



New York Democracy Forum



“The Future of Muslim Democracy”

Remarks by Anwar Ibrahim

Visiting professor at Georgetown University
Former Deputy Prime Minister, Malaysia

December 1, 2005

Thank you, Carl. It's always my pleasure and I'm very fortunate to have Carl as a friend and the NED as an institution that promotes the idea of democracy throughout the world. And the issue that we need to reflect on is an issue which is not confined to theoretical analyses or descriptions. It is very close and dear to my heart and something that I passionately believe in. When I was asked after six years of solitary confinement in a Malaysian prison, what have I learnt, having to reflect, meditate and devour books in the six years, it is my strong passion for freedom and I am in no position to either compromise or concede on the importance of democracy, in Malaysia, the Muslim world or throughout the world.

About four months ago, in a speech at the United Nations University, Tokyo, I alluded to the strong and lively, social, political, cultural and intellectual movements in Muslim societies. I call this movement “The Great Wave of Democratic Islam.” Now, the quest for democracy among Muslims today, is one of the most prominent and transforming features of our time. The Muslim world missed the boat in an earlier democratic wave that brought down the Berlin Wall, the liberation of Eastern Europe from communism and the implosion of the Soviet Empire. We had to wait almost a decade later with the onset of the Asian financial crisis that Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world,

finally broke itself free from the yolk of a military-based authoritarianism.

What happened in Indonesia in 1997 is one of the most decisive moments in Islam's modern history. What is happening in Turkey is no less remarkable. If Indonesia has the prestige of being the largest Muslim country, Turkey is remembered among Muslims as the seat of their last empire, as well as Caliphate. Turkey came into being a modern state with an avowed secular character under Mustafa Kemal. However, it is Turkey's fundamental contradiction that until recently, its secular character was maintained not by popular consent, but by military force. But the current government, with a clear democratic mandate, Turkey is undoubtedly, one of the most vibrant and mature Muslim democracies. It is within this democratic mode that the nation wants to refresh its collective memory of its cultural identity. To mature as a democracy, but retain its Muslim identity.

The current trend in the Muslim world has its historical antecedent. One historian, Eric Hochbaum, has called the 20th century, "The Age of Extremes." Despite so much fear and prejudices towards fundamentalists of all religious persuasions, the worst crimes against humanity are all committed by godless fanatics: Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong and Pol Pot.

But the 20th century, for the Muslim, was a century of great hopes. Unfortunately, it was also a century of great betrayal. The great expectations of the last century issued from the achievement of national liberation. Muslim countries, one after another, freed themselves from colonial tutelage. Algeria from the French, Indonesia from the Dutch, Libya from the Italians and others from the British. Too many to mention.

Perhaps, it is more than a coincidence that Indonesia organized the Bandung Conference in 1955. The unprecedented and unsurpassed

assembly of leaders of the Third World Liberation movements, notably Chou En-Lai, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Sukarno and others. I can still recall Sukarno's mesmerizing oratory, which I listened clandestinely in the early 60's at a time when Indonesia launched its "confrontasia" (confrontation) against Malaysia, dubbed as a neo-colonialist state. But I later came to learn that it was Sukarno, the secular nationalist that botched Indonesia's constitutional democracy that had conducted free and fair elections in 1955.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, at that time, was perhaps the most loved foreign leader among Muslims in Southeast Asia. That affection is well placed. As I later read of Jinnah's commitments towards democracy, his horror against corruption and his stern warning: that the army should never leave the barracks. Musharraf needs to be reminded.

Unfortunately, Jinnah did not live long to see Pakistan as a civilian and democratic state. After his death, Pakistanis unfailingly and deferentially referred to him as "Quaid-e-Azam" - the Great Leader. But his ideal of good governance and democracy is yet to be realized.

In my country, Malaysia, when independence was achieved in 1957, it was stated in the Declaration of Independence, that the new sovereign nation is founded upon the principles of justice and freedom. I think the summary is of somewhat Jeffersonian ideals. We will never claim that to be true.

Unfortunately, the principles of justice and freedom were forgotten and the provisions of fundamental liberties enshrined in the constitution were progressively compromised and eroded by the ruling clique. So, when we speak of the future of democracy in the Muslim world, we must acknowledge its roots in groups in Muslim societies that fair and free elections are not something unusual. It

has been practiced in the past. It has been hijacked by authoritarian leaders, dictators. The Baathists and the rest.

We have also to acknowledge that the battle cry of our freedom fighters, founding fathers or liberation fighters were democracy, freedom, justice. From Sun Yat-sen in China to Sukarno Hatta in Indonesia, Ali Jinnah in India and hundreds others in the Middle East. Their sacred oath was to establish an independent and democratic nation.

There is a great intellectual movement as I had alluded to earlier on the rise in the Muslim world, increasing the store of ideas that will inspire change in the present and in the future. Even among Muslims, so-called Islamists, freedom is considered one of the higher objectives of the divine law, the Maqaasid Shariah, reverberating through societies, providing the moral basis upon which the institutions of democracy and civil society and justice to be established. And this includes the freedom of conscience, freedom to speak out against tyranny, a call for reform and the right to property.

Only the autocrats and authoritarian leaders seem to create a perception that democracy is something alien, as a Western agenda, imposed by the administration in Washington, and orchestrated by the NED. But the desire to be free is universal. It's neither East, nor West; Islam or Christian or Jews, Judaism. It is universal concern. It is a moral imperative to my mind.

The Islamic intellectual tradition is replete with incidences of "ulama" or religious scholars chastising the unjust and corrupt leaders. Tradition, the tradition of dissent of what Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen persuasively argued as the argumentative tradition, although he confined it as the argumentative Indian, is always present in Muslim cultural history. The birth of democratic --- among Muslims came at the same time with a burst of movement

for reform and renewal of religion and society more than two centuries ago.

Our time does not permit me to say enough to do justice to the rich current and cross-current of ideas chosen by the religious scholars, journalists, reformists, men, women in the 19th and early 20th century that provided today's Muslims with a stall of reform and democratic ideas. Now, the criticism of Abdul Rehman al-Kawakiwi of the Ottoman Empire's despotic role. Riffat Tatawi's admiration of French democratic institutions, recently translated under the title, "An Imam in Paris."

It reminds me of a great Hindi movie, "An Evening in Paris", or probably Marlon Brando's "Last Tango in Paris". Or Taha Hussein's lucid exposition on "The Future of Egyptian Culture". And letters of a 19th century Javanese Princess, Radin Kartini, "From Darkness to Light" Long before the feminist writings surfaced, these provided a constellation of ideas and infused motives and desires that can only be fulfilled by the establishment of a free and democratic society.

It is the human desire to be free; to lead a dignified life, an abhorrence of despotism and oppression that motivate the Muslims, be they Arabs, Malays, Persians or Africans to crave for democracy. Their desire has been nurtured, accumulated and betrayed, but is now gaining an unprecedented momentum. It is based on this desire that I believe that Muslims and Americans are natural partners. It is an alliance that can and must be forged to make the world once again secure for democracy.

This is not necessarily a very popular statement to make, to assume that Muslims and Americans can be partners, certainly not these days. But if you look at the historical perspective of the liberation struggles, the Americans were there. You look at the roles the Moroccans played, the first country to recognize the United States

after the War of Independence. And again, prior to this war on terror, the war against militant communists, the general Muslim masses were with the Americans.

I was a student at the University of Malay at the height of the Vietnam War. Yes, we were against American bombings in Vietnam, but we were, at the same time, concerned, worried, scared to death, in case the communists were able to continue their crazy designs and the Domino Theory actually work.

So, there was always this contradiction and the dilemma faced by many of us. Today, there is an opposition, a strong opposition against American aggression but a strong support for American policies against the communists. And I think this reverberates well when we consider the issue of Iraq. There is a strong opposition against dictatorial, repressive rule by Saddam Hussein and others, but, at the same time, against any aggressive design and war perpetrated by the United Nations or by America against these countries. What is left, therefore, is a concerted effort to influence the direction of policies in these societies.

Let us look at Egypt, for example, who is the great beneficiary of American aid, second to Israel. But acting on issues of governance, repression and corruption with impunity and you can then appreciate the disgust, the utter perplexity felt by many Muslims against the so-called contradiction and hypocrisy of American policy. When Secretary Condoleezza Rice came out with --- categorical statement on the need for democracy and reform in Egypt, it was widely reported and supported by Muslim masses.

Of course objected to by the authoritarian leaders, but when we see almost a thousand arrested and repression by Mubarak and hardly anything done by the United States administration other than some normal, pious platitudes on the need for reform, etc. This, of course, caused a lot of consternation among Muslims.

Now let me come back to the issue on the war on terror. I never equivocate on terrorism, and find great difficulty in trying to understand people who give it a lot of rationality, rationale why terror is a phase, why we can appreciate because of poverty, marginalization, etc. We can deal with them separately, but we must confine the issue of terrorism as a problem and we need to support strong and effective measures to defeat the terrorists.

Having said that, I must say that the manner it is conducted at least in some aspects is blatantly unwise. The net has been cast rather too widely, civil liberties compromised and here in the United States, there is a growing evidence that innocent Muslims continue to be harassed.

Malaysia, my country, successfully fought the militant communists. What the government did then, of course it started with the British colonial masters and later followed by the independent government was to isolate the communists and win over the hearts and minds of the rest of the population. Most of the communists were Malaysians, or Malaysians of Chinese origins. I repeat, most, virtually all, the militant communists then were Malaysians of Chinese origins. But we never called them Chinese communists. We simply called them militant communists, because the majority of Malaysians of Chinese origins were not communists, were not even supportive of communist activities and did not condone the excesses of the militant communists.

But, here, in the war against terror, we have the perception that the war has been waged not only against genuine terrorists, but also groups arbitrarily named as jihadis, wahhabis, salafis, madrassah – you name it. I disagree with many of the ideas and views of the wahhabis and salafis. Let me categorically state that, as many good Christians strongly disagree with some of the views of the

Christian fundamentalists here and elsewhere. But this is a separate issue. The debate, the polemics, should continue.

But, in the war on terror, it is ludicrous to cast the net wide open to engulf those who are neither perpetrators nor purveyors of criminal acts of terror and I think why it is relevant in our discourse today, because it complicates the issue, it makes the entire struggle for democracy and reform in the Muslim world more difficult.

So, the future of Muslim democracy, therefore, is right now. The emergence of Muslim democracies beyond a mere theoretical exercise as a fact and reality on the ground is something significant and worth our attention. We are making the rules as we go and as T.S. Elliott once wrote, “Time present and time past are both perhaps, present in time future and time future contained in time past. If all time is eternally present all time is redeemable.”

Now, of course there are concerns which will be discussed because some Islamic parties or Muslim parties participating in the democratic process now were known to be clear strong advocates of a theocracy then they revised a theo-democracy, whatever it meant. But, they mature in the process.

My limited experience in Malaysia, I’m working in a coalition of fossils, the liberal right, the Islamic party and the Justice party. Now, of course, Carl referred to the rally that we had a lot of constraints and roadblocks, I was given clear warnings and threatened before the speech. Our worry has always been not that we do not have freedom of speech. All countries have. Under Saddam, we had freedom of speech. In Malaysia you have freedom of speech, but you don’t have freedom after the speech. That is the problem.

So, the key, of course, is engagement. We must have the courage, conviction, and the courage to engage. It is, to my mind, totally

unacceptable for us to continue to marginalize groups because of their perceived views, either against the West or against the other parties. To my mind, it is essential because again, in my limited experience, with the Islamic Party, we were known to be strong advocates of Islamic law, even an Islamic state. Now, Islamic state is no longer on the agenda. Now, what happens if it is one man, one vote, one time? And I think the fear is real, not only among non-Muslims, but also some Muslims in Malaysia. They kept on cautioning me, “Anwar, look. What happens next?”

Then, we must have institutions, civil society in place. Not just free and fair elections like you observe in Egypt. You must have the rule of law, the institutions in society and a free media. Without a free media, elections are rendered irrelevant. And we do not have a free media in Malaysia, for your information, because according to the freedom index, ours is number 151, close to Cuba and Libya. And still, we have somewhat fair elections. But how can they be fair, when you do not have a free media? And that is what Carl needs to see.

Now, let me conclude by saying that pluralism and diversity has its own legitimacy within Islam. It's a tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, that divergence of opinions among scholars is a rahmah; a blessing. In fact, the four schools of law in Islam, the Maliki, Hanafi, Shafii, Hanbali, these great founding jurists refused to have their school adopted by the government of their day as the official school of law. Many of them were imprisoned as a result.

What is less known in the West, including the United States, is that among the traditional scholars, the tradition of free inquiry and dissent still continues. They continue to work to increase the store of ideas, they support democracy and they support freedom and free market. They also have been fighting for freedom and justice and some have suffered immensely. They are also allies and

partners, not only the liberal elite, and this is of course a mistake to my mind, that many of us here in the United States, you engage with only the so-called liberal elite. You ignore the leaders who muster the support of the majority of the Muslim public.

I would of course call, as I have mentioned, a number of sessions with the NED that you need to engage but the universal principles might be made clear. In no way will we compromise on the issue of freedom, a democracy and a free market economy. These are fundamental issues and constitutional guarantees must be in place. Institutions of civil society must be supported.

And I think these ways, mechanisms, how we then march forward in this reform agenda and march towards democracy.

Thank you.