

# *The Democratic Imperative*

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I have called this speech 'The Democratic Imperative' because I believe discussion about the Iraq war has clouded the debate about promoting democracy around the world. I understand the doubts about Iraq and Afghanistan, and the deep concerns at the mistakes made. But my plea is that we do not let divisions over those conflicts obscure our national interest, never mind our moral impulse, in supporting movements for democracy. We must not be glib about what democracy means – it is far more than a five year ballot. We cannot be self satisfied about the state of our own democracy. We cannot impose democratic norms. But we can be clear about the desirability of government by the people and clear that without hubris or sanctimony we can play a role in backing demands for democratic governance and all that goes with it. That is my focus today.

Victor Hugo said you can defeat armies, but you can't defeat ideas. Last September when so many people were prepared to risk their lives by coming out onto the streets of Rangoon, in what I would call a 'civilian surge,' we saw that, for all its brutality and for all its corruption, the Military Junta in Burma has been unable to destroy the hope of a better and freer life. The people of Burma show that the hope for a life lived at liberty extends to all people in all parts of the world.

It is fitting, therefore, that I should make this speech in the Oxford College where Daw Aung San Suu Kyi not only undertook her undergraduate education but also met her late husband, the distinguished scholar, Dr Michael Aris.

Aung San Suu Kyi remains today what she has been for 20 years: a beacon of hope in the struggle for democracy in Burma. And a beacon of hope beyond Burma too – the civilian surge there is not an isolated phenomenon. It can be seen around the world. More literate, better informed citizens, more conscious of their rights,

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less deferential towards authority, more able to connect with each other through technology, are challenging incumbents.

But today, although we should be celebrating Burma's 60th year as an independent nation, we are not. Instead, remind yourself that it is 18 years since Aung San Suu Kyi's party won 82 percent of the seats in Parliament, and almost 5 years since she began her latest stint of house arrest.

Thanks to the efforts of many people in this room, and many others around the world, Burma has not and will not be forgotten. The campaigns, the resolutions, the sanctions are in place. And the world community looks closely, with caution rather than expectation but hope as well as scepticism, at suggestions from the regime about how to achieve progress and reconciliation.

The regime has this week called a referendum for May on a new constitution and elections for 2010. For any process to have credibility two things must happen. First Aung San Suu Kyi must be released immediately and allowed to participate along with other political leaders and ethnic groups in drafting the constitution and in the subsequent referendum campaign. Second the UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari should be allowed to return immediately to Burma to help facilitate the process.

I believe this is an important time to reflect on the situation in Burma and to think about what the international community can do there – and elsewhere – to help people fulfil their aspirations for democratic rule. There is a paradox here.

On the one hand the last 30 years have witnessed a remarkable 'third wave of democracy.' In the 1970s the collapse of authoritarian regimes led to the reestablishment of democracy in Portugal, Greece and Spain. But it was with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the crumbling of the Soviet Empire that the tide really turned. By the early 1990s most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe had democratically elected governments and many were seeking reintegration into the European family.

At the same time, several authoritarian regimes in Asia – South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and Indonesia – converted to democracy. Much of Africa had also made the transition – the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994 was a defining moment. And by the end of the century, all of Latin America – except for Cuba –

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had established democratically elected governments. Today, there is only one region – the Middle-East – where democratic regimes remain the exception. According to Freedom House, in the early 1970s less than a quarter of the world's countries were democratic. Thirty years later, the figure stood at over 60 percent.

At the same time as this dramatic growth in democratic governance, the belief that there is an inevitable tide of history has been discredited. After the end of the cold war it was tempting to believe in 'the end of history' – the inevitable progress of liberal democracy and capitalist economics. Now with the economic success of China, we can no longer take the forward march of democracy for granted. Since the millennium, there has been a pause in the democratic advance. The rise in the number of democracies has plateaued. Countries with new democratic systems are struggling to establish roots. Our own democratic institutions struggle to bridge the gap between citizens and government.

This reality makes my argument today all the more important. I will argue that we should back demands among citizens for more freedom and power over their lives – whether that is reforming established democracies, or supporting transitions to democracy. We should be on the side of the civilian surge.

We must resist the arguments on both the left and the right to retreat into a world of realpolitik. The traditional conservative 'realist position' is to say that values and interests diverge, and interests should predominate. This will not do. Yet in the 1990s, something strange happened. The neoconservative movement seemed to be most sure about spreading democracy around the world. The left seemed conflicted between the desirability of the goal and its qualms about the use of military means. In fact, the goal of spreading democracy should be a great progressive project; the means need to combine soft and hard power. We should not let the genuine debate about the 'how' of foreign policy obscure the clarity about the 'what.'

I want to begin by talking about what we mean by democracy and why we should support the spread of democratic ideals and practices. I then want to discuss how we can do so in a way that recognises both the diversity of cultures and the limits of our power and capacity to effect change.

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### Defining Democracy

Democracy is plural not singular. There are many aspects to democracy and some countries are more democratic than others. It also makes sense to talk of the culture of democracy which is both a condition and a consequence of a democratic state.

But that doesn't mean that nothing can be said. The root of the word is clear: government by the people. We can specify the indispensable conditions of a democracy – that the people choose the government, that they are free from arbitrary control and that the government respects the right of the people to dispense with it.

And I do not believe that this demand for civil recognition to be a curiosity of the modern West. There are very many forms of government by the people that are compatible with the demand for civil recognition. The demand itself I take to be universal. The checks and balances of human rights and democratic governance are important for the security and development of any society: from established systems like ours to the new democracies of Eastern Europe and Africa to the emerging economies of China and the Middle East.

According to global polling by Gallup, 8 out of 10 people want to live in a democracy, closer to 9 out of 10 in Africa. From Botswana to Indonesia, there are striking examples of successful representative democracies that demonstrate how universal values can be applied to diverse cultural, social and economic contexts.

The belief in the equal worth of each human being, and the desire for people to have sovereignty over their own lives is not only enshrined in the Universal Declaration of human rights, it is lived out in all corners of the world. Tellingly, even where democracy is absent, dictators seek to describe their rule as 'democratic' to provide a veil of legitimacy for their regimes.

### Universal Values

This is a controversial case, I know. The claim that some values are universal is often thought to be a kind of intellectual imperialism. There are three schools of criticism of the case I have made. I want to dwell on each in turn.

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First, the Asian values school. Spreading democracy, they say, is an attempt to impose Western values on countries with distinctive traditions and aspirations. Not so much intellectual imperialism as actual imperialism.

Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's former prime minister, once characterised 'Asian values' as 'a certain attitude towards life which raises the interest of the community above that of the individual.' In 1993, the Bangkok declaration of 34 Asian and Middle Eastern states supported the universality of human rights, but rejected the 'imposition of incompatible values,' emphasising the importance of 'national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds.'

I have two responses to this. The first I borrow from Amartya Sen who has brilliantly shown, from the Buddhist councils in India to the society of the Ochoollo in Southern Ethiopia, that people from all cultures came together to deliberate over their communal affairs centuries before the emergence of the Italian city-republics.

The second response is that it is precisely liberal democracies that are most hospitable to the variety of histories and heritages that are said to make democracy impossible. Indeed, the great variety of cultures and peoples contained in the idea of 'Asian values' casts grave doubt on whether it means very much. And even if something like 'Asian values' can be adduced, they will find democracy a hospitable place. The kind of place that would welcome the 'Asian values' of Aung San Suu Kyi, for example.

### Values and Interests

The second critique is what we might call the school of *realpolitik*. This is the charge that democracy is not always in the national interest. Sometimes democracy is a luxury that nations cannot afford because either prosperity or security must be achieved first. Trade and investment before democracy; fighting terrorism trumps individual rights.

This is dangerously narrow and short-term, in my view. Democracy is the best custodian of trade. Free trade and investment rely on confidence that governments will protect property rights, operate in a transparent way, and avoid hidden subsidies and distortions.

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I also believe that established democracies are less likely to fight each other. Their intentions and motives are more transparent. They are better able to build trust with other states.

But today, the main security threat, from terrorism and conflict, comes not from conflict between states, but within states. Local disputes and ethnic divisions escalate into wider regional conflicts. Groups that begin with local grievances increasingly become co-opted by al-Qaeda into global terrorism.

In weak states, there are no military solutions to the insecurity and injustice that helps to breed terrorism, only political solutions. Democracy provides a way of resolving competing interests and claims on resources in a peaceful way. Without democratic legitimacy, it is hard to sustain the increase in state capacity needed to maintain law and order.

In my mind there is no doubt: the rule of law in a democracy is the best long-term defense against global terrorism and conflict.

And in countries such as China seeking a stable path to political reform it's important to recognise that democracy is not a threat to instability but a way to guarantee it. Globalisation, and the increasing complexity of modern societies, has strengthened this truth.

### **Democracy Promotion**

The third school of opposition is more pragmatic. It asserts that our ability to promote democracy is limited because the transition to democracy is usually the result of national convulsions. Democracies usually emerge as part of a bargain between citizens and the state. Where the state requires more resources – taxes, or military conscription for war – citizens are granted more accountability over the state. Or a growing middle class demands political representation as a concomitant of its growing purchasing power.

This can involve violent rupture. When powerful political players – the tribal or dynastic leaders, warlords or the military – jostle for position and try to co-opt the system, the birth-pangs of democracy can be anything but democratic. We know this from our own histories in Europe and America.

But, however the change comes, it grows in the soil of the nation. The argument is that our capacity to create democracies from here is limited. As Fareed Zakaria has argued, democracy flourishes in societies that are already constitutionally liberal, and based on the rule of law and property rights.

This is a better response than the previous two. We need, of course, to be cautious about our capacity to change the world. But while we have less influence than we might hope, we have more than we might fear.

In an increasingly interdependent world, economic linkages mean countries care more about their external reputation and are increasingly subject to global rules and global institutions. International institutions – from the International Criminal Court and the World Trade Organization to the European Union – provide a framework of norms, incentives and sanctions. And the revolution in media and communications enables new forms of global collective action, with government and global non-governmental organisations able to support bottom-up pressure from within countries.

So I am not persuaded that we should take a relativist view. I am quite comfortable asserting, to echo Churchill, that democracy is the least bad system of government we have yet devised. I am unapologetic about a mission to help democracy spread through the world – and by this I mean not just more elections, but the rule of law and economic freedoms which are the basis of liberal democracy. And while we must deploy different tools in different situations, flexibility of means must be combined with consistency in our goals.

The question, which is rightly raised by the pragmatic critique, is how should we promote democracy? In the time I have left I'd like to point to five things we might do.

First, the civilian surge is being driven by more literate, better educated people, able to access information and communicate with others. Technology is playing a crucial role. The Gulf satellite channels Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiyya are a departure for the region. Al-Jazeera's motto, roughly translated, is 'the opinion and the other opinion.' If it lives up to it, it will make a major contribution to the region. Bloggers in Iran are challenging the conservative order online. Bloggers in Kuwait mobilised popular support for parliamentary reform in 2006.

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We can and should support the creation of a free media and free debate. Last year, the BBC World service broadcast to 183 million people; and this year will see the launch not only of a 24-hour Arabic service but also a Farsi TV service – a source of genuinely independent reporting on world news and events. Through its education and cultural programs the British Council last year reached out to over 16 million people; that is why we are extending the British Council work in the Middle East, as well as Central and Southern Asia. Britain has global reach in its media and through the networks of its NGOs. That is why the Foreign Office and DfID continue to invest in national and global NGOs that can open up debate and stimulate pressure from civil society.

Second, we have very important, and potentially influential, financial and economic links. The integration of India and China into the global economy has created unprecedented flows of people, money, and ideas across national boundaries.

Economic openness can drive political and social change. For example, as the UAE has become more integrated into the world economy, it has tackled corruption, increased transparency, and improved institutional and legal mechanisms. China's incorporation into the global economy has brought radical social change – Chinese society is more mobile, vocal and diverse than in the pre-reform period. Arguably more people in China are freer today than they have been at any previous time in Chinese history. But people inside China and outside are rightly concerned about the next stages in political development. President Hu's speech to his Party Congress shows that democracy is an issue for China's leaders as well as its people. I will discuss this for myself during my visit to China the week after next.

Third, as a world leader in aid, we can ensure that aid supports democracy and good governance. We can directly influence the activities of EU and international donors. DfID's investment in governance has increased markedly in recent years: from £85 million (\$165.7 million) in 1997-98 to £322 million (\$628 million) in 2005-06.

Aid has different objectives according to circumstance. In Ethiopia, DfID investment has helped to build the capacity of federal and regional parliaments. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, women have been supported to stand as candidates in local elections. In other countries, where the power of the state threatens to dominate, we need to use aid to support civil society, from trade unions to the media. For example, our aid in Nigeria has supported the work of the Economic



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and Financial Crimes Commission, which has led to 150 convictions and the recovery of \$5 billion since 2002.

Fourth, the attraction of becoming members of 'clubs' such as the European Union, the World Trade Organization, and NATO, can act as a powerful way of establishing democratic norms. As Vaclav Havel said in December 2002, 'the vision of becoming part of the EU was... the engine that drove the democratisation and transformation of' Central and Eastern Europe.

Unless the offer of joining EU remains on the table, and unless we can forge a more attractive Near Neighbourhood Policy, the EU will lose its power as a magnet for democratic reform. Nowhere is this more true than in the countries of the Western Balkans, where the prospect of EU membership is encouraging newly democratic regimes to bolster the rule of law and to ensure greater transparency and accountability. But we need to keep the door open to our Eastern neighbours and continue to deepen our ties with them, supporting those who filled the streets during the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 or the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004.

I also want the EU to engage more actively in promoting democracy beyond its immediate neighbourhood. EU election monitoring in places like Pakistan and Nepal is a good step. But the EU should be clearer about what it understands by democracy. This would help give real meaning to the commitments to democracy in our partnerships with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. And it would enable aid and trade more effectively to support democratisation. An agreed EU position on democracy would also give the EU a clear basis for engaging with partner organisations, such as the African Union or ASEAN, and encouraging them to develop similar agreements around democracy and good governance.

Fifth and finally, there will be situations where the hard power of targeted sanctions, international criminal proceedings, security guarantees and military intervention will be necessary. The UN has 13 sanctions regimes; the EU has eight. They are an imperfect instrument. But targeted sanctions can send a powerful signal about the legitimacy of a state's actions, and offer substantive pressure for changes in behaviour. The most famous example of success is South Africa where they helped persuade the white political establishment of the need to change and dismantle apartheid. In some cases, sanctions are not enough. In extreme cases the failure of

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states to exercise their responsibility to protect their own civilians from genocide or ethnic cleansing warrant military intervention on humanitarian grounds.

Paul Collier argues in his forthcoming work on ‘democracy in dangerous places,’ that the offer of a security guarantee to a new but fragile government, conditional on them abiding by democratic rules, could create a strong incentive for them to abide by the democratic process. To date, our only experience of security guarantees has been of the sort that NATO provides against external aggression. There are a whole range of reasons why Collier’s idea would be difficult. How would you judge which regimes merit the guarantee for instance? How would you avoid perverse incentives? Who would intervene to put down the coup and how would they avoid complicating or exacerbating political divisions? But it is surely right that we consider carefully how best we can support fledgling, fragile democracies, as we are doing in Afghanistan, Iraq and Sierra Leone.

### **Democratic Consolidation**

Most democracies that fail, do so during the first few electoral cycles. While fragile democracies are safer the year before an election, they are more at risk of violence the year after. Democracy needs to be nursed through its early years.

There is no single blueprint. But there are important lessons. In particular, we must strengthen the capacity of the state to enforce the rule of law, while extending accountability to citizens. Three principles stand out.

First, at a national level, governments must ensure the plural distribution of power, with checks and balances between the executive, judiciary and legislature, and electoral systems that share power. In Kenya for instance, we have seen how the ‘winner takes all’ system has raised the political stakes – all was seen to be lost if you ‘lost’ the race for state house. An arrangement which allows for power to be shared, however, could help to defuse tensions. This is why we are supporting Kofi Annan’s efforts to mediate a solution.

In Pakistan, the path to democracy begins with free and fair elections, but it needs deeper roots: an independent judiciary, a commitment from the army to stay out of politics, and devolution of powers to states and local government. The elections in Sierra Leone last year demonstrated the importance of a powerful and independent election commission. The Commission’s resistance to pressure and its determination

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to root out fraud and irregularities meant that the elections were among the most free and fair the continent has seen. Independent election observation can help to reinforce public confidence in the electoral process. I regret in this context that Russia has acted to prevent OSCE experts and parliamentarians from observing its Presidential elections in March.

Second, fledgling democracies need to build the capacity of local as well as national institutions. As Tocqueville wrote ‘the strength of free peoples resides in the local community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within the people’s reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it.’

Iraq is moving towards a new round of provincial elections. The Sunni and Sadrist boycott of the 2005 provincial elections left too many unrepresented and politically disempowered. But as the security situation has improved, former rejectionists accept that they have a stake in Iraq’s future and want their voice to be heard.

In places such as Anbar in western Iraq which were previously dominated by al-Qaeda and other extremists, groups called ‘Concerned Local Citizens’ are now conducting joint operations with the multi-national and Iraqi security forces, ousting al-Qaeda and restoring stability. The Iraqi government must seize the opportunity to bind these people firmly into the legitimate state structures – creating legitimate employment opportunities, including by integrating some elements into the Iraqi Security Force and holding provincial elections to give their leadership a chance to play a role in the political mainstream.

Third, while in some countries we need to strengthen the capacity of the state so that militias and other coercive centres of power fall under the control of the state, in others it is the checks and balances of a sustainable democracy that need strengthening, and it is the role of civil society to provide a voice for popular will. That is why, for example, we are supporting the International Labour Organization’s work to strengthen national trade unions, particularly in Africa. It is why the work of NGOs is important. These are not alternatives to effective democracy; but they are essential to democracy’s effectiveness.

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### Conclusion

There are not many countries where democracy is achieved without a struggle. Nelson Mandela, Lech Walesa, Mahatma Ghandi, Rosa Parks, Shirin Ebadi, Aung San Suu Kyi and many other others have risked their lives and their liberty for it. Those are the names we know. Behind them are others, who, because they are not famous, are taking even greater risks.

In Burma: Tin Oo, the National League for Democracy's vice-chairman, who at 80 years old is under house arrest; U Win Tin, the 78-year-old journalist who is the country's longest-serving political prisoner, having spent 19 years behind bars; Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi and other student leaders from 1988, who have spent 15 years of their life in prison and are currently serving a third stint in detention; Nay Myo Latt, one of Burma's best known bloggers, who was recently arrested at his home; and U Htin Kyaw, who was arrested last year for protesting against the economic hardship faced by Burma under this leadership.

No one ever knows when the struggle will end. When they begin to crumble authoritarian regimes can collapse overnight. The fight needs uncompromising courage; but when it is over different qualities are needed: reason, patience, calm, a readiness to reconcile and forgive. Qualities that I find easy to associate with the patient suffering of Burmese men and women, and which Aung San Suu Kyi herself embodies.

When it awarded the Nobel peace prize to Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Committee said in its citation that it wanted 'to show its support for the many people through the world who are striving to attain democracy, human rights and ethnic conciliation by peaceful means.'

I would like to echo that sentiment today. I believe democracy can take root in all societies. I hope and believe that, in time, it will. The equal worth of human beings, their equal right to independence and self-government, requires no less. And all those brave people who are fighting to gain tomorrow the democracies that we, in the lucky, rich nations of the world are blessed with today, deserve our support. Not just in words, but in deeds.

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