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DOHA, QATAR

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DR. IBRAHIM: I don't claim to have much expertise on this issue of elections, although I come from a country, Malaysia, they've had elections from the time of independence, but I'm not too sure whether it's at all free or fair.

My former second boss, the former Deputy Prime Minister, is also here. I'm not sure whether he concurs with me on that, but certainly it is a long way to go before we can conduct free and fair elections.

The winds of change from autocracy to democracy have been blowing across various parts of the Muslim world for some time now. The Iraq War, though still mired in controversy, has yielded the country's first democratic elections.

In this regard, I must say that, though I remain opposed to the war in principle, I must concede that the voices of freedom in Iraq are not finding expression after decades of oppression and being forced into silence. I dare say that given half a chance, Muslim societies, not just in Iraq, but throughout the world, will seize the opportunity to enjoy democracy.

But a major concern in our deliberations is whether the mere phenomenon of elections means that democracy is being practiced the way it is being preached or

are there still certain fundamental issues yet to be resolved.

I think it is obvious that among the first will be that elections must be free, fair, and transparent. Free, as in free from interference from all extraneous factors in the determination of the electoral process. Candidates, of course, have to be elected and those elected must be the choice of their own electorate. And this would include equal access to a free media, open debates, and the conduct of elections that can stand up to international scrutiny.

It is not enough just to have civil liberties guaranteed in a document, which represents the seal of the people's will. The other basic institutions of a civil society must be in place.

Therefore, elections have to be seen as a process toward the establishment of a meaningful democracy. There must be an independent judiciary that will function as an effective check and balance against the powers of the executive and the legislative branches of government.

Essentially, the judiciary must be the bulwark of fundamental liberties. Complementing this, the position of the state prosecutor should be protected by constitutional guarantees.

You can see my penchant for the rule of law and the rule of the prosecutor is probably more profound than

yours after being given a long vacation for six years. But that is relatively short.

When I met Mandela, two months back in Johannesburg, he was, of course, very concerned, very sympathetic, and felt bad the way I was treated. But I told him that we have an unfinished agenda, and mine was a short walk to freedom.

The long walk is towards democracy as opposed.

The argument that encouraging democracy in the Muslim world would only create instability is, therefore, clearly untenable. Already significant progress has been made in the area of civil liberties and I see in Qatar's new constitution, for example, and undoubtedly the Doha Declaration for Democracy and Reform resonates well for the prospects of political reform in the region. But I believe that a vibrant democracy needs a vibrant opposition. The Pandora's Box syndrome that is being raised runs counter to the fostering of a true democracy.

Civil liberties entrenched in the constitution become pious platitudes when the voices of dissent are not allowed to be heard. This forum could not have come at more opportune time and I pray it will pave the way for more concrete and direct ways of engagement. None of us from the Muslim world can honestly say that America has not left a

lasting imprint on us. Conversely, America will be equally dishonest if it fails to acknowledge the vast impact made by the Muslim world.

It is true that recent events have widened the chasm--all the more reason than to heed the call for dialogue and active engagement. Why can't we give more due to the ties that bind us rather than those which separate us? Why then should we lend our ears to those who continue to beat the drums of discord? But Muslims are prone to pride themselves as being the followers of a religion where the principles of justice "adl" esal [ph.], equality, fair dealing, and tolerance are paramount. I hear this ad nauseam, in all forums that Muslim leaders, Muslim scholars articulate these issues convincingly, yet between the idea and the reality falls the shadow.

The reality is that the contradictions are shockingly glaring, for isn't it true that Muslim leaders are among the greatest perpetrators of injustice. Can we in all honesty deny that Muslim regimes are, in fact, among the most blatant violators of human rights and that their leaders have the dubious distinction of being the most corrupt and having the most tenacious grip on power.

And when confronted with these issues, these same self-made leaders are not adverse to citing and chapter and

verses from the Koran, included, to justify why changes can only be brought about gradually; that Muslim societies can only take democracy in small doses, and that freedom will bring about anarchy. And with the War on Terror, it is indeed ironic and even tragic for the cause of democracy that these regimes are allowed to persist in their errant ways with impunity.

Allow me to elaborate. It is said that the underlying causes of the current progress of political reform in the Muslim world are to be found in the aggressive foreign policy initiatives embarked upon by the Bush Administration.

I'm not going to be engrossed in the liberals and the neocon debate. And I think other than the engagement between Muslims and the U.S., there should also be a proposal that we organize a conference in Washington about engagement among the liberals and the neocons.

[Laughter.]

DR. IBRAHIM: This is the policy that was launched following the tragic events of 9/11, a policy marked by a so-called forward strategy of freedom. To my mind, while it cannot be denied that the pro-reform initiatives under this policy have indeed contributed positively to current developments, yet sometimes the rhetoric may be more

convincing than the reality. For certain countries, this policy is marked by what I would characterize as a strategy of selective ambivalence.

In reality, this strategy of selective ambivalence means constructively aiding certain countries to resist the type of reform by a process of omission rather than commission. Prompted, no doubt, by the dictates of expediency, this policy has meant turning a blind eye to blatant human rights violations and other kinds of abuses which clearly fly in the face of this forward strategy of freedom. In return for this support to the United States in the War Against Terror, these countries are conferred the status of strategic partners.

To my mind, this is a case of conditionality working backwards. It is a case of allowing repressive regimes to don the cloak of legitimacy simply because they raise the specter of terror.

Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation in the world, stands out as the single most significant political development in the history of democracy in modern times. Unfortunately, this is not being highlighted. We gloat and pride ourselves over the success of the elections in Iraq and Palestine.

When the East Asian financial crisis broke out, Indonesia underwent a major socio-political upheaval, and I was sent to jail. But Indonesia emerged from the storm and evolved itself into a new emerging nation. In place of oppression and dictatorship, Indonesia is now secure by freedom and democracy.

The press there is free, and the fairness in the conduct of elections is unsurpassed. Florida is now a province of Indonesia.

The phenomenal changes brought about through reformacy [sic.] should provide an enduring lesson on peaceful transition from autocracy to democracy. But if we go beyond the rhetoric, it would not be as an exaggeration to say that for the last two centuries, the Islamic world has been dazzled by the wealth, power, and the technological prowess of the West.

Under the bondage of colonialism, Muslim nations developed a deep rooted sense of self-resentment and inferiority and the natural upshot was an almost total erosion of confidence in their own traditions.

Confronted with centuries of traditional thinking and a submissiveness to the past, Ardonis [ph.], arguably the foremost contemporary Arab [inaudible] denies his roots in the following verses.



My gospel is rejection and my map a land without a creator.

The point is that it is just as reckless for the Muslim world to generalize that Americans are the best example of a morally depraved nation as it is for America to label the Muslim world a civilization full of menacing fundamentalists.

We must also learn to break free from the anxiety of historical influence and not succumb to the lure of [inaudible] and [inaudible] chanting wherever they may issue from in whatever shape or form.

Ladies and gentlemen, the challenge before us is enormous. And I believe the dialogue and the discourse are essential. It is not going to resolve matters fast. But it will certainly generate a lot of interest and resonate among the population, Muslims in particular, on the assumption that the media in Muslim countries and societies are free.

We know that the War in Iraq rages on with increasing ferocity. Suicide bombers continue to blow themselves up, murdering innocent people. Just three weeks ago, this nation was the victim of such an outrage.

As for America, to many in the Muslim and the Arab worlds, it still carries the tag of arrogant power and Machiavellian machinations. To merely dismiss this, as a

manifestation of hatred of modernity or envy of technological progress is to miss the point entirely.

That there should be a war against terror is not in dispute. But this military war must be subsumed under a war of ideas. To my mind, the issues of modernity and democracy, fundamentalism and autocracy, will loom large across the battle horizon.

Even as America has not understood Islam, Muslims have also failed to grasp the spirit of America. Where are the Muslim de Toquevilles? America has countless centers for Christian and Muslim understanding. Can we say the same about Muslim countries? Why is the Muslim world so reluctant to reach out and learn more about the Christians and the Jewish faith?

I believe that active engagement, through sustained dialogue, will not only help us erase our mutual prejudices, born of ignorance, but will also help us to rediscover this universal dignity and common humanity hidden by deep seated fear and distrust.

Failure to pursue active engagement only serves to fortify the prophecies of soothsayers of impending doom. It is also a wanton dereliction of moral responsibility to our future generations.

In the words of Robert Penn Warren: "we shall come back no doubt to walk down the road, but that will be a long time from now. And soon we shall go out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history, into history, and the awful responsibility of time."

Thank you.

[Applause.]

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