

Graduation Address by Professor Amartya Sen, Rhodes University, 30 July 2004

I feel deeply honoured to become associated with this marvellous university in this wonderful way. I am very happy indeed and extremely grateful.



I understand that I have come to Rhodes at a time when the university is also celebrating its centenary. Let me take this opportunity of congratulating this great academic institution for what it has achieved over the last hundred years.

I thought that I should address my remarks here tonight to the most significant thing in my judgement that has happened in the world over the last hundred years – during the lifetime of Rhodes University. Much has happened in the world over the last century, but nothing perhaps is as important as the emergence of democracy as the standard form of government to which every country in the world is seen to be entitled. Even after the British, French, Portuguese and Belgian empires were dissolved, South African people still had to fight to achieve the realization of their own right to democratic governance. With great courage and determination, and with visionary leadership (especially of Nelson Mandela), South African people have ended authoritarian governance and apartheid. South Africa now is not only a member of the democratic collectivity in the world, it has also become one of the major leaders of the people of the world. Given its history and geography, as well as the visionary approach to democratic governance that has emerged through struggle in this country, South Africa cannot but play a critically important leadership role in the world today. The safeguarding of democracy and promoting its advancement in the world are parts of that role.

The subject of democracy has become particularly muddled because of the way that rhetoric has recently been used, with an oddly confused dichotomy – in particular between those who want to “impose” democracy in countries in the non-Western world and those who are opposed to such “imposition”. But the language of “imposition” is extraordinarily inappropriate since it makes the implicit assumption that democracy belongs to the West, taking it to be a quintessentially “Western” idea which has originated and flourished only in the West. That is very far from the truth. The temptation to see democracy as a parochial invention – a home-made recipe developed in Europe and North America – has received much encouragement recently from the messy military operations in Iraq. There is a real loss of clarity when the blame for the immense difficulties and problems faced in post-intervention that was chosen by the governments of the USA, UK and some – not particularly active – supporters, but attributed instead to some imagined difficulty that sees democracy as being unsuitable for the cultures and traditions of Iraq, or of the Middle East, or more generally, of the non-Western world. The culpability of the harrowing results of an under- reflected military action is placed solidly on the

shoulders of some cultural explanation, rather than where it belongs, to wit, the politics of an ill-formed and largely botched operation.

We can begin with the fundamental question: what exactly is democracy? There are, in fact, two quite different ways of seeing democracy, both of which have received extensive attention, but which have very different implications for our understanding of the foundations of democracy, and of its historical origin, geographical connections, and contemporary relevance. One view, which I shall call the “public ballot perspective”, interprets democracy mainly as majority rule, and focuses predominantly on the freedom to vote and the fairness of vote counting and electoral assessment.

The second interpretation, which I shall refer to as the “public reason perspective”, sees democracy in terms of the opportunity of participatory reasoning and public decision-making. The democratic claim of a political order has to be judged by its commitment to protect as well as to respond to public reasoning. Voting and balloting are, in this perspective, just one part of a much larger story. There is a need for supporting and encouraging open and informed discussion and to work for the responsiveness of public decisions to that interactive process.

This approach to democracy as participatory public decisions can be referred to as “government by discussion” – to quote an old phrase. In recent years, this approach has received much championing and powerful defence from John Rawls. When Rawls argues that “the definitive idea for deliberative democracy is the idea of deliberation itself,” he points to a very broad understanding of the conceptual foundations of democracy as protected and effective public reasoning.

The reach and effectiveness of voting depend critically on the opportunity of open public discussion. Indeed, balloting itself can be woefully inadequate on its own (that is, unless it is combined with public discussion and its dialectics), as it is abundantly illustrated by the astounding electoral victories of tyrannical rulers in authoritarian regimes, who often get nearly a hundred percent support in elections. The problem here lies not just in any coercion that may be exercised in the acts of elections and voting, but also in the way opposition becomes muted and muffled when public discussion is suppressed rather than encouraged, and there exists no safe procedure for bringing the mistakes and failures of ruling governments into clear light.

There can, of course, be no doubt at all that the contemporary concepts of democracy and of public reasoning have been very deeply influenced by European and American analyses and experiences over the last few centuries, including the influence of the European Enlightenment. But to extrapolate backwards that comparatively recent history to construct a quintessential and long run dichotomy between the West and non-West would be extremely misleading.

The tradition of public discussion can be found across the world. And sometimes it has been particularly active. In his autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom, Nelson

Mandela describes how impressed and influenced he was, as a young boy, by seeing the democratic nature of the proceedings of the local meetings that were held in the regent's house in Mqhekezweni:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was a democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer... The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens.

Meyer Fortes and Edward Evans-Pritchard, the great anthropologists of Africa, argued in their classic book African Political Systems, published more than sixty years ago, "the structure of an African state implies that kings and chiefs rule by consent." There might be some overgeneralization in this, as critics have argued later, but there has been little doubt about the traditional role and continuing relevance of accountability and participation in African political heritage. To overlook all that in seeing the fight for democracy in Africa only as an attempt to import from abroad "the Western idea" of democracy would be a profound misdescription. Mandela's "long walk to freedom" began at home.

Nowhere in the contemporary world is the need for more democratic engagement stronger today than in Africa. The continent has suffered greatly from the domination of authoritarianism and military rule in the late twentieth century, following the formal closure of the British, French and Portuguese empires. Africa has also had the misfortune of being caught right in the middle of the cold war that made each of the superpowers cultivate military rulers friendly to itself and hostile to the enemy. A military usurper of civilian authority never lacked a super-power friend, linked with it in a military alliance. A continent that seemed in the 1950s to be poised to develop democratic politics in newly independent countries was soon being run by an assortment of strong men who were linked to on one side or the other in the cold war. They competed with apartheid-based South Africa in despotism.

That picture is slowly changing now, with post-apartheid South Africa playing a leading part. But, as Kwame Anthony Appiah has rightly argued, "ideological decolonisation is bound to fail if it neglects either endogenous 'tradition' or exogenous 'Western' ideas." Even as specific democratic institutions developed in the West are welcomed and put into practice, the task requires an adequate understanding of the deep roots of democratic thought in Africa itself.

A similar re-examination is important even for a better appreciation of the cultural background of the politics of the Middle East. We must not confuse the narrow history of the Islamic militancy with the capacious history of Muslim people and the tradition of political governance by Muslim rulers. When the Jewish philosopher Ammonites was forced to emigrate from an intolerant Europe in twelfth century, he found a tolerant refuge in the Arab world, and was given an honoured and

influential position in the court of Emperor Saladin in Cairo – the same Saladin who fought hard for Islam in the Crusades (Richard the Lionheart was one of his disgruntled opponents).

Maimonides's experience was not, in fact, exceptional. Indeed, even though the contemporary world is full of examples of conflicts between Muslims and Jews, Muslim rules in the Arab world and in medieval Spain had a long history of integrating Jews as secure members of the social community whose liberties – and sometimes leadership roles – were respected. For instance, as Maria Rosa Menocal has noted in her recent book, The ornament of the World, by the tenth century the achievement of the Cordoba in Muslim-ruled Spain in being “as serious a contender as Baghdad, perhaps more so, for the title of most civilised place on earth” was due to the joint influence of Caliph Abd al-Rahman III and his Jewish vizier, Hasdai ibn Shaprut.

Middle Eastern history and the history of Muslim people also include a great many accounts of public discussion and political participation through dialogues. In Muslim kingdoms centred around Cairo, Baghdad and Istanbul, or in Iran, India or Spain, there were many champions of public discussion. The extent of toleration of diversity of views was often exceptional in comparison with Europe. Indeed, when – in the 1590s – the great Moghal emperor Akbar was making his pronouncements in India on the need for religious and political toleration, and when he was busy arranging organized dialogues between holders of different faiths (including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Jains, Jews, and even – it must be noted – atheists), the Inquisitions were still very active in Europe. Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake in Rome for heresy, in 1600, just when Akbar was lecturing on toleration and the need for dialogue in Agra.

It is extremely important to understand the global roots of democracy, rather than seeing it as a parochial Western contraption. In addition to the importance of democracy and public reasoning for each country taken separately, there is also a need to see the importance of global democracy for the world as a whole. The point is often made, reasonably enough, that it is impossible to have, in the foreseeable future, a democratic global state. This is indeed so, and yet if democracy is seen in terms of public reasoning, then we need not put the issue of global democracy in indefinite cold storage. Many institutions have a role here, including of course the United Nations, but there is also the committed work of citizens' organizations, many NGOs, and independent parts of the news media.

There is also an important role for the initiative taken by a great many activist individuals. Washington and London may be irritated by the widely dispersed criticism of the Coalition strategy in Iraq, just as Paris or Tokyo or Chicago may be appalled by the spectacular vilification of global business in parts of the so-called anti-globalization protests (which is perhaps the most globalized movement in the world today). The points that the so-called “anti-globalization” protesters make are not invariably correct, but many of them do ask extremely relevant questions and thus contribute constructively to public reasoning.

This is part of the way global democracy is already being pursued, without waiting for the emergence of a global state. The distribution of the benefits of international relations depends not only on domestic policies, but also on a variety of international social arrangements, including trade agreements, patent laws, global health initiatives, international educational provisions, facilities for technological dissemination, ecological and environmental restraints, fair treatment of accumulated debts (often incurred by irresponsible military rulers of the past), and the restraining of conflicts and local wars, and - very importantly - global selling (indeed “pushing”) of armament. It is worth remembering that more than 80 percent of the armaments sold in the world market are sold by the five permanent members of the Security Council (the United States alone is responsible for about half the international sales of arms).

Enriching the domain and power of public reasoning is not a negligible cause. It has relevance at different levels of social choice – from the tiniest communities to the huge globalized world in which we live. A just global society - no less than just domestic orders – is ours to make. And in this continuing global struggle, the visionary contribution of South Africa will be extraordinarily important.

I must stop here, after thanking you again for making me a part of the community of this wonderful hundred-year-old university. I appreciate this opportunity tremendously, and I am immensely grateful.

An honorary doctorate in Laws was conferred to Professor Sen at a special graduation ceremony on 30 July 2004, forming part of Rhodes University’s Centenary Celebrations.
