

Closing Remarks  
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Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World  
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to have this opportunity to sum up this historic congress as the closing speaker, and on behalf of all of the delegates and participants I would like to thank the United Nations Development Programme, National Democratic Institute and Turkish Democracy Foundation for making it possible.

I would also like to extend our appreciation to the principal organizers for their work over many months to shape this conference, and to the staff who have worked so hard behind the scenes, for many long days and late nights, to make everything run so smoothly and successfully.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One thing that has been made abundantly clear from the discussions and the deliberations of our distinguished participants and presenters is that differences of opinion, as well as a diversity of social, political and cultural experiences, are enriching factors that add to our understanding, rather than detracting from the clarification of so many difficult issues facing us.

We all realized here that there are common grounds on which we can agree. We can also agree on the fact that there are exceptional aspects on which we do not share a common understanding, but I need not remind you that disagreement is the essence of a democracy that is based on freedom of opinion and the duty to respect the opinions of others.

At the heart of the social revolution which marked the advent of Islam 15 centuries ago, are a number of core moral, individual and social principles and values. These principles and values include: equality, equity, justice, liberty, fraternity, mercy and tolerance.

The Islamic notion of human dignity occupies a central position and is accorded high respect. Nowhere is this clearer than in regard to social justice which is considered to be a social duty as well as a moral obligation as confirmed in numerous Quaranic verses. The Quran warned in many verses against oppression, injustice, torture and cruelty, and it condemned aggression in all its types and forms; and furthermore it stipulated severe punishments against perpetrators of these acts.

As a matter of fact, the assumption in Islam is that the individual human being is born free and endowed with the freedom of choice, regardless of his or her religion, race or identity. As such the individual is also regarded as the most significant entity in our human universe.

The problems that are facing democracy and democratic movements in countries where these notions are yet to be allowed to develop cannot be attributed to Islam. The key to resolving these problems resides in the proper understanding of democracy and its implications.

The answer to the question of democracy in the Islamic world should start at the identification of the obstacles facing democracy and a diagnosis of the ills ailing democratic development in the Islamic world, no matter how painful this process may be. Simply stated, my position is that the issue of democracy in the Islamic world is an elementary one of diagnosis and the prescription of proper medicine.

It is no doubt that democracy is considered to be the proper medicine for relieving the ills of governance and development. That is because democracy is seen as a necessity in our present life and an essential prerequisite for the life of a human being whose destiny is determined by the rights and freedoms this human being enjoys. At the forefront of these rights and freedoms is the cluster of democratic rights that include the right to choose, monitor -and depose rulers; the right to freedom of expression, opinion, thought, assembly and association; and the rights to education, work, equality and equal opportunity.

These rights and freedoms constitute the core of what can be called democratic legitimacy, which is the only legitimacy that ought to be conferred upon any system of governance. Democratic legitimacy is the practical implementation of sovereignty that is manifested in the peaceful change of government, in guaranteeing rights and freedoms and political pluralism. It will no doubt lead to an independent and fair judiciary and to a system of government that is subjected to the scrutiny of the rule of law.

The most obvious and pressing need in our Islamic societies today is the need for democracy by way of fundamental rights that cannot be restricted and/or shaped by outside forces. Our understanding of democracy has to flow from human rights and has to be dedicated to respecting these rights.

It goes without saying that consolidating democracy in the Islamic world cannot be achieved without reforming and strengthening the economies of many nations within the Islamic world. Reforming these economies on the other hand cannot be done without tackling the main challenges represented by growing poverty, increasing illiteracy, rising unemployment and a declining GDP.

One of the major themes that emerged in our discussions here is that poverty remains a chief obstacle to democratic development throughout the world. We cannot talk to people about their rights and freedoms if they do not have a job or basic services. Economic development must be a priority in all countries seeking to make progress in democratic reform.

Public health is also a fundamental concern, which has been a particular emphasis of many delegates from Africa. The devastation of families and communities by AIDS and other diseases quite obviously drains away attention and resources from addressing democratic reform and other important concerns. So protecting and improving the health of the public must also be a priority if we are to advance and establish democracy.

Another major theme that arose in our discussions, and one that I was particularly pleased to have taken so seriously by the delegates and organizers, is the political participation of women and youth. Women and youth form the majority of the population of many countries, but in most countries they play little if any role in the formation of policies or setting of priorities for government and society.

Gender inequality is not confined to any single religion, culture or society. If we look honestly at the situation of women around the world, we know that inequality is the norm everywhere. In our countries, we must work to accept women as full contributors and participants in civic and political life, not just as voters but as candidates and officeholders.

This change must come not only in government, but within political parties as well.

If women are to be integrated into the political system, they must also take more active leadership roles in civil society. We should make it a point to develop the leadership of women in NGOs, where they can gain experience representing people at the grassroots level. This will not only benefit the people to be served, but position women to move into leadership roles in politics and government.

As for youth, the fact that none are represented in our deliberations here is a symptom of their exclusion from political participation in many of our countries. Again, this is not a problem intrinsic to the Islamic world, but a sad fact of life in most of the world. The reality is that middle-aged and older men determine the agenda for the future in most countries, without meaningful participation by women and members of the up-and-coming generation who have much to contribute and much at stake.

To sum up, I believe our discussions here have shown the way to some clear priorities for advancing democratic reform. Chief among them are the protection of fundamental human rights, the development of national economies, the improvement of public health, and greater participation by women and young people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by saying that democracy in the Islamic world is a historic necessity, as it represents the only way of achieving the great transformation we desire. It is the only means through which we can respect one another, even when we disagree. It is also the only coherent way to ensure that civil society is developed and that women and youth are involved in decision-making and allowed to make their contribution to social development.

The rise in fundamentalism is a growing obstacle to this vision in many countries. Fundamentalism is a topic of much concern, but fundamentalism is not confined to one religion or culture; it is on the rise everywhere. This is a particular worry of women, who are often the first targets of repression by the forces of fundamentalism. It should be a concern to everyone who values democratic pluralism and individual freedom.

I simply do not see any alternative to democracy in our present world of bloody wars, civil conflicts and terrorism, which leave no winners but rather hamper the progress of all humanity. Our discussions here are part of an ongoing process by which we create the social, political and cultural environments necessary for achieving democratic development and peaceful change of governments.

I sincerely hope that continued dialogue between nations and cultures for the betterment of our entire humanity is something that we can all commit to from this day forward.

Thank you.