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08.10.2012



World Forum
for
Democracy
STRASBOURG - 2012

Speech by

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Secretary General of the Council of Europe

**at the opening ceremony
of the
World Forum for Democracy**

(Strasbourg, 5-11 October 2012)

Winston Churchill may have called democracy the “least worst” form of government but it is, of course, far more than that.

Democracy enshrines universal values and as rapidly unfolding events keep reminding us, it is a system that has a magnetic appeal for people across the world. With all its flaws and faults, it offers a political system which brings us closest, by far, to the respect of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Democracy is a guarantor of progress and prosperity. The revolutions in the Arab world reminded us all that authoritarianism tends to produce its own dysfunctional symptoms: corruption, injustice, misuse of power. Yes, from time to time democracies also have these attributes. The difference is that the people can correct them by choosing another government.

There is ample evidence to support that, in the long term, democracies perform better than authoritarian societies.

Democracy is also an agent of peace. It is not that democracies never fight wars, but they very seldom, if ever, go to war against each other.

The Council of Europe was created as a consequence of the awful wars on this continent. Lasting peace had to be built on democracy, human rights and rule of law, as Winston Churchill stated when he came here to Strasbourg to start the organisation.

It is natural that we come together in this historic city to discuss how we can help expanding democratic values in other parts of the world and to find solutions to the problems and challenges the already established democracies in our part of the world are facing.

Thank you all for coming, starting, of course, with the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon. Your presence here is highly appreciated. It illustrates your personal commitment to the values of freedom, human dignity and equality, but also the ever-growing contribution of the United Nations, under your leadership, to the safeguarding and promotion of these values throughout the world.

I would also like to welcome most warmly Tawwakol Karman from Yemen, a 2011 Nobel Peace Prize Winner. Tawwakol Karman's untiring struggle for freedom of expression continues to be an inspiration to women – and men – across the world.

Tawwakol Karman represents what I like to call the emerging voices of freedom.

It was my ambition to use the Forum as an opportunity for these young people to speak – and to be heard.

I believe it will be a unique and historic moment for all present here when Ban Ki-Moon, the strongest and the most representative voice in the world today, and Tawwakol Karman as a representative for the aspiring young voices, take the floor and deliver their key-note speeches in a few moments.

I also wish to thank our partners, the City of Strasbourg, the Region of Alsace, the Department of Bas-Rhin and the French Government, for their confidence in – and support for – this important project. And I wish to thank all of you for showing interest and readiness to participate in the Forum. I am confident you will not be disappointed.

But let me return to my opening remarks on the universality of democracy. Think of the Arab spring.

What they demanded was representative democracy, fair elections, decent life and social justice. What they demanded was to be free and equal, in their dignity and in their rights.

You will be quick to point out that the reality of 2012 is different from the hopes of 2011.

Many among the protesters, especially the young, are still frustrated this time not because of a stagnant and oppressive dictatorship but because changes are too slow, because they are not going far enough, because they seem to have gone astray. And the social and economic problems which prompted the revolt are still there. Libya has gone through a bloody civil war; Syrian people are still suffering from a savagely brutal conflict.

To aggravate an already raw climate, a ridiculous but nevertheless offensive film has again inflamed part of the Islamic world. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims have been protesting to express their indignation.

The road to democracy is bumpy and uneven. In a period of transition, tiny, malign groups can try to exploit popular frustration and provoke violence. People have been killed. Terrorist acts have been committed. This was tragic but not fully unexpected. The goals and aspirations of the Arab spring are seen as a serious threat by those who use religion to pursue extremist political objectives. They try to reverse the wheel of history and restore the belief in cultural and religious divides. A culture of democratic tolerance directly undermines their *raison d'être*.

It is high time to liberate religion from politics. We never said that terrorism in Northern-Ireland was Christian terrorism. No, there were people that exploited Christendom for political purposes. It was terrorism. Full stop. There is no Islamic terrorism. Only terrorism. Full stop.

Today politics is harming religion. And misuse of religion is harming politics.
Religion is faith. Politics is compromise.
They have to find a way of enriching each other, not harming each other.

When it comes to politics I would say that in today's world compromise and moderation is one of the most important values.

And I believe that the major world religions have a great potential to help building an environment in which compromise and moderation can be a reality. By fostering tolerance between themselves.

We who live in the old world – in the established democracies do not have any cause for self-congratulation. Our model of representative democracy is in trouble. We are witnessing a growing mistrust in political institutions, by a dramatic fall in membership of political parties, by ever diminishing voters' turnout. And there is a growing forgotten underclass that is not represented in the political processes. They are neither in the political parties nor in parliaments and most of them do not vote. They are not around the table when the budgets are being made, but the strong and organized groups are.

So the welfare states that were created to do away with poverty have become a mechanism for those who are well organised and well off.

Our model of democracy has also been compromised because its institutions are largely national while most of the problems – and potential solutions – are globalised.

And then there is the impact of the new communication technologies.

They have brought about many clear upsides – more participation, more transparency, more innovation.

But, there are other questions. In today's politics, some politicians tweet faster than they think. Some, on the other hand, seem to think only what others tweet. As the New York Times' columnist Thomas Friedman recently wrote: "read the polls, track the blogs, tally the Twitter feeds and Facebook postings and go precisely where the people are, not where you think they need to go. If everyone is "following," who is leading?"

We should ask ourselves whether democracy can function if people tweet, but do not vote? If there are no leaders, no voters and no ideas, only sound bites.

Followership, not leadership—that cannot be a recipe for modern democracy.

So, are new technologies simply changing the way our democracy functions, or are they offering a substitute? A virtual democracy, perhaps?

The age of representative democracy was nurtured by the advent of print culture and its books, pamphlets, novels, daily newspapers. Now we are witnessing a new wave of democratization of information. The public not only gets more direct access to information, the public can also make its influence in a more direct form. And unelected representatives, such as bloggers and TV-stars, are public figures who can exert a lot of influence.

The crucial question is how representative democracy can be reconciled with this development which is about direct democracy.

So many questions, but that is always the nature of democracy. It is enriched through criticism and self-questioning. We will tackle these issues in the coming days. Please, make full use of your freedom of expression.

Keep in mind what Albert Einstein said, that your brain is like a parachute, it only functions when it is open.

And try to look over the fence. Try to understand other peoples' perspective.

Thor Heyerdahl, a fellow citizen of mine, a famous explorer and scientist who travelled on the tiny fleet Kon-Tiki at the mercy of the Pacific in order prove that the people in Polynesia had come from South-America and not from the opposite direction, he had his brain open and the ability to see the world from the perspective of "the others".

In a Question and Answer session after a lecture a Norwegian student asked him: Did Cristopher Columbus or Leiv Ericson discover America? And the student wanted to hear that it was the Norwegian. Leiv Ericson. Mr Heyerdahl replied: "Ask those who were on the shores when they arrived."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Nobody can claim that democracy is perfect, it will always be in a certain sense incomplete. But "least worst" than any other system. And less incomplete if we ask the right questions and keep our brains open for new developments.

That's why we are here.

We live in interesting times. Let's have an interesting debate.

Thank you very much.