

**ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY  
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PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE  
TO THE CONGRESS OF DEMOCRATS  
FROM THE ISLAMIC WORLD  
ISTANBUL, TURKEY**

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**Madam Chairperson,**

I am deeply grateful for the honour and opportunity to participate at this Congress. The issues that the Congress has set out to address, that is, the realities of democratic governance in the context of Islamic societies are of great importance in seeking to establish and maintain order, stability and prosperity in the world, and in our respective societies.

I therefore want to take this opportunity to acknowledge with admiration the thoughtfulness of the organizers and sponsors of this gathering. This comes as no surprise to us given the splendid credentials of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Dr Madeleine Albright as unflinching stalwarts in the promotion of democracy throughout the world. By the way, I regard Dr Albright as an institution in her own right. I had a direct personal experience of Dr Albright's commitment to the promotion of peace and democracy in the year 2000 when in her capacity as US Secretary of State, she visited my country, to bolster international efforts to save a faltering peace process in the country at the time.

By sponsoring this event, the UNDP has clearly underlined the strong link that exists between democracy and development, especially in the category of States known collectively as the developing world. All these efforts, together with the leadership role of the NDI in organizing this Congress, are bound to lead to a rewarding experience for those attending the Congress and the societies they represent; societies that generally suffer disproportionately from disturbances that affect the international system either due to natural causes or from flawed decisions especially by those in leadership positions in influential countries.

By undertaking to critically examine the relationship between Islam and democracy, this meeting is offering further opportunities for the development of a fresh and more wholesome approach to the management of relations between and within nations.

**Madam Chairperson,**

I came here with strong evidence which proves that Islam is compatible with democracy; indeed, that Islam and democracy can reinforce each other. I represent a multi-religious nation with about 70% Muslims, 25% Christians and the rest practising other important religions, including Hinduism.

We inherited strong democratic traditions from Britain at independence, under a Christian Prime Minister, complete with an Executive Branch, a Parliament and an independent Judiciary. These traditions have never been undermined by religious tensions or, more specifically, by Islam. The only challenges to our democratic traditions have come from other quarters, mainly the military and the ten years of conflict - none of which has a religious or Islamic flavour. I am a Muslim. I succeeded a Christian as Head of State. I may be succeeded by another Christian in our third successive democratic election in the year 2007.

Some people may find this state of affairs to be curious. They may also find it curious that Sierra Leoneans of different religious faiths intermarry routinely. I am one of many such examples. For instance, my late wife was a Catholic and we lived happily together for 34 years. Also commonplace is the practice of offering both Muslim and Christian prayers at important private and public events. Schools run by Islamic and Christian organizations enrol students regardless of their religious denominations. As a Muslim I was educated in a Catholic Secondary School. Several Christians have, and are being educated in schools run by Islamic organizations. In effect, the greatest strength of our nation is the high degree of tolerance and respect for different faiths and cultures as well as the determined effort of our leadership to foster understanding and cooperation among communities.

**Madam Chairperson,**

In cases where democracy has been threatened in my country the Islamic Community together with other faiths, has always played a leading role in defending it. This was evident in the period of the conflict from 1991 to 2001. The leaders of the Muslim Community and their counterparts firmly resisted the temptation of being protagonists in the conflict which they strongly denounced for its undemocratic character. They objected in particular to the insistence by the rebel leaders that democratic principles such as results of free and fair elections must be nullified before agreeing to a peaceful settlement.

The religious leaders went further. Together with their Christian brethren, under the umbrella of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, they admonished the rebel leaders that any settlement of the conflict outside of the Constitution would be unacceptable to the civil society in Sierra Leone and would therefore be unsustainable. To ensure that this message got across clearly, these leaders became actively engaged initially in mediating between the Government and leaders of the rebellion, and subsequently helped in facilitating the landmark negotiations that took place in Lome, Togo, where the framework for ending the conflict was developed. At those negotiations, each session was marked by the communal offering of both Muslim and Christian prayers.

**Madam Chairperson,**

This brief account of the positive realities of democratic governance in Sierra Leone, a developing country with an overwhelming majority of Muslims, suggests that Muslims are not only capable of promoting and defending democracy but can live in harmony with communities of other cultures and faiths, especially Christians. It is important to note, from the invitation addressed to me, the long list of countries with predominantly Muslim populations that have sustained impressive records of democratic governance, including Turkey, the host country of this Congress. Islam cannot therefore be inherently anti-democratic. Ironically, peace is one of the central tenets of the Islamic faith, and peace happens to be an abiding goal of democratic governance.

Why then has it become fashionable to associate Islam with anti-democratic practices or violence?

**Madam Chairperson,**

Surely, throughout human history violence in any form has been no more a characteristic of Islam than it has been of other faiths or cultures at different periods of their evolution. Similarly, no culture or faith can boast of being inherently constructed to practise democracy flawlessly. Democracy which, in essence, is governance that satisfies the hopes and aspirations of the citizens, is a form of governance that societies continuously struggle to develop and sustain. In the process, they confront numerous constraints varying in severity according to their traditions, levels of economic development and the dominant global forces in existence at the time, including political and socio-economic forces.

We cannot deny the fact that today, many Muslim societies are politically in a state of stress and that some of the most fearsome acts of violence or terror are committed by Muslims or in the name of Islam. We strongly condemn these acts and others like them that are committed in the name of other causes. Such acts hardly promote the cause of Islam or that of any other religion or ideology. They certainly do not promote democracy. They often upset our aspirations for peace.

**Madam Chairperson,**

Muslims know these facts too well. This is why no self-respecting Muslim would condone or justify violence as a means of propagating the ideals of Islam.

Therefore, it would be simplistic to attempt to address some of the major challenges of governance confronting our societies and the world today by focussing on the notion of a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West or between Islam and any other civilization. The present interdependent and globalized world is too complex to be so simply categorized into distinct civilizations, unless we are prepared to accept, for example, that Western European men and women who have

converted to the Islamic faith have been excluded from Western civilization; or that African, Arab, Indian or Chinese children born, raised and resident in Western societies have no share in western civilization.

Non-Muslims in countries throughout the world commit acts of terror against their compatriots or consistently challenge democratic order in their own societies. Are these manifestations of clashes of civilizations, given the magnitude and frequency of these events in the recent history of our time? It is, therefore, inaccurate, and perhaps misleading, to try to address current challenges to democracy and social order between and within States through the parochial channel of a clash between Islamic and Western civilizations. It would be more constructive to place these problems within the wider context of the sociology of conflict. In this way, we will be able to justly take full account of the impact of such factors as perceived injustice or inequity in political and socio-economic relations among communities and nations. Overlooking these dimensions will not help the search for a correct diagnosis of the problems confronting democracy and social order, which is necessary for the adoption of relevant and effective measures for resolving these problems.

**Madam Chairperson,**

The responsibility for resolving or mitigating the current crises is a sacred and urgent one that must be borne by political leaders in the Muslim world and elsewhere, as well as by multilateral institutions, such as the UN system, international financial institutions, the Organization of Islamic Conference, and others.

At the national level, political leaders, particularly those in countries with substantial Muslim populations, should endeavour to provide political space for different shades of opinion and demonstrate a strong commitment to the genuine modernization of their societies. In effect, we must embrace the wave of expression of aspirations for freedom and liberty by our citizens.

However, it should be recognized that in some of our societies, it can be extremely difficult to manage the process of democratisation without addressing the challenges that are inherent in that process. It is difficult for instance to promote

democracy in a society unless there is at the same time a deliberate State Policy for promoting social and economic justice. Democracy cannot thrive in a society where there exists political exclusion. Democracy cannot be sustained where there is gross poverty.

In our post conflict Sierra Leone for example, we are conscious that to enhance the process of democratisation, especially after ten years of gruesome conflict, we must embark on a determined policy to address these matters. That conflict left in its wake a fragile security environment, severe economic deprivation, and total destruction of the social and economic infrastructure. If the democratisation process should proceed smoothly in such circumstances, the country would need to depend to a large extent on strong economic and other external assistance. The international community has been supportive so far. For this we are immensely grateful. With such support we have started addressing the issues of development. We wish the assistance was large enough and was received in a timely manner so as to enable us embark on an orderly development planning process. Sometimes there is such time lag between the decision to give assistance and the implementation of that decision to the extent that the proper impact is lost by the time the assistance is received.

Now, the greatest challenge we face is the capacity to consolidate our democracy. From our experience as one of the least developed countries in the world, democracy is an expensive phenomenon. It will not be enough to teach people of the developing world about the principles of democracy without providing the means of upholding and sustaining the practice of democracy. It is certainly not enough to provide assistance for conducting free and fair elections, then leave and forget about the means to sustain democratic institutions. People have to see the benefits of democracy in their salaries, food baskets, and general well-being. They have to see it in the form of accessibility to clean potable water, and basic health care. Some nations have the capacity, the wherewithal to practice and sustain democracy, and they do. Others have the resources but are averse to democratic governance. We, for our part have embraced democracy, but have limited means to uphold and strengthen it. Democracy is like a seed. When planted it must be nurtured, watered and

provided with the necessary nutrients if it is to grow properly and bear fruits for the nourishment of the people.

**Madam Chairperson,**

Successful democratic reform should involve material improvement in the condition of life of the citizens. This is particularly so in a country like Sierra Leone just emerging from conflict. Here we are dealing with a traumatized and severely deprived people. They have a high sense of expectation of the dividends which the newly won peace would bring and the benefits they hope to derive from the democratisation process which they have been asked to embrace and participate in. Thus, for the process of democratisation to be sustained it should be accompanied by the provision of the means to better the lives of the citizens. It is here that the international community and our donor partners can play a timely, pivotal and meaningful role to prevent our deprived populations from falling prey to ideas that may offer seductive but often undemocratic remedies for their predicament.

This brings me, Madam Chairperson, to the subject of international cooperation.

In my view, international cooperation in the economic, political and social fields is key to the establishment and consolidation of democracy in the world today. Without international cooperation, with a determined effort to bridge the proverbial chasm that separates the “haves” and the “have-nots”, and without some degree of tolerance within and among states, the efficacy of all democracies – old, new, or emerging – could be threatened.

I am pleased that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is co-sponsoring the Congress with the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI). This I must re-emphasize underlines the linkage between democracy or good governance and economic and social development.

As a matter of personal experience, I have learnt that democracy is better enhanced when every citizen is made to realize that he has a role to play in it and he is

given enough space to play that role in the governance of his country. One way to achieve this is to enable people to participate in governance not only at election time, but in particular in respect of matters that affect their daily lives, and the needs of their immediate communities. Adopting a mode of decentralized administration even in a unitary system of government as we have in Sierra Leone, is one way of achieving that objective. Thus, we have embarked on the establishment of local government units nationwide and by legislation conferred on those units specific governmental functions which are to be performed by the local people for the benefit of the local population. In this way, Government has been taken to the doorsteps of the people. This is a policy measure reactivated by my Government as the system of local government had been non-existent for over 32 years. I have decided to adopt this measure as a key element in the democratisation process, conscious of the fact that the cost involved in implementing this measure is beyond our normal means.

**Madam Chairperson,**

Speaking as a democrat I believe that democratic governance within states could also be greatly enhanced by the democratisation of the international system. In my view, widening economic inequalities at the international level do not advance the cause of democracy within States such as mine. Disparities in decision-making at the international level also do not augur well for the promotion and consolidation of democracy within such states. I believe that political and economic empowerment must be promoted, strengthened and sustained within and across States. This will be in the interest of all peoples.

It is my hope that the proceedings of the international Congress, and the informal networking among such a wide variety of senior democratic practitioners and leaders, will inspire us all in our respective functions and searches to help meet the aspirations of citizens everywhere.

For leaders elsewhere, it is critical to be conscious of the fact that first, democracy is a process and not an event, and second, that there are variations in the speed at which different societies can democratise. Trying to dictate the speed of democratisation in all societies without due regard to their peculiar economic, social

and cultural conditions, can undermine the democratic process or even set off unpleasant reactions.

**Madam Chairperson,**

This Congress, therefore, represents a significant contribution towards ongoing efforts in various quarters, including other multilateral fora and academia, to develop a clear understanding of these major challenges of our time and fashion more effective approaches for addressing them.

I thank you.

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