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## Freedom, Development, and Human Worth

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At its third meeting, held at San José, Costa Rica, on 22-26 February 1994, the World Commission on Culture and Development set itself three goals, the third of which was "to promote a new cultural dynamic: the culture of peace and culture of development." The Commission undertook to "endeavour to recommend the concrete measures that could promote, on a national and international scale, a culture of peace" and went on to state that "a culture of peace, culture of democracy and culture of human rights are indivisible. Their effective implementation must result in a democratic management and . . . the prevention of intercultural conflicts."<sup>1</sup>

Peace as a goal is an ideal which will not be contested by any government or nation, not even the most belligerent. And the close interdependence of the culture of peace and the culture of development also finds ready acceptance. But it remains a matter of uncertainty how far governments are prepared to concede that democracy and human rights are indivisible from the culture of peace and therefore essential to sustained development. There is ample evidence that culture and development can actually be made to serve as pretexts for resisting calls for democracy and human rights. It is widely known that some governments argue that democracy is a Western concept alien to indigenous values; it has also been asserted that economic development often conflicts with political (i.e., democratic) rights and that the second should necessarily give way to the first. In the light of such arguments culture and development need to be carefully examined and defined that they may not be used, or rather, misused, to block the aspirations of peoples for democratic institutions and human rights.

The unsatisfactory record of development in many parts of the world and the ensuing need for a definition of development which means more than mere economic growth became a matter of vital concern to economists and international agencies more than a decade ago. In *A New Concept of Development*, published in 1983, François Perroux stated: "Development has not taken place: it represents a dramatic growth of awareness, a promise, a matter of survival indeed; intellectually, however, it is still only dimly perceived." Later in the same book he asserted that "personal development, the freedom of persons fulfilling their potential in the context of the values to which they subscribe and which they experience in

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<sup>1</sup> "Draft Preliminary Outline of the World Report on Culture and Development," UNESCO, CCD-II 1/94/Doc. 2, 7 February 1994, 16

their actions, is one of the mainsprings of all forms of development."<sup>2</sup> His concept of development therefore gives a firm place to human and cultural values within any scheme for progress, economic or otherwise. The United Nations Development Programme too began to spell out the difference between growth and development in the 1980s. With the beginning of the 1990s the primacy of the human aspect of development was acknowledged by the UNDP with the publication of its first *Human Development Report*. And the special focus of the 1993 *Report* was people's participation seen as "the central issue of our time."<sup>3</sup>

### **Beyond Economics**

While the concept of human development is beginning to assume a dominant position in the thinking of international economists and administrators, the Market Economy, not merely adorned with capital letters but seen in an almost mystic haze, is increasingly regarded by many governments as the quick and certain way to material prosperity. It is assumed that economic measures can resolve all the problems facing their countries. Economics is described as the "*deus ex machina*, the most important key to every lock of every door to the new Asia we wish to see"; and "healthy economic development" is seen as "essential to successfully meeting the challenge of peace and security, the challenge of human rights and responsibilities, the challenge of democracy and the rule of law, the challenge of social justice and reform and the challenge of cultural renaissance and pluralism."<sup>4</sup>

The view that economic development is essential to peace, human rights, democracy, and cultural pluralism, and the view that a culture of peace, democracy, and human rights is essential to sustained human development, may seem on the surface to differ only in the matter of approach. But a closer investigation reveals that the difference in approach itself implies differences of a more fundamental order. When economics is regarded as the most important key to every lock of every door it is only natural that the worth of man should come to be decided largely, even wholly, by his effectiveness as an economic tool. This is at variance with the vision of a world where economic, political, and social institutions work to serve man instead of the other way round; where culture and development coalesce to create an environment in which human potential can be realized to the full. The differing views ultimately reflect differences in how the valuation of the various components of the social and national entity are made; how such basic concepts as poverty, progress, culture, freedom, democracy, and human rights are defined; and, of crucial importance, who has the power to determine such values and definitions.

The value systems of those with access to power and of those far removed from such access cannot be the same. The viewpoint of the privileged is unlike that of the

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<sup>2</sup> François Perroux, *A New Concept of Development* (Paris: UNESCO, 1983), 2, 180.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, *Human Development Report 1993*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Towards a New Asia* (Report of the Commission for a New Asia, 1994), 39.

underprivileged. In the matter of power and privilege the difference between the haves and the have-nots is not merely quantitative, for it has far-reaching psychological and ideological implications. And many "economic" concerns are seldom just that, since they are tied up with questions of power and privilege. The problem of poverty provides an example of the inadequacy of a purely economic approach to a human situation. Even those who take a down-to-earth view of basic human needs agree that "whatever doctors, nutritionists, and other scientists may say about the objective conditions of deprivation, how the poor themselves perceive their deprivation is also relevant."<sup>5</sup> The alleviation of poverty thus entails setting in motion processes which can change the perceptions of all those concerned. Here power and privilege come into play: "The poor are powerless and have no voice. Power is the possibility of expressing and imposing one's will in a given social relationship, in the face of any resistance. The poor are incapable of either imposing, coercing or, in many cases, having any influence at all."<sup>6</sup> It is not enough merely to provide the poor with material assistance. They have to be sufficiently empowered to change their perception of themselves as helpless and ineffectual in an uncaring world.

The question of empowerment is central to both culture and development. It decides who has the means of imposing on a nation or society their view of what constitutes culture and development and who determines what practical measures can be taken in the name of culture and development. The more totalitarian a system, the more power will be concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite, and the more culture and development will be used to serve narrow purposes. Culture has been defined as "the most recent, the most highly developed means of promoting the security and continuity of life."<sup>7</sup> Culture thus defined is dynamic and broad; the emphasis is on its flexible, noncompulsive qualities. But when it is bent to serve narrow interests it becomes static and rigid, its exclusive aspects come to the fore, and it assumes coercive overtones. The "national culture" can become a bizarre graft of carefully selected historical incidents and distorted social values intended to justify the policies and actions of those in power. At the same time, development is likely to be seen in the now-outmoded sense of economic growth. Statistics, often unverifiable, are reeled off to prove the success of official measures.

Many authoritarian governments wish to appear in the forefront of modern progress, but are reluctant to institute genuine change. Such governments tend to claim that they are taking a uniquely national or indigenous path toward a political system in keeping with the times. In the decades immediately after the Second World War, socialism was the popular option. But increasingly since the 1980s, democracy has gained ground. The focus on a national or indigenous way to socialism or democracy has the effect of stressing cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Streeten et al., eds., *First Things First: Meeting Basic Human Needs in the Developing Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Paul-Marc Henry, ed., *Poverty, Progress and Development* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 1991), 34.

<sup>7</sup> *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "culture."

continuity as both process and goal; this in turn obviates the necessity of defining either democracy or socialism in institutionally or procedurally specific terms; and finally, it elevates the existing political elite to the indispensable position of final arbiter and interpreter of what does or does not contribute to the preservation of cultural integrity.<sup>8</sup>

It is often in the name of cultural integrity as well as social stability and national security that democratic reforms based on human rights are resisted by authoritarian governments. It is insinuated that some of the worst ills of Western society are the result of democracy, which is seen as the progenitor of unbridled freedom and selfish individualism. It is claimed, usually without adequate evidence, that democratic values and human rights run counter to the national culture, and therefore to be beneficial they need to be modified--perhaps to the extent that they are barely recognizable. The people are said to be as yet unfit for democracy; therefore, an indefinite length of time has to pass before democratic reforms can be instituted.

The first form of attack is often based on the premise, so universally accepted that it is seldom challenged or even noticed, that the United States of America is the supreme example of democratic culture. What tends to be overlooked is that although the United States is certainly the most important representative of democratic culture, it also represents many other cultures, often indelicately enmeshed. Among these are the "I-want-it-all" consumer culture, megacity culture, superpower culture, frontier culture, immigrant culture. There is also a strong media culture which constantly exposes the myriad problems of American society, from large issues such as street violence and drug abuse to the matrimonial difficulties of minor celebrities.

Many of the worst ills of American society, increasingly to be found in varying degrees in other developed countries, can be traced not to the democratic legacy but to the demands of modern materialism. Gross individualism and cut-throat morality arise when political and intellectual freedoms are curbed on the one hand while on the other hand fierce economic competitiveness is encouraged by making material success the measure of prestige and progress. The result is a society where cultural and human values are set aside and money value reigns supreme. No political or social system is perfect. But could such a powerful and powerfully diverse nation as the United States have been prevented from disintegrating if it had not been sustained by democratic institutions guaranteed by a constitution based on the assumption that "man's capacity for reason and justice . . . makes free government possible," while "his capacity for passion and injustice . . . makes it necessary"?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Harry M. Scoble and Laurie S. Wiseberg, eds., *Access to Justice: Human Rights Struggles in South East Asia* (London: Zed, 1985), 57.

<sup>9</sup> The quoted words are from Clinton Rossiter's introduction to *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Mentor Books, New American Library, 1961), xiv-xv. I owe thanks to Lady Patricia Gore-Booth for the original quotation on which Rossiter presumably based his words: "Man's

It is precisely because of the cultural diversity of the world that it is necessary for different nations and peoples to agree on those basic human values which will act as a unifying factor. When democracy and human rights are said to run counter to non-Western culture, such culture is usually defined narrowly and presented as monolithic. In fact the values that democracy and human rights seek to promote can be found in many cultures. Human beings the world over need freedom and security that they may be able to realize their full potential. The longing for a form of governance that provides security without destroying freedom goes back a long way. Support for the desirability of strong government and dictatorship can also be found in all cultures, both Eastern and Western: the desire to dominate and the tendency to adulate the powerful are also common human traits arising out of a desire for security. A nation may choose a system that leaves the protection of the freedom and security of the many dependent on the inclinations of the empowered few, or it may choose institutions and practices that will sufficiently empower individuals and organizations to protect their own freedom and security. The choice will decide how far a nation will progress along the road to peace and human development.

Many of the countries in the Third World now striving for meaningful development are multiracial societies where there is one dominant racial group and a number--sometimes a large number--of smaller groups: foreign, religious, or ethnic minorities. As poverty can no longer be defined satisfactorily in terms of basic economic needs, "minority" can no longer be defined merely in terms of numbers. For example, a study of minorities in Burmese history has noted that:

In the process of nation-building . . . the notion of minority in Burma changed, as one group defines itself as a nation those outside the group become minorities. . . . There were, of course, minorities in traditional Burma--people close to the power elite who considered themselves superior and people estranged from the power elite who were considered inferior. These criteria for establishing majorities (who might in fact be a small portion of the population as, say, white people in South Africa today) were not based on race or ethnic group, but on access to power. Minorities, thus, are those people with poor access to power.<sup>10</sup>

Once again, as in the case of poverty, it is ultimately a question of empowerment. The provision of basic material needs is not sufficient to make minority groups and indigenous peoples feel they are truly part of the greater national entity. For that they have to be confident that they too have an active role to play in shaping the destiny of the state that demands their allegiance. Poverty degrades a whole society and threatens its stability, while

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capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary," which is from Reinhold Niebuhr's foreword to his *Children of Light and Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (London: Macmillan, 1945).

<sup>10</sup> Ronald D. Rendard, "Minorities in Burmese History," in K.M de Silva et al., eds., *Ethnic Conflict in Buddhist Societies: Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma* (London: Westview, 1988), 79.

ethnic conflict and minority discontent are two of the greatest threats to both internal and regional peace. And when the dispossessed "minority" is in fact an overwhelming majority, as happens in countries where power is concentrated in the hands of the few, the threat to peace and stability is ever-present even if unperceived.

The Commission for a New Asia notes that:

the most rapid economic transformation is most likely to succeed within the context of international peace and internal political stability, in the presence of social tranquility, public order and an enlightened and strong government, and in the absence of societal turbulence and disorder.<sup>11</sup>

This comment highlights the link between economic, political, and social concerns. But there is a danger that it could be interpreted to imply that peace, stability, and public order are desirable only as conditions for facilitating economic transformation rather than as ends in themselves. Such an interpretation would distort the very meaning of peace and security. It could also be used to justify strong, even if unenlightened, government and any authoritarian measures that such a government may take in the name of public order.

### **Empowering the People**

If material betterment, which is but a means to human happiness, is sought in ways that wound the human spirit, it can in the long run only lead to greater human suffering. The vast possibilities that a market economy can open up to developing countries can be realized only if economic reforms are undertaken within a framework that recognizes human needs. The 1993 *Human Development Report* makes the point that markets should serve people instead of people serving markets. Further, "both state and market should be guided by the people. The two should work in tandem and people should be sufficiently empowered to exert effective control over both."<sup>12</sup>

Again we come back to empowerment. It decides how widespread will be the benefit of actions taken in the name of culture and development. And this in turn will decide the extent of the contribution such actions can make to genuine peace and stability. Democracy as a political system which aims at empowering the people is essential if sustained human development, which is "development of the people for the people by the people," is to be achieved. Thus it has been rightly said that:

National governments must find new ways of enabling their people to participate more in government and to allow them much greater influence on the decisions that affect their lives. Unless this is done, and done in time, the irresistible tide of people's rising aspirations will inevitably clash with inflexible systems, leading to anarchy and chaos. A rapid

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<sup>11</sup> *Towards a New Asia*, 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Human Development Report 1993*, 53.

democratic transition and a strengthening of the institutions of civil society are the only appropriate responses.<sup>13</sup>

The argument that it took long years for the first democratic governments to develop in the West is not a valid excuse for African and Asian countries to drag their feet over democratic reform. The history of the world shows that peoples and societies do not have to pass through a fixed series of stages in the course of development. Moreover, latecomers should be able to capitalize on the experiences of the pioneers and avoid the mistakes and obstacles that impeded early progress. The idea of "making haste slowly" is sometimes used to give backwardness the appearance of measured progress. But in a fast- developing world, too much emphasis on "slowly" can be a recipe for disaster.

There will be as many kinds of democracies as there are nations which accept it as a form of government. No single type of "Western democracy" exists; nor is democracy limited to a mere handful of forms such as the American, British, French, or Swiss. Each democratic country will have its own individual characteristics. With the spread of democracy to Eastern Europe, the variety in the democratic style of government will increase. Similarly, there cannot be one form of Asian democracy; in each country the democratic system will develop a character that accords with its social, cultural, and economic needs. But the basic requirement of a genuine democracy is that the people should be sufficiently empowered to be able to participate significantly in the governance of their country.

The 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are aimed at such empowerment. Without these rights, democratic institutions will be but empty shells incapable of reflecting the aspirations of the people and unable to withstand the encroachment of authoritarianism.

The democratic process provides for political and social change without violence. The democratic tradition of free discussion and debate allows for the settlement of differences without resort to armed conflict. The culture of democracy and human rights promotes diversity and dynamism without disintegration; it is indivisible from the culture of development and the culture of peace. It is only by giving firm support to movements that seek to empower the people through democratic means that the United Nations and its agencies will truly be able to promote the culture of peace and the culture of development.

### **Toward a Global Community**

Let me in conclusion summarize my argument. The true development of human beings involves much more than mere economic growth. At its heart there must be a sense of empowerment and inner fulfillment. This alone will ensure that human and cultural values remain paramount in a world where political leadership is often synonymous with tyranny and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 5.

the rule of a narrow elite. People's participation in social and political transformation is the central issue of our time. This can only be achieved through the establishment of societies which place human worth above power, and liberation above control. In this paradigm, development requires democracy, the genuine empowerment of the people. When this is achieved, culture and development will naturally coalesce to create an environment in which all are valued, and every kind of human potential can be realized. The alleviation of poverty involves processes which change the way in which the poor perceive themselves and their world. Mere material assistance is not enough; the poor must have the sense that they themselves can shape their own future. Most totalitarian regimes fear change, but the longer they put off genuine democratic reform, the more likely it is that even their positive contributions will be vitiated: the success of national policies depends on the willing participation of the people. Democratic values and human rights, it is sometimes claimed, run counter to "national" culture, and all too often the people at large are seen as "unfit" for government. Nothing can be further from the truth. The challenge we now face is for the different nations and peoples of the world to agree on a basic set of human values, which will serve as a force in the development of a genuine global community. True economic transformation can then take place in the context of international peace and internal political stability. A rapid democratic transition and strengthening of the institutions of civil society are the *sine qua non* for this development. Only then will we be able to look to a future where human beings are valued for what they are rather than for what they produce. If the UN and its agencies wish to assist this development, they must support those movements which seek to empower the people, movements which are founded on democracy, and which will one day ensure a culture of peace and of development.

[Aung San Suu Kyi](#) is the recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize for Peace and the leader of Burma's National League for Democracy. Held under house arrest by the Burmese dictatorship since July 1989, she wrote this address, originally entitled "Empowerment for a Culture of Peace and Democracy," for a meeting of the World Commission on Culture and Development held in Manila on 21 November 1994. At the author's request, it was presented on her behalf by former president Corazon Aquino of the Philippines. Copyright ©Aung San Suu Kyi, 1994.