"Much of the world’s attention is periodically focused on the phenomenon of so-called failed states. But of the global threats that face us today, apart from nuclear war or HIV/AIDS, the most preoccupying is not failed states. It is the failure of democracy. The global picture at the beginning of the 21st century is a story of failed democracies in the Muslim world, in Latin America, in Eastern Europe and in sub-Saharan Africa. A startling fact today is that nearly forty percent of UN member nations are failed democracies. The greatest risk to the West itself, and to its values, is therefore the accumulation of failed democracies. That in turn will cause deep under-currents of stress, if not conflict, among societies. It is essential, in the West’s own interest, to admit to itself that democracy is as fragile as any other form of human governance.

"It is essential that the question be asked, in every national situation and within each society, “if democracy is failing, why is this the case?” Every effort needs to be made to help correct the situation, rather than referring dismissively to failed states. To my knowledge, democracy can fail anywhere, at any time, in any society — as it has in several well-known and well-documented situations in Europe, as recently as the last 50 years. For it is self-evident, in Europe and across the globe, that the existence of political parties and elections do not alone produce stable governments or competent leadership.

"Three concepts seem to me to be essential in creating, stabilising and strengthening democracy around the world, including among the people of Africa and Asia with whom I have worked in the past. These concepts are meritocracy, pluralism and civil society. In particular, I will ask, what role can Canada play, drawing upon her national genius, in creating or enhancing these great underpinnings of democracy in the developing world? ...
"Our long presence on the ground gives us an insight that confirms the UN’s detailed assessment in Latin America, which is that a democracy cannot function reasonably without two preconditions.

"The first is a healthy, civil society. It is an essential bulwark that provides citizens with multiple channels through which to exercise effectively both their rights and duties of citizenship. Even at a very basic level, only a strong civil society can assure isolated rural populations, and the marginalised urban poor of a reasonable prospect of humane treatment, personal security, equity, the absence of discrimination, and access to opportunity.

"The second precondition is pluralism. Pluralism means peoples of diverse backgrounds and interests, coming together in organisations of varying types and goals, for different kinds and forms of creative expression, which are valuable and deserving of support by government and society as a whole....

"A secure pluralistic society requires communities that are educated and confident both in the identity and depth of their own traditions and in those of their neighbours. Democracies must be educated if they are to express themselves competently, and their electorates are to reach informed opinions about the great issues at stake. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to pluralism and democracy, however, is the lacuna in the general education of the populations involved."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2004 Keynote Address to the Governor General’s 2004 Canadian Leadership Conference: ‘Leadership and Diversity’ (Gatineau, Quebec, Canada)

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References

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