Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on the failure of democracy

by NANO WISDOMS ARCHIVE OF IMAMAT SPEECHES, INTERVIEWS AND WRITINGS

'In the 1990s, the term “failed state” gained currency to describe the situation in places like Afghanistan and Bosnia or Liberia and Somalia. Today, such descriptions simply divert attention from the real issues. For, apart from Weapons of Mass Destruction, HIV/AIDS or climate change, the greatest global threat today is not failed states — states themselves do not fail — but the failure of democracy in nearly forty per cent of UN member-nations. These failures cross much of the Muslim world, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa.

'In my visits to African countries such as Mali and Uganda, to Middle East countries such as Syria and to Asian countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan, leaders in all levels of society have expressed to me their deep concern and frustration about the failure of democracy and its consequent inability to put governments in authority that can meet the expectations of the people. They would welcome assistance supporting education about democracy.

'Unfortunately today, in more and more developing countries where there is a tradition of legislative elections, we are witnessing a splintering of national political parties into factions, based around narrow interests. Coalition governments are being cobbled together by leaders with little experience in managing multiple factions. We only need to look at the recent history of Western Europe to understand the difficulty such coalition governments may face in delivering effective, democratic governance. For many years, the lifespan of governments in some countries was measured in months. Building consensus for corrective constitutional changes, and implementing them, was equally challenging. What logic is there to think, therefore, that an African government suddenly having to manage a fractious coalition after years of single-party majorities will be able to address this issue maturely? If it cannot, how will it meet the expectations of its people for a better life?
'The point is this: democracy is fragile. It is susceptible to failure at any time, in any society. The experience of Europe in the last fifty years should also be a sobering reminder of another unfortunate truism. Elections and the existence of political parties do not by themselves guarantee stable governments, competent political leadership and respect for the constitution. Nor do they guarantee good economic management and the absence of corruption. If this has been the experience in the birthplace of modern democracy, I must urge you to be patiently supportive of democratic experiments in the Middle East and in the wider developing world.'

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2004 Keynote Address to the Annual Conference of German Ambassadors (Berlin, Germany)

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