"My first concern is that we must define the paths to democracy more flexibly. We like to say that democracy involves a pluralistic approach to life but too seldom do we take a pluralistic approach to democracy. Too often, we insist that democracies must all follow a similar script, evolving at a similar pace, without recognising that different circumstances may call for different constructs....

"How is power best divided and balanced? How should secular and spiritual allegiances interact? How can traditional authority, even monarchical authority, relate to democratic frameworks? How is the integrity of minority cultures and faith systems best reconciled with majority rule?

"It is simplistic to wish that our democratic destinations should be similar — that they cannot be reached by many paths. The democratic spirit of freedom and flexibility must begin with our definitions of democracy itself. Even as we think more flexibly about democracy, we should also consider a second goal: diversifying the institutions of democratic life....

"Democracies need to distinguish responsibly between the prerogatives of the people and the obligations of their leaders. And leaders must meet their obligations. When democracies fail, it is usually because publics have grown impatient with ineffectual leaders and governments.

"When parliaments lack the structure or expertise to grapple with complex problems, or when a system of checks and balances stymies action rather than refining it, then disenchanted publics will often turn to autocrats. The UN Development Program recently reported, for example, that 55 percent of those surveyed in 18 Latin American countries would support authoritarian rule if it brought economic progress. There, in too many cases progress and democracy have not gone hand in hand....

"Expanding the number of people who share social power is only half the battle. The critical
question is how such power is used. How can we inspire people to reach beyond rampant materialism, self-indulgent individualism, and unprincipled relativism? One answer is to augment our focus on personal prerogatives and individual rights, with an expanded concern for personal responsibilities and communal goals....

"A deeply rooted sense of public integrity means more than integrity in government, important as that must be. Ethical lapses in medicine and education, malfeasance in business and banking, dishonesty among journalists, scientists, engineers, or scholars — all of these weaknesses can undermine the most promising democracies."

Click here to read more at NanoWisdoms.org ...¹

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2006 School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, Commencement Address (USA)

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References


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