

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MR AJAY CHHIBBER

It is a distinct honour and pleasure to participate in this pioneering Regional Conference on Deepening and Sustaining Democracy in Asia. On behalf of all participants, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to our hosts for their warm welcome and generous hospitality.

Natural Disasters across the Asia-Pacific Region

Before we start on the theme of our deliberations, let me acknowledge the recent devastation and loss of life in our region. Over the past few weeks, Asia and the Pacific have been battered by a series of multiple disasters that have killed more than 1,500 people and affected upwards of seven million others. Typhoons ravaged through vast areas in the Philippines, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Viet Nam, producing severe floods. More unexpected floods wreaked havoc in India. Two strong earthquakes caused grave devastation and loss of life in Indonesia. Only a few days ago, more earthquakes shook the South Pacific triggering several tsunami waves that struck parts of the island countries of Samoa and Tonga. Information on the extent of damage and loss is still unfolding as assessments are under way. The UN Development Programme, along with other UN agencies, reacted quickly, immediately deploying crisis management teams to support governments in the aftermath.

Our host country, Bhutan, has not been spared by this wave of natural disasters. On 21 September, a strong tremor shook the eastern part of the country claiming lives and causing damage and destruction across many communities, some of them quite remote and difficult to reach. I would like to extend my heartfelt condolences to our gracious hosts – and indeed to all other countries in Asia and the Pacific affected by recent calamities – on the death toll and devastation suffered. My thoughts are with you at this difficult time as the UN system is working hard to assist the people affected across the region, together with the Government and other partners.

Going Beyond Elections as a First Step

As we deal with these disasters on the positive side we must recognise that this Conference is a celebration of an important milestone in Asia. For the first time, democratically elected Governments are now in place in all of South Asia and many parts of the rest of Asia, from the Maldives to Pakistan, from India to Nepal, from Bangladesh to Bhutan, from Sri Lanka to Afghanistan, from Cambodia to Timor Leste and Indonesia. We salute and congratulate the Royal Government of Bhutan and the Centre for Bhutan Studies for hosting this important event. It is a tribute to the significance of this time in the history of the region and to Bhutan's own democratic path that high level delegations from so many countries and so many distinguished experts, have come to Bhutan this week.

Today, we are at a crossroads for democratic developments in Asia. The region has made tremendous strides in economic and social progress under many different forms of governance. Multi-party elections have taken place in every country in South Asia over the last few years. This is a significant achievement. It is also a resounding call for all the elected governments now in power in Asia to fulfill the promise of democracy.

Some Examples

In 2008 alone, a number of significant elections took place in South Asia. These elections were a critical starting point for public participation and political engagement.

In Bangladesh, after two years of emergency rule and considerable uncertainty, parliamentary elections were held peacefully on 29th December 2008, returning democracy to the country, with a record turnout of 87% of the 80 million registered voters.

In Nepal, notwithstanding the violence, the historic Constituent Assembly election on 10 April 2008 turned a new page in the country's political history. A refreshing outcome of the election was that women comprised more than 30% of the elected members.

Similarly, the first-ever multi-party presidential elections held in Maldives on 28 October, almost one year ago, reflected the long yearning to embrace electoral democracy, with 87% of voter turnout. I

acknowledge here again His Excellency the Vice President of Maldives, who is an old friend a great leader of his country.

This year in Indonesia, over 125 million voters scattered across over 900 permanently inhabited islands went to the voting booth in the legislative and presidential elections in April and July 2009. These peaceful, free and fair elections were a testament to the remarkable political experiment unfolding in the world's fourth most populous nation.

In the spring of 2007, Timor-Leste held presidential elections with a sleight of 8 candidates and a voter turnout of almost 82%. Elections observers agreed that all these elections were generally free and fair without significant violence or irregularity.

In Pakistan, despite the violence and tragic assassination of the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, free and fair elections have returned her party to power. While Pakistan deals now with a lot of challenges, it does so under a democratic system.

In the Kingdom of Bhutan, the first ever multi-party democratic elections took place on 24 March 2008 to elect a National Assembly. This transition to a constitutional monarchy was initiated 10 years ago (in 1998) by His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. This Conference is a testimony to the Royal Government's determination and resolve to pursue His Majesty the King's dream of a democratic Bhutan where all people are at the centre of decision-making.

At the UN, and especially at UNDP, we are very proud to have played a role in support of these democratic transitions. The more important discourse remains in answering the question, how can democratic processes be sustained over the coming decades to go beyond elections?

Deepening Democracy through Inclusive Participation

But, elections alone cannot equate with democracy. The roots of democracy need to be grown deeper. Democracy is a continuous process. Free and fair elections go hand in hand with efforts to provide everyday opportunities for people to participate in the decision-making affecting their lives, whether through civic engagement in political

parties, trade unions or civil society organisations, or whether through access to information, e-governance and independent media. Each can play a useful role in modulating the relationship between ordinary citizens and the Government and ensuring that the decisions that are made meet the people's needs. Through CSOs, citizens can also participate in the delivery of services to segments of the population that are difficult to reach or have special needs; they can also advocate on their behalf. The participation of women and of the most vulnerable segments of society, notably, youth, people with disabilities, minorities and indigenous people is crucial in the democratic process. Strengthening that role, also for the media, to participate in the policy making process and to monitor and to evaluate the implementation of these policies will also be central to deepening democracy.

If I may quote, Mahatma Gandhi, who said, "In true democracy, every man and woman is taught to think for himself or herself. Democracy must come from within"

Deepening Democracy through Responsive and Efficient Institutions

All the main democratic institutions – the government, the parliament and the judiciary – need to be responsive to the people's needs in order to deepen democracy. A democratically elected government does not fulfill its promise if it doesn't deliver the basic services to society, such as education, health and water and sanitation; formulate and approve sound legislation and ensure adherence to the rule of law. In this respect, it is important to determine the roles and responsibilities of all levels of government in the provision of services. It is also important to bring the governing institutions as close as possible to the people – through decentralisation and devolution of power – to make them accountable to the people. But the delivery of services may be compromised unless the rule of law is strictly adhered to with effective independent and honest judges upholding the rights of their fellow-citizens and members of parliament providing adequate oversight over the government's functioning.

Going Beyond National Level

Democracy also needs to go beyond the center. It needs strengthening of management of affairs at provincial, district, village, and municipal levels.

More countries than ever have elected representatives in addition to national parliaments. Local democracy is taking root in the region, for example:

Maldives is currently establishing elected Atoll and Island Councils.

Bangladesh made a recent decision to reestablish Upazila parishads (councils) with – so far – elected chairs – and already has democratic institutions at other levels.

Afghanistan had the first elections to Provincial Councils in 2005 with District, Municipal and Village Councils scheduled to follow.

The Kingdom of Bhutan established formal district and village governments with the 2008 reforms – building on Dzongkhag and Geog committees.

This adds to Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor Leste and Viet Nam which already have a tradition of forms of subnational democracy.

While getting democratic institutions in place is a first step, strengthening inclusiveness and accountability of subnational governments is at the core of sustaining democracy.

We also need to understand the way we design local democratic institutions. For example, how political parties function at subnational level, how electoral systems affect representation, and what roles are played by national MPs. In most countries, MPs remain closely involved in local development. In some cases this is an advantage; in others it can undermine local democracy. When some countries shifted to direct election of mayors and chairs of councils, stronger lines of accountability to the electorate were established. But the checks-and-balance were often weakened.

Much of the real impact of local democracy on development is determined by how we follow up on political decentralisation. It needs actual fiscal powers and changes to the management of civil servants. Local governments need the money and clout to deliver the goods and services for which they have been assigned responsibilities. While political decentralisation has been fast, fiscal and administrative decentralisation in Asia has, as a whole, been much slower.

Deepening Democracy through Fulfillment of Internationally Agreed Principles

Finally, electoral democracies cannot be sustained, unless they live up to a number of internationally agreed principles, in particular human rights, gender equality and accountability and transparency. All democracies should strive to promote, protect and fulfill our basic human rights, especially those that matter most for the poor. These include the right to food, the right to health and the right to education, but also the civil and political rights, notably freedom of expression and assembly, as all human rights are indivisible, interdependent and mutually reinforcing. In some Asian countries the judiciary has played a remarkable role in defending the rights of its citizens, for example in Pakistan, where the lawyers and judges took to the streets, or in India, where the judiciary is renowned for upholding economic, social and cultural rights. In other countries the full independence of the judiciary has not yet been achieved. The same can be said about the institution of parliament, which needs to be strong to provide an adequate counter-balance to the executive.

Many countries in Asia have established National Human Rights Institutions. I had the pleasure of visiting with the Philippines Human Rights Commission recently, led by a strong leader, which is doing excellent work in that country. But not all these institutions are truly independent, or well-resourced and staffed, working at the service of ordinary people.

At the regional level in Asia, the recent establishment of the ASEAN Commission on human rights is a welcome development, which hopefully will be fully supported by ASEAN member countries.

One of the most fundamental rights, is the right to equality before the law, and non-discrimination. With two thirds of the world's poor in Asia, i.e. people living on less than \$1 per day, and with women estimated to constitute 70% of those poor, the region has a major challenge to tackle. Only 7% of the arable land in Asia is owned by women, compared to 18% in Africa. Gender equality and women's empowerment are particularly important for a nation's well-being and in achieving the MDGs. Investing in women brings broad economic and social benefits. Devoting resources to women's health, for example, is one of the smartest investments any society can make. When women are healthy, they provide for their families. They contribute to their communities. They lift up entire nations. In terms of political empowerment, women in Asia struggle with low parliamentary representation - second worst in the world at 17% after the Arab States - and also male-centered political party cultures. Women suffer from unrepresentative electoral systems, gender-blind budgetary processes and greater vulnerability in times of political crisis. This trend exists with respect to women's participation and roles even at the local levels.

Corruption is well-known to be a devastating cancer undermining the efforts of governments to deliver services to the people. Electoral democracies are not fulfilling their promise, if the resulting government is mired with corruption. Anti-corruption policies are therefore an essential ingredient of any attempt to deepen democracy. Some countries, such as Indonesia, have made remarkable strides in fighting corruption through effective mechanisms such as the Anti-Corruption Agency KPK and the Anti-Corruption Courts, but more needs to be done to sustain these best practices and to ensure that all anti-corruption actions in South and South-East Asia are seen as credible efforts, not biased towards attacking political opponents or catching only the small fish. At the same time, it's also essential to free the basic social services of the State, such as policing, education, and health services, from the cost of corruption as it cripples the poorest segments of society and entrenches their poverty.

Bringing Back the Challenges and Lessons from Democracy to Countries in Asia

In sum, deepening democracy is about a multitude of actions promoting inclusive participation, strengthening responsive institutions

and upholding international principles. Discarding some of these building blocks of democracy will inevitably lead to setbacks. In many Asian countries, the democratic progress is still fragile and prone to reversal risks. The gains of electoral democracy will be lost if not substantiated with a broad-based commitment and action to uphold democratic principles.

The recent challenges of deepening democracy faced by countries like Nepal or Thailand have highlighted the quintessential importance of inclusive participation of all key actors along the political spectrum, and of resolving social tensions through debate and negotiation within the framework of democratic processes and institutions.

Allow me to quote the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize winner and President of the United States of America, Barack Hussein Obama, who recently addressed the UN General Assembly in New York. President Obama stated that: “Democracy cannot be imposed on any nation from the outside. Each society must search for its own path, and no path is perfect. Each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its people and in its past tradition”.

The main challenge now is to deepen democracy and to take it beyond institutional routines and elites. It calls for the democratisation of public policy making and creating social democracy to run alongside political democracy. Finally, it calls for a celebration of diversity within the different societies of the region. It requires the minimalist demand of instituting a democratic government that will not be undermined by authoritarian challenges, a functioning state that delivers benefits to people and can protect the rights of the weak, dispossessed, and oppressed, especially women and children.

It is in this context, that this regional Conference on “Deepening and Sustaining Democracy in Asia” is being organised by the Royal Government of Bhutan. This forum:

- Marks the smooth and peaceful democratic transition in Bhutan, and signifies the completion of democratic election processes in the whole of South Asia.

- It also provides an avenue to share the lessons and experiences among countries in the region as well as with other Asian neighbors to help strengthen, deepen and sustain the democratic culture and values in Asia.
- Our discussions will center on how to overcome these core challenges. Because the democracy a nation chooses to develop depends on its history and circumstances, countries will necessarily be “differently democratic”. But in all countries democracy is about much more than a single decision. It requires a deeper process of political development to embed democratic values and culture in all parts of society – a process that by definition must be always renewed.

Concluding Remarks

As mentioned at the outset of this opening address, today, we are at a cross-roads for democratic developments in Asia. Either democracy will thrive and deliver benefits for the people in terms of human development, or it will wane and turn into the victim of its own neglect of the people. The question is now: what path will Asia take? The decision is up to the governments and the people of Asia. It is the context for this very important Conference.

I wish you very fruitful and stimulating discussions over the next three days and look forward to hear from your experiences, insights, suggestions and recommendations for sustaining and deepening democracy in Asia and taking forward these historic times for the sake of our grandchildren’s children, to make sure that they can reflect upon these times as a turning point in the history of Asia.

Let me end with a famous but very appropriate quote from Sir Winston Churchill: “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried.”

It is the discretion Asia takes with great vigour, because democracy is not a means, it is an end in itself.