

Democracy Lecture Forum, 8 September 2020

Neil Bradley, British Ambassador, Liberia

Democratic institutions and accountable governments are the foundations on which open, stable and prosperous societies thrive. Why does it matter and what does it mean for you?

Overview

The UK believes that democratic institutions and accountable governments are the foundations on which open, stable and prosperous societies thrive.

Democracy, human rights and the rule of law contribute to long-term security and prosperity. Advocating respect for these values is in the UK's national interest. There is a strong correlation between societies that are secure and prosperous, and those that enjoy participative democracy.

We support democracy worldwide because we believe it is the system of government that best allows for individual freedom and is the fairest way to govern human societies and states.

Democracy rests on foundations that have to be built over time: strong institutions, responsible and accountable government, a free press, the rule of law and equal rights for all people.

The way we act to support democracy in each country will be different depending on the context and needs of the country concerned. Our approach is practical, recognising where we can, and even where we cannot, have an impact.

We support a wide range of democracy-building initiatives, including funding NGOs that increase citizen participation, promoting inclusion of marginalised groups, providing training for legal professionals, promoting freedom of expression and strengthening political parties and parliaments.

The UK recognises that the current global environment is challenging and that evidence suggests that globally the pace of democratisation has slowed.

Where human rights abuses go unchecked, we see the seeds of conflict sown, often with devastating consequences for communities and nations. Over the long-term, the absence of democratic freedoms, good governance and the rule of law impede nations' prosperity, deterring international investment, restricting innovation, and reducing opportunities.

UK - Magna Carta

The sealing of Magna Carta on 15 June 1215 marked the first step on the UK's journey towards parliamentary democracy and respect for individual rights, a foundation for our values and for many of the rights and freedoms UK citizens enjoy today.

In sealing the Magna Carta on June 15, 1215, King John accepted for this first time that his subjects were citizens, giving them rights, protections and security. Whilst

remaining copies of that charter may have faded, its principles remain relevant today.

The drivers behind Magna Carta – concern about unrestricted power of the executive, the state's ability to curtail individual rights and lack of due process in convicting individuals of crimes against the Crown – remain just as relevant in today's world. Arbitrary detention, torture, and state-sponsored harassment of those who disagree with the government of the day continue to be a reality in many countries around the world.

The influence of Magna Carta has driven the UK's position as a global leader in commerce, law and education, influencing the way in which the world conducts business, resolves legal disputes and creates democracies.

In commerce, the principles of Magna Carta underpin the value of contractual law, arbitration, mediation and adjudication, which supports global trading.

Democratic journeys

Of course, democracy does not take a single form. The British political system, for example, has a constitutional monarchy, an elected House of Commons and an unelected House of Lords.

Each country's journey towards democracy is unique. But, one true fact is that every true democracy has at its heart the interest of the people. People make democracies tick. It is not just about giving people the vote – it is also about the process that goes behind it; in terms of education, it is about being informed, being enabled.

I remember that famous scene of the first democratic election in South Africa, where people queued for hours, just to cast their vote. I am mindful of the fact that there are places in the world, such as Australia, where if you don't cast your vote you get fined – so there are different ways of encouraging participation. There is no one size fits all.

But in essence, it comes back to the idea of people and ensuring people are fully engaged and that we facilitate that engagement.

Providing an open space for debate, the ability to question and challenge – and yes, our democracy is reflective of that. It is often said that the British Parliament is quite adversarial, I mean literally Members of Parliament are opposite each other being challenged. But the fact is, it provides that level of accountability.

I would also emphasise the importance of the freedom of press, sometimes they are critical, quite often they are critical of governments and hold them to the account. But this is part and parcel of the free press which defines a flourishing democracy.

It is no coincidence that where societies enjoy participative democracy, where people are free in an open environment, security and prosperity tend to follow very quickly and are part and parcel of what defines that particular country or society.

However, when we look at different comparative democracies there are still those that feel their voices are not heard. This is a challenge we have. Different electoral

systems are perceived as being more fair than the next. So again, democracies can be very different – proportional representation is often said that that way all people are heard; but does that mean that those voices, perhaps who are at the fringes also then gain greater voices in public space – that is a challenge that all democracies face.

Since 2018 the UK has held a National Democracy Week. The aim is to increase participation from those most under-represented in this country, to tackle the real challenge of democratic participation; encouraging more people to engage.

Internationally, we support a wide range of democracy-building initiatives, just to give you a few examples:

- funding NGOs that increase citizen participation;
- promoting the inclusion of marginalised groups;
- providing legal training for legal professionals around the world;
- promoting freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly;
- strengthening political parties and parliaments; and
- supporting free and fair elections, including by working within election observer bodies.

However, there are many things that limit democracy. For example, you can have a democracy, but through legislation, through the constitution, certain communities are marginalised – they are not allowed to participate. Internet shutdowns – we have seen this recently as well as a means to clamp down on challenge to the government. Out-dated restrictions on women – I should mention that 100 years ago women did not have the right to the vote in the UK. But the fact is that there are still places around the world that restrict a woman's ability to go out and simply cast her vote and chose her elected representative. And indeed women's participation in parliament.

In contrast, in Rwanda over 60% of the parliament are now women. So representative democracy, in its truest sense, does take place, and sometimes it is not by the oldest democracy, it is by those who are seeking to effect change in a different way. This goes back to my earlier point about how democracies take route and the speed in which they take route, including by encouraging greater levels of democracy amongst marginalised groups; a greater level of democratic participation amongst women and of course young people.

Covid 19 and democratic resilience

Covid-19 has brought the interdependence of democracy and human rights into even sharper focus. And, as the pandemic continues to impact all our communities, it has also highlighted the very interdependency of humanity. This virus recognises no borders. Success - beating the virus, and building a global recovery - lies in working together in a coordinated effort.

We must be resolute in that effort. Democratic norms are eroding as countries resort to autocratic measures to control the pandemic. We must not allow the pandemic to stifle the voices of our most vulnerable. We must reaffirm our commitment to the core values: democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

As many of our countries begin to emerge from a state of lockdown, it is important to remember that any restrictions that have been imposed have an expiry date. Restrictions on human rights must be lawful, under both international human rights law and national law, and they must be absolutely essential. They should be targeted, time-limited, and subject to regular review.

If I may leave you with one reflection from the pandemic, we have once again been witness to the adaptability and resilience of democracy. Time after time, no matter the challenge, democracy is proven to prevail.