

Statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay,
on the International Day of Democracy

Tuesday 15 September 2009

The International Day of Democracy is an opportunity to take stock of the way democratic principles are applied both at the national and international levels: an occasion to applaud successes, recognize shortcomings, and devise strategies to introduce or improve democracy across the world.

States bear ultimate responsibility as the guarantors of democracy, human rights, and rule of law. There has been remarkable progress in terms of the number of States that have adopted democratic governance over the past two decades, mainly through commitment to holding periodic elections. While this gives new hope and expectations to millions of people around the globe, the prospect of leading a fulfilled life, free from fear and want, remains elusive for millions who continue to suffer from injustice, war, poverty, social exclusion, and numerous forms of discrimination. These not only damage their lives and well-being, but also at times reach a level that jeopardizes international peace and security.

Non-existent or inadequate democracy remains perhaps the single biggest barrier to widespread enjoyment of human rights. Likewise, the failure to respect fundamental human rights is a major impediment to the establishment of a smooth-running democracy. For this reason, UN action as a major international provider of technical cooperation to support national governments and actors seeking to establish, restore or improve democratic processes and institutions is of greater significance than is generally recognized.

Chipping away at the impediments to democracy is long, slow, often unglamorous work, but when it produces results in the form of a freely and fairly elected government it is priceless. The failures in democracy – stuffed ballots and stolen elections, leading to protests, riots and sometimes even civil war – dominate the news and arouse anger and anxiety, whereas the fragile incremental successes that precede and accompany the establishment, or major overhaul, of a democracy rarely make headlines.

In our efforts to establish true, smooth-running democracies on a wide scale we have come a long way – and we still have a long way to go. Democracy does not come alone, and it does not come cheap. If it is to be sustained, it has to develop in tandem with the realization of numerous basic human rights: for example the rights to

universal education, gender equity, non-discrimination against all sorts of minorities, and a free and critical press and civil society.

On this occasion, I would like to highlight four challenges to democracy that are particularly relevant today: Impunity, corruption, denial of access to justice for disadvantaged groups, and conflict and disorder.

All States must uphold their human rights obligations even in the face of national emergencies, including outright conflicts. They are obliged to act within the law and do their utmost to ensure accountability for abuses and wrongdoing.

Corruption is also a major impediment to democracy: all forms of corruption -- including the political, economic and corporate varieties -- undermine democratic values and institutions, degrade the enjoyment of rights, and impair the ability of the State to implement human rights, in particular, economic and social rights. Resources to combat corruption should be made readily and widely available at the national and international levels. In addition, there should be further focus on studying the particular needs of minorities and other disadvantaged groups in societies, such as women, children, and non-citizens

The attainment and maintenance of democracy is a relentless, on-going process which deserves our struggle and sacrifices. And the same goes for the principles contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the democracy-supporting norms and standards enshrined in the United Nations Charter and wide array of international human rights treaties and other instruments. Democracy and human rights go hand in hand: if one stumbles, then so does the other.

I take this special opportunity to call on all States to uphold their commitment to democracy and the rule of law. My office, OHCHR, stands ready to provide the necessary cooperation and support to all countries striving to counter democracy deficits through the protection of human rights and the rule of law; access to justice by all, especially the most vulnerable segments of the society; the empowerment of disadvantaged groups and of civil society; and the enjoyment of fundamental freedoms.

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