

Promoting democracy in post-conflict societies – a challenge for the Byblos Centre

How should democracy be encouraged in post-conflict societies? This was the subject of debate at a Conference held in April 2004 at UNESCO's new Byblos Centre in Beirut, Lebanon.

For decades, Beirut conjured images of conflict, suffering and opposition in the Middle East. The city still bears the scars of 15 years of civil war. This capital city of a country with 17 different religious groups, leaves no one indifferent to its complex history and all-pervading will to heal the wounds of the past. It was, therefore, not by chance that the Lebanese Government accepted to host an institution – established on the initiative and with the support of UNESCO – whose mission is to encourage peace and democracy in the world: the International Centre for Human Sciences in Byblos (hereunder “Byblos Centre”).



Alain Caillé (left)
in discussion with
Pierre Cornillon.

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The word *byblos* means *book* in Greek, and the invention of the alphabet is attributed to the ancient Phoenician city of that name. An hour's drive from Beirut, the Byblos Centre has recently been set up in a historical building put at the Centre's disposal, by the Lebanese Government, for research, conferences and a documentation centre. From 7 to 9 March 2004, the Centre organized a Conference with the International Panel on Democracy and Development, headed by former United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali,¹ and researchers in the social and human sciences specializing in democratization issues. The aim of the Conference was to examine the process of democratization in three countries in “post-conflict” situations: Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Iraq.

During the Conference, the experts, several of whom came from these three countries, touched on basic issues such as: In post-conflict societies, how can skepticism towards the State and political process be overcome? What are the links between, on the one hand, social organization and cultural traditions and, on the other, democracy? Are any cultures incompatible with democratic values? What role can the United Nations and UNESCO play in the processes of democratization?

Democracy is no archangel

According to one of the experts – William Maley, Professor at the Australian National University – since Jean-Jacques Rousseau's time the notion of democracy has frequently been misunderstood. Expressions like “the general will”, “the will of the people” or “the will of the nation” have left us with an idealized image having little relation to reality, of what democracy can guarantee as an organizational constituent of society. Whatever the level of a people's tradition and democratic culture, it is rarely united and there are few matters on which it expresses genuine agreement. Another of the experts at the Conference, Guy Hermet, Director of Research at the Institute of Political Science in Paris, reminded us that “democracy is a form of government – not an archangel” to emphasize that we cannot generalize about democracy as though it were a matter of essence or a unique, homogeneous will. So some experts kept with a minimalist definition, and – like William Maley – backed the theory that democracy at the very most can be considered “a particular type of mechanism of accountability, by which rules may be appropriately disciplined”.

Apart from problems of concept, this thinking underlined the overall difficulty, not only of defining and setting up such a mechanism in a specific historical, cultural and ethnic context, but also of getting a nation to adhere to democratic values particularly when it has known conflict, violence, civil war, foreign intervention, humiliation and the poverty that invariably ensues.

“It would be better to talk of democracies in the plural than democracy in the singular, not just because modern democracy is multidimensional and its different aspects are interdependent, but because there have been other forms of expression of a democratic aspiration than the dominant contemporary political moulds.” Alain Caillé

1. See SHS Newsletter 01



Panel on Iraq
(left to right):
Riyadh Aziz Hadi,
Wamidh Omar Nadhmi
with **Carole O'Leary.**

The challenge of democratic consensus

If the idea of a nation's unity appears utopian, then the challenge would be to attain what is called *democratic consensus* on certain basic democratic principles. The establishment of such a consensus, however, frequently comes up against power sharing and traditional organizational models of the societies concerned. Nasrine Abou-Bakr Gross, Director of the Social Science Department at the National Centre for Policy Research in Kabul, explained that with regard to Afghanistan, one of the country's particularities is the presence of tribes whose decision-making procedure is based on consensus of the council members, called *shura* or *jirga*. Participation in these councils, which rule all aspects of society, is determined by the members' age and therefore transcends all levels of society. According to Nasrine Abou-Bakr Gross, breaking with the consensual decision-making process would be tantamount to individual and collective suicide.

The prime importance of this system explains a paradoxical situation in the recent history of democracy-building in Afghanistan. On ratification of the new Constitution, representatives of the different communities gathered in the grand council meeting – *Loya Jirga* – were divided in two factions: those who were for the presidential system proposed in the draft submitted to the vote, and those who were in favour of strengthening the role of parliament. When it came to the vote, only those in favour of adopting the proposed draft, voted. The other members of the Council – although in favour of strengthening the role of Parliament – abstained. Several reconciliatory meetings had to be called in order to reach a solution acceptable to both groups. Nasrine Abou-Bakr Gross described the outcome of these negotiations: “Even the last action of the *Loya Jirga* to announce the ratification of the Constitution did not take place with the counting of votes. The President of the *Loya Jirga* asked all the delegates to rise to show their ratification. No one bothered to count those who remained seated”. That example is far from the individual vote count which is one of the basic tenets of democratic organization in Western countries.

“Democracy cannot be implanted. It has to evolve in an indigenous way.” Carole A. O'Leary

Democracy can neither be imposed nor imported

For Professor Mwayila Tshiyembe, Director of the Pan-African Institute of Geopolitics, “it is impossible to impose democracy on a society that does not want it. Each nation improves through contact with others. One can, while retaining one's own characteristics, draw inspiration from positive aspects of others. But one cannot copy a model just like that or impose it by force. That will never work”. The anthropologist Carole A. O'Leary, specialist in the relation between politics and identity in the Middle East, agreed with these remarks: “I would categorically reject the notion that you can impose democracy. You cannot impose it with a gun. It cannot be implanted. It has to evolve in an indigenous way”.

As far as participants in the Conference were concerned, there is no democratic system that could become a universal model. Professor Riyadh Aziz Hadi from the Political Science Department of Baghdad University, stressed that democracy can be “neither imposed nor imported”.

“There cannot be traced any society in which democracy exists with no innovations.” Gul Rahman Quazi



Panel on Afghanistan
(left to right):
William Maley,
Nasrine Abou-Bakr Gross,
Gul Rahman Quazi,
Werner Prohl.

Cultures and democratic principles

Some democratic systems are incompatible with certain cultures, but no culture is incompatible with democratic principles. Imposing a political system which takes no account of the cultural, historical, ethnic or linguistic context, can be counterproductive.

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Congolese experts
Mwayila Tshiyembe
(left) and **Mabiala**
Mantuba-Ngoma.

→ Professor Tshiyembe explained how attempts to endow African countries with institutions identical to those in Western countries and thereby establish a democracy that he categorized as “formal”, have often led to failure. The concept of the nation-State is a Western invention which, for Professor Tshiyembe, could never be applied in Africa: “Extended to the reality of Congo society, the nation-State model becomes war-inducing because of its cultural unification primacy, ethnic homogenization and individualization of the body of society”.

A system that disregards the specific context is prone to latent destabilization which at any time can result in an overthrow of the balance of power. This explains how a democratic model that is not adapted to the realities of a society may create its own violence.

“The notion that some cultures are incapable of democracy is an insult to the human race.”

Mabiala Mantuba-Ngoma

And yet all the participants in the Conference agreed that there was no culture incompatible with democracy. Thus, Professor Mabiala Mantuba-Ngoma, National Coordinator of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, dismissed the idea that some cultures might be “incapable of democracy” by underlining that such a thesis is “an insult to the human race”. According to Professor Tshiyembe, “every nation displays at one stage or another in its development, the ability to assume and create a social contract that allows it to function and to have a common existence. Democracy is a capacity inherent in the history of humanity”.

What role can the Byblos Centre and the international community play?

If one were seeking a common denominator to identify the difficulty in consolidating democracy in the three countries under study, it would certainly be the challenge of inventing a common democratic plan and building a true democratic culture, a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multicultural society. Encouraging research into the definition and implementation of suitable policies, developing case studies and strengthening local research capabilities are some of the key elements in this process on which the experts attending the Conference asked the Byblos Centre and UNESCO to work.

Apart from specific recommendations, the Conference shed light on the fact that the process of democratization of countries in a post-conflict situation presupposes a step which goes further than setting up free elections and United Nations peacekeeping operations. It is up to the international community and every actor involved to show that democracy brings justice and is guarantor of all fundamental rights for every citizen. Without that, any discourse on the need to democratize risks being mere rhetoric and hides the actual power struggle situation that is far from the principles on which the rule of law should be based. ¶

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“UNESCO has been asked to play an essential role, not only so that the diffusion of a culture of peace is linked with a culture of democracy, but also to create a new principle of international law based on democratic legitimacy and democratic security.” Boutros Boutros-Ghali

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Boutros Boutros-Ghali
(left) in discussion with
Attiya Inayatullah.