

## AMERICA AND THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

ZAID IBRAHIM\*

Good governance and democracy are key driving forces in the development of states. Today, these very same concepts transcend beyond the boundaries of statehood to the global arena. The focus of international political discourses on “global democracy” and “global good governance” reiterates the importance of these concepts in the quest for a better world for all. The Widener Symposium has brought together scholars, social and political scientists, and policy makers. to explore and strategize on how best to ensure that global democracy and governance may be realized in a constantly evolving multicultural and pluralistic international community. Exploration and strategic management is indisputably crucial, but unless the components of the system change or reform, the ideas, strategies, and principles will serve no effective purpose. The key component in the equation here is the political arena where the strategies, precepts and concepts explored and fine-tuned find life. It is the political power play. The global democracy dream—a fair and just international system—will never materialize if political power is not balanced or equitably and morally exercised. To ensure that this will happen, it is imperative that the leadership of the free world must be grounded on the rule of law, morality, justice, and equality. Therefore, unless the leading powers appreciate the significance of the part they play, all the strategizing and evaluation are worthless—merely lip service. Nothing will change unless the big powers, namely America, want to change.

Better global governance requires a shift in international politics, and a shift in international politics requires America's support. The dream of an equitable and just global democracy is not unattainable but one which is beset with obstacles. However, with a leader of America's historical moral stature, the struggle may be less of an uphill struggle. Some may argue that the process has already commenced with discussions of reforming international institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, World Intellectual Property Organizations, NATO, and so forth. Though it is important that international institutions evolve and change, their success in effectively participating in the process of developing a global democracy is very much

---

\* Mohd Zaid Ibrahim is a Member of Parliament representing Kota Bharu which constituency seat he won in the last general election. He is also Chairman of the Pro-Democracy Myanmar Caucus (Malaysian Parliament) and ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC). Also, the Chairman and Founding Partner of Zaid Ibrahim & Co., Malaysia's largest law firm, Mr. Ibrahim has extensive experience in advising on a broad spectrum of legal matters encompassing corporate, administrative, constitutional, construction, financing and commercial law. Mr. Ibrahim is Director of Tenaga Nasional Berhad and is currently a President of the Malaysian Civil Liberties, a society established to promote freedom, the rule of law and of formal ethics. He holds a Bachelor of Laws (Honours) from the University of London, he is a Barrister-at-Law from the Inner Temple, and he is an Advocate and Solicitor of the High Court of Malaya.

dependant on principled leadership. It is in this capacity that America must take the lead in collaboration with all nations. History attests to the many instances where other nations were more than happy to be led by America. Today, however many are reluctant to be associated with America because of her departure from multilateralism and the appearance that America seeks to dominate rather than to lead. Herein lies the first obstacle to realizing the dream of a global democracy.

Changing the present American unilateralist leadership style will not be an easy task, especially with the war in Iraq and the lackadaisical attitude with regard to Lebanon. It is comprehensible for any country like America to want to preserve its power and leverage, particularly when she believes so fervently in the correctness of her own policies. But the end does not justify the means because, “[w]hat difference does it make to the dead, the orphans, and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty and democracy?”<sup>1</sup> The obsession with the preservation of power has led America “to adopt the flawed and erroneous principles and tactics of [their] adversaries, sometimes abandoning [America’s] own values. . . .”<sup>2</sup> at the expense of her exemplary fundamental values—of democracy, equality, justice and liberty, chipping away at what is left of her moral integrity. It is these fundamental values that are the building blocks of a global democracy. Where the moral leader has regressed from such standards, the foundations are shaky and will in time disintegrate or crumble. Therefore, unless this is addressed, the ideas and strategies for a global democracy are only as valuable as the paper in which they are inscribed on.

In spite of America’s tarnished moral reputation, it is not too late for change. America has a rich history to draw from, to reacquaint herself with her cherished founding principles of freedom, equality and justice, as she once did under the leadership of Jimmy Carter.<sup>3</sup> American integrity must be restored to lead and prepare the global community for the next chapter. America needs to embrace the principle of non-violence and peace to rebuild just international relations.

For much of the past century, America was undoubtedly the moral leader of the free world because of her history, which was driven by a sense of moral purpose. People all over the world, in both developing and developed countries alike, looked up to America because of her commitment to democracy and a just political system. America came out of isolation and sacrificed thousands in the Second World War, defended Europe, rescued Asia from Japan’s imperial designs, and returned Japan in one piece and with a very

---

1. MAHATMA GANDHI, *NON-VIOLENCE IN PEACE AND WAR* (1942).

2. JIMMY CARTER, *A NEW AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY* (1954).

3. “[T]hrough failure[,] we have now found our way back to our own principles and values, and we have regained our lost confidence.” *Id.* He then went on to appoint the first assistance secretary of state for human rights and started the practice chronicling the human rights practices of countries receiving assistance from the United States. *Id.*

good constitution. Today, Japan has the second largest economy in the world, and Europe is rebuilt and prosperous thanks to the Marshall Plan.

Underpinning all that help was an abundance of idealism. It is not beyond reason to assume that America may have had practical reasons for participating in the war, but its conduct during the war and its commitments afterward evidence a deeper concern with a just world order. America did not abandon the defeated people of Japan. Instead, she helped Japan realize their potential to achieve prosperity through subscription to peace and non-violence. Today Japan is one of America's strongest allies.

America's leaders then grasped the fundamental importance of being not just a military and economic leader, but also a moral leader. They appreciated and understood that America's moral reputation could help build alliances, expand her influence, and secure support in times of crisis—that this image of revolution, freedom and democracy is her “soft power” capable of more than military might and superiority. America's leaders realized that it was in America's interest to retain this moral reputation to enhance security and her global position.

Today, however, the image of America is different. She is an image of violence, militarism, and obsession with world domination; especially with the invasion of Iraq and the passivity of America as the Israel-Lebanon conflict unfolds. During the Cold War, America began to detach its use of military and economic might from moral principle. Though the overarching themes of the standoff between the United States and the USSR were cast in moral terms, somewhere along the way small countries came to be viewed as no more than instruments, mere pawns in that game. If a tyrant served America's interests, he was propped up. If democratic processes produced an unappealing outcome, regime change was encouraged or aided<sup>4</sup>. In the name of democracy, America compromised her moral integrity adopting the principles of her foes without due regard for the long-term ramifications of such decisions.<sup>5</sup> Evidently, these were expedient policies rather than just policies.

America has repented for the worst of these practices since the fall of the Soviet Union, but its foreign policy today continues to demonstrate her half-hearted commitment to moral leadership. This is highlighted by inaction on her part in the Israel-Lebanon conflict, in responding to the new democratically elected Palestinian government, in advocating the doctrine of pre-emptive self-defense<sup>6</sup> by invading Iraq and persisting with the unilateralist approach.<sup>7</sup> In my opinion, what is most shocking to other countries is the practice of double standards, departing from the notion that all is equal,

---

4. For example, the democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala was overthrown by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas with the help of the US government in the early 1970s.

5. The propping of Saddam Hussein in the Iran – Iraq war.

6. The right to take hostile action against any foreign nation under the suspicion that it may one day take action against America even if an imminent threat is not present.

7. Where George W Bush failed to assemble a more impressive multinational coalition with regards to the present conflict in Iraq, he retorted, “At some point, we may be the only ones left. That's ok with me. We are America.”

because America holds itself to different standards than it holds the rest of the world. A pertinent example, is the pre-emption doctrine; if this right was claimed by another government, America would not recognize it as a legitimate right to self-defense. America has also adopted different interpretations of the rules for itself, at the United Nations and with its positions on nuclear non-proliferation and global warming.

These hypocracies are not right because they contravene the fundamental values of America, such as fairness, equality, and the rules of law, which demand that rules be applied consistently and uniformly to the powerful and the weak. America's departure from multilateralism and the application of double standards have taxed America's financial and military resources. More importantly, however, it has cost America her moral integrity. In the weeks after 9/11, global public opinion was overwhelmingly sympathetic to America. Within two years, however, the pendulum of support has swung in the opposite direction. In Indonesia, the most populous Muslim-majority state, the attitude towards America plunged from 75% in 2000 to - 83% by 2003.<sup>8</sup> The majority of Muslim countries fear that the United States is planning to attack them. This is not an unreasonable fear considering America's approach in dealing with Iran.

At this juncture, America is presented with two options. Option one would be to continue on this course of self-destruction, to attempt to dominate and rule the world by force, military, and economic might. While this may be an effective strategy for tyrants, this choice does not befit a country with a proud heritage like America and will not be sufficient to keep order in the world. Those ruled by force will chafe and become unruly, as they have in so many countries throughout history. As Gandhi said, "... I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall—think of it, always."<sup>9</sup>

In the long-term interest of mankind, it is far better to wield influence through the power of persuasion and reason, and build alliances on the principles of justice and humanity. The best way for America to do this is by adhering to the rules that it proposes for others. Adherence to a more just principle, to a rule of equality in international law, will restore America's moral integrity. America must embrace the reality of its position of responsibility to the world with humility and accept responsibility for her arrogant unilateralist agenda. America must work to restore her alliances, to look at every region through the lens of equality, and understand that the very same fears she faces are not different from those before other nations. America must return to assume her throne as the leader who listens, admits mistakes, and is diligent at

---

8. In Pakistan, support for the US led war in terror fell to 16%. Levels of support in 2005 remain disturbingly low with 12% in Jordan, 17% in Turkey and 31% in Lebanon.

9. World Prayers, at [http://www.worldprayers.org/frameit.cgi?archive/prayers/meditations/when\\_I\\_despair.html](http://www.worldprayers.org/frameit.cgi?archive/prayers/meditations/when_I_despair.html) (last visited Aug. 25, 2007).

addressing global challenges. This will consequently result in the restoration of America's integrity and legitimacy in world affairs. Thus, she will be able to lead others on the path to moderation and understanding.

For starters, America must eat a slice of humble pie rather than flout her power to suit her self-interest to the detriment of others. Hence, if a principle cannot be made universally available, it should not be available to anyone at all. It is best for everybody to stick with the time-tested prohibition of the use of force and its limited self-defense exception, both of which are enshrined in the U.N. Charter. Even within the spaces where there are no international rules, America must be more careful about the way it wields—or chooses not to wield—its power. A dash of delicacy, diplomacy, and understanding goes a long way in human relations. For example, it is probably not constructive to categorize countries as “evil” or imply that terrorism is a feature of a major world religion. There are no black and white answers to these issues; they are extremely complex.

America should exercise some restraint and shift her emphasis to international community-building, to education, to increasing tolerance, to cultivating democracy and human rights at the grassroots. The use of force should always be a last resort. If force must be resorted to, it should be done in accordance with the laws of war. These are values that the whole world consensually promulgated and respects. By championing them, America will slowly regain the confidence of the rest of the world and will once again be a moral leader. Good intentions alone will not be enough to save the world or make it better—the end does not justify the means.

A better and more just world order can only come about if there is a fundamental change in American foreign policy. As we all know, it will be a challenge to implement that change but not impossible. Global and American citizens must speak out, voice their disapproval, and question why those principles stop at the American borders. Americans must reflect on the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence, which extend to all men and not just to those who are fortunate enough to live in the “right” country. America must be reminded of her deep and abiding commitment to equality and democracy, and lessons learned from the American Civil War and the Civil Rights movement. American citizens must be concerned with not just what America stands against, but also what she stands for.

We can all remain in our “havens” and ignore these complex issues so as to not offend anybody. If, however, we are truly concerned about the world and the future of democracy, then we must argue for more just international relations. We must give due credit to people who are different from us and to nations that are poorer than us. If we share that vision of the world, then it is crucial that this message—that fundamental political change is necessary—be spread quickly.

Better global governance requires a shift in international politics, and a shift in international politics requires America's support. If we global citizens of the world, Americans included, do not make this happen, who will?



