

It has been tempting for some to claim that peoples and governments have come to embrace democracy and human rights because they believe their old systems were immoral or illogical. I believe that perspective is wrong. Those societies have rejected other systems and other approaches because they did not work; they did not deliver. They denied people food for the body or for the spirit. The challenge is to ensure that the new systems work better.

Governments in the new democracies may recognize that societies which suppress are systems which self-destruct. They may accept that systems which deny prosperity are systems which will always be poor. They may know that societies which deprive human rights in the interest of social peace are societies where that peace is only a truce. But their citizens will draw other conclusions if these new experiments don't work either. If people become frustrated, if prosperity remains but a promise, if democracy does not deliver, there is a real danger of a return to the old ways, to the old regimes.

What is critical here is that human rights and democracy must be seen, not as a change in style, but as key components of societies which work, societies which are stable and prosperous. Otherwise, human rights and democracy could fall away as quickly as they have arisen.

Those of us who come from societies where prosperity has come with freedom and stability has come with democracy have an obligation. It is an obligation to prove that what we have said is universal in theory can be made universal in practice. It is an obligation to assist -- not as preachers but as partners.

That effort will come from attitudes and from action. That effort will also come from knowing both what to do and what not to do.

First, we must avoid the easy error of declaring that we have models to mimic. Our societies have developed the way they have for particular reasons which lie in history, in tradition and in culture. Our democracies were not delivered to us like prefabricated housing. They were home-grown. And because they were home-grown, they grew firm roots.

And our democracies themselves vary considerably. From the social democracy of Sweden to the traditions of Westminster to the unfettered capitalism of the United States, we ourselves are not uniform. We cannot expect others to be.