issue of what democracy is all about.

We looked back at the evolution of systems of governance in the West and in the East..

We identified the major milestones of that evolution. In fact, the exhibition that accompanied the conference, showed the major documents that marked these milestones....

But we concluded that the key stages of democracy in terms of content were the following:

- Limiting absolute rights of the monarch
- Guaranteeing some fundamental rights to subjects
- Creating a social contract between government and governed
- Limiting the power of government - separation of powers
- Legitimacy of government comes from the consent of the governed
- The voice of the sovereign people is represented by an elected government
- The right to participate in electing that government was the privilege of the few
- Universal suffrage for all

In general, Democracy was seen as the best means to protect individual freedoms and to prevent the emergence of dictatorship by keeping the legitimacy of the government hostage to the consent of the governed, and keeping to the governed the means of changing those who govern in an orderly, peaceful and legitimate fashion. Elections were deemed the key tool for that, and thus the search for achieving universal suffrage was the primary goal of democratic evolution.

But we also acknowledged that Democracy as a system of government – so eloquently and succinctly described by Lincoln as “Government of the people, for the people, by the people” – was intended to achieve certain desired outcomes, including:

- Freedom
- Justice
- Equality
- Social choice
- Participation
- Due process
- Rule of Law
- Protection of minorities
- Transparency
- Accountability

And it became apparent that in many countries, despite regular elections and other trappings of the modern democratic state, these desiderata were not being fulfilled, or at least not sufficiently, to meet the expectations of the public.

Some argued that we had in the last century focused on expanding the base of those who have the right to vote, automatically accepting the elected governments that resulted as representative of the people. But experience towards the end of the century showed that despite broadening the base of participation to universal suffrage, money and corruption, special interest groups and lobbies, perpetuation in office due to the advantages of incumbency, and other problems emerged. The presence of a vigorous free press and an active civil society were a few of the bulwarks beyond elections that appeared required for a healthy democratic system that had better chances of responding to the needs and wishes of the people.

Conscious of the fact that many of the ideas that govern our democratic systems are almost 200 years old, we asked whether we could not improve and add to them in the light of the changing world in which we live. Given the amazing transformations taking place in the world, driven by globalization, and an unprecedented revolution in science and technology, especially in ICT and the enormous penetration of connectivity through the internet, mobile telephony and such media as Facebook, our world is different from that of Montesquieu and Jefferson and Madison.

So, in my first intervention at the outset of these proceedings, I posed to the participants three important questions:

- Are the current modes of operation of democratic systems delivering these desired outcomes? No, or at least not enough!
- Are we confusing means (elections) with results (desired outcomes)? Too frequently observers make this mistake...
- Are there new instruments that we could incorporate into our democratic models that would bring us closer to these desired outcomes?

I will return to this last question in a moment. But first I would like to record that I am not in any way a pessimist, that I remain profoundly optimistic about democracy and its promise for the 21st century, and that whatever the shortcomings of democracy are, the treatment is to provide more democracy...

Indeed let us just look back at the last century: the 20th century. We could rightly call it “the century of democratic expansion”. Indeed, despite the turbulences and wars, democracy surged forward during the last century, both in terms of reaching

more countries, and in terms of expanding suffrage in the countries where it was already accepted as a form of government.

The world was transformed in the 20th century. At the start of the 20th century the Western World was dominant and its values were far from benign. Colonization, racism, gender discrimination were the order of the day. European empires ruled or dominated the earth, with the US an emerging major power. Women, youth and many European men did not have the vote. Then came World War I, the great depression, and the rise of totalitarian systems: communism, fascism, Nazism, with all the horrors that they would commit...Finally the bloodbath of WWII and the civil war that accompanied the Chinese revolution.

Then the second half of the century saw the foundation of the UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and despite the cold war, and the horrors of localized conflicts from Vietnam to Cambodia and elsewhere, the scale of murder and mayhem of WWII was behind us. Nazism and Fascism had been largely defeated, and Communism's turn was to come. By the 1960s, with decolonization everywhere, the democratic transformation of most of Latin America in the 1980s, and upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, of Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the march of democracy seemed unstoppable. In Europe the EU emerged as the greatest democratic transformation of all, and with it came peacefully. In one generation the youth of Germany and France could no longer envisage that their countries would ever go to war, a dream that their parents and grandparents would have had difficulty to even imagine. Internationally, we built on the legacy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and we had CEDAW (Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women), and by the end of the century we even had the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

And so, on that journey of exploration that saw the surge of democracy, and with the emergence of so many examples and models, with criticism and response, with scandals, crises and revivals, we also are able to say, that we got to acquire a much more realistic appreciation of the complexities of democratic governance in an increasingly complex world. In the words of T.S. Eliot:

"We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring,
Will be to arrive where we started,
And know the place for the first time."

But if we see the destination with renewed clarity, we have also recognized that Transitions from dictatorship to democracy are particularly arduous and challenging.

II. Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy:

But at the end of the century and the beginning of the 21st century, the world of the 20th century was no more. The internet:

Globalization, local identities...

A new scientific revolution was, and is, underway, from ICT to biology. Profound economic transformations appeared with the rise of China and the emerging markets, and the widespread penetration of new technologies, especially the internet and mobile telephony with more lines than there are humans on the planet. Social connectivity touches almost everyone on the planet, and all that is new is instantly shared across the world.

Such transitions are difficult. Our region is awash with broken dreams and human blood. In many of our countries, corruption runs from the lowest bureaucrats to some of the custodians of the highest offices. Oligarchs are emerging between the cracks of the breaking old system, as the new system is still not fully formed... There is anxiety among those who knew the old system that is vanishing, while the youth drifts between uncertainty and aimlessness... With violence in the streets, and rampant profiteering and black markets—with a virtual despair among the many who seek a life of dignity amidst the ruins of bygone systems and the incompleteness of the successor systems, the general outlook for a system in revolutionary change can indeed be bleak...

In our discussions we highlighted the vulnerability of democracy in its early stages as opposed to mature democracies. We also underlined that the economic underpinning for transition democracies is essential – people expect improving living conditions – but transitions provide a very poor climate for economic development.

In addition, periods of transition witness an explosion of many local identities asserting themselves and many hitherto suppressed tensions and conflicts coming to the fore. Indeed, authoritarian regimes do not resolve society's profound problems, they keep them suppressed, “under the lid” so to speak, and therefore

when democracy arrives all these classic issues come out again and provide fodder for demagogues and allow the emergence of oligarchies....

So the role of leaders in transitional times is important. Who can underestimate the contributions of leaders such as Mandela and Tutu in South Africa? And as we saw in the case studies of Latin America and Eastern Europe, how to prevent the emergence of oligarchies is very important in the crucial times when the new institutions of governance are taking root in the fragile periods of transition from dictatorship to democracy.

III. Today: New Instruments: Innovations

But beyond the issues of transitions towards democracy, we also recognized that even in mature democracies, as in Europe and the US, there were a number of **danger signals** of trends that could undermine the good functioning of these democracies, such as declining party membership, declining participation and generally low opinion of elected representatives and lack of trust in the institutions of government, that sometimes went as far as considering the government incompetent at best, an enemy at worst. But instead of just criticizing, we moved to look at possible improvements that we could make, new instruments that we could use... Thus we explored possible answers to the third question I posed at the outset:

Are there **new instruments** that we could incorporate into our democratic models that would bring us closer to these desired outcomes?

We looked at the ideas of **Sortition** ... and the examples of **Deliberative Democracy** ... And the arguments for seeing this as a very useful and effective **complement rather than a substitute** to the usual and elective formal processes of democratic governance.

We also discussed the values of **local government, decentralization and other mechanisms** to reduce the concentration of power and the support of representative democracy, and its emerging morphing into participatory democracy.

Institutional developments must also encourage the emergence of the **civil society** which has a crucial role to play in any democratic society. It is only by practicing democracy that people will learn to establish **trust** in the government system.

IV. So Where Are We Now in the Arab World?

We are in such a transition period, and we cannot expect smooth sailing...

But as Shakespeare said:

There is tide in the affairs of men
Which taken at the flood leads on to fortune
Omitted all the voyage of their lives is bound in shallows and in miseries
On such a full sea are we now afloat
And we must take the current when it serves
Or lose our ventures...

But we shall not lose our ventures!

Our young people will create the better future which our generations have not yet been able to achieve...

But what about those of us who are not so young anymore?

I believe that we are young at heart...

For indeed; the years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up our ideals wrinkles the soul. The years may mark our face, diminish our physical vigor, whiten our hair and limit our eyesight, but we can remain young at heart... for You are:

As young as your faith, as old as your doubt;
As young as your dreams; as old as your cynicism;
As young as your self-confidence, as old as your fear;
As young as your hope, as old as your despair¹.

You will remain young as long as you believe in the beauty of your dreams, that you believe in hope, cheer and courage...

Only if you give in to pessimism, and lose your heart to cynicism, then, and then only, are you grown old.

And then, indeed it is as Douglas MacArthur said: “ you just fade away.”

But the dreams will not fade away... The dreams are there for they inspire us all to new levels of effort...

To look at democracy as Amartya Sen was quoted saying:
“Democracy as equal authorship of collective life”.

To look at our legislative tasks and think of them as:
Fashioning the wise constraints that make people free

To look at the dawn of a new era and live by the immortal words:
There are those who look at things as they are and ask why
But we are among those who look at the world as it could be and ask why
not...

To confront these turbulent times in our world and take up the challenge of the
future... for...
If not now, when?
If not us, who?

So let this conference be a small contribution to inspire each of us to think, to
dream and to act to help design the future...

I wish you many future adventures
Happy journeys...

Thank you...

Ismail Serageldin

ⁱ From poem by Samuel Ullman (1840 -1924) which was a favorite of General Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964) who quoted it frequently and kept a copy of it above his desk.