

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



November 20, 2016

Ensuring Democratic Rights

Peaceful nations must stand for the advance of democracy. No other system of government has done more to protect minorities, to secure the rights of labor, to raise the status of women, or to channel human energy to the pursuits of peace." George Walker Bush.

The concept of democracy is often expressed in terms of "thin" and "thick" definitions. At its most fundamental or thin incarnation, democracy is synonymous with popular sovereignty or majority rule: in some forms, democracy can be exercised directly by the people; in large cities, it is by the people through their elected agents. Or in the memorable phrase of Abraham Lincoln, democracy is government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Therefore, what we know as democracy in its ideal form generally also includes governance by rule of law and the protection of civil liberties, or liberal democracy. Though how these two basic components of democracy – electoral and liberal – are represented may differ, it is widely accepted that a truly democratic system of governance must comprise both. The extent to which it does so will determine its quality and durability. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, without liberal democracy, electoral democracy is "nothing more than mob rule where 51% of the people may take away the rights of the other 49."

People living in a democratic society must serve as the ultimate guardians of their own freedom and must forge their own path toward the ideals set forth in the preamble to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world."

Democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule and individual rights. Democracies guard against all-powerful central governments and decentralize government to regional and local levels, understanding that all levels of government must be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible. Democracies understand that one of their prime functions is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in political, economic and cultural life of society.

In a democratic society, citizens do not have only rights, but also the responsibility to participate in the political system that protects their rights and freedoms.

Moreover, democratic societies are committed to the values of tolerance, cooperation, and compromise. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "Intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit." It worth mentioning that majority rule, by itself, is not automatically democratic. For example, no one would call a system fair or just that permitted 51% of the population to oppress the remaining 49% in the name of the majority. In a democratic society, majority rule must be coupled with guarantees of individual rights that, in turn, serve to protect the rights of minorities and dissenters – whether ethnic, religious, or simply the losers in political debate. The rights of minorities do not depend upon the good will of the majority and cannot be eliminated by majority vote. In other words, the rights of minorities are protected because democratic laws and institutions protect the rights of all citizens.

The relationship of citizen and state is fundamental to democracy. Thomas Jefferson says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

More specifically, in democratic system, these fundamental or inalienable rights include freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion and conscience, freedom of assembly, and the right to equal protection before the law. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the rights that citizens enjoy in a democracy, but it does constitute a set of the irreducible core rights that any democratic government worthy of the name must uphold. Since they exist independently of government, in Jefferson's view, these rights cannot be legislated away nor should they be subject to the whim of an electoral majority. Freedom of speech and expression, especially about political and social issues, is the lifeblood of democracy. This freedom is fundamental right but cannot be sued to incite to violence.

Democratic government, which is elected by and accountable to its citizens, protects individual rights so that citizens in a democracy can undertake their civic obligations and responsibilities, thereby strengthening the society as a whole. Free and fair elections are essential in assuring the consent of the governed, which is the bedrock of democratic politics. Elections serve as the principal mechanism for translating that consent into governmental authority. Democratic elections are competitive. Opposition parties and candidates must enjoy the freedom of speech, assembly and movement necessary to voice their criticisms of the government openly and to bring alternative policies and candidates to the voters. Simply permitting the opposition access to the ballot is not enough. The party in power may enjoy the advantages of incumbency, but the rules and conduct of the election contest must be fair.



A Surge in Sectarianism

By Hujjatullah Zia

In Syria, men, women and children bear the brunt of sectarian violence. The fundamental rights of the ethnic minority groups are violated on the grounds of their race, sex and creed. Their blood is spilt and their liberty and dignity are trampled upon without an iota of mercy. The radical ideology of the self-styled Islamic State (IS) group transgresses the religious tenets and humanitarian law. They pay no heed to humanity and ethical code.

Last month, a young Yazidi woman named, Nadia Murad, was awarded the Vaclav Havel Human Rights Award. Her story is highly moving. In July 2014, Nadia was just an ordinary girl living in the village of Kocho in northern Iraq. In her own words, she lived a simple life, with little idea of just how harrowing life could become. Yazidis, members of an ancient religious sect, have lived in the region for hundreds of years and have been declared 'infidel' by the militant Islamic State group, which was set to kill as many of them as they could. That is exactly what they would try to do to Nadia and her family and thousands of other Yazidis in the village.

On August 15, 2014, Nadia and her family along with the other villagers were told to walk to the school. All around them they saw IS fighters they had previously seen only on television. Once all the villagers were in the building, the men were separated from the women and children.

According to the United Nations, 312 men were murdered within one hour, along with six of Nadia's own brothers and stepbrothers. Young women like Nadia were all grouped together and taken to the Iraqi city of Mosul.

In Mosul, the women were distributed among IS fighters, who have declared all captured non-Muslim women as spoils of war. Many tried to kill themselves by slitting their wrists or even smearing battery acid on their faces rather than bear enslavement. According to Nadia, women would be told to wash and clean up.

Then they were taken to the 'courts' that the IS has established in Mosul. There, they would be photographed and their pictures pinned on a billboard. Underneath would be the telephone number of the fighter who currently 'owned' them. This was done so that the men could swap women amongst themselves.

One morning it was Nadia's turn, and she, along with three of her nieces, was marched to the 'court'. A large man with long hair wanted to take her but she begged

another fighter, a tall and thin man, to take her instead. It would not make her ordeal any easier. The man kept her captive in a room and sexually abused her. Her first attempt at escape did not succeed; instead she was punished by being locked in a room with six IS fighters who abused her until she fell unconscious.

According to IS fighters, who have revived the institution of slavery, women like Nadia were 'sabria', or slaves, whom they were entitled to take.

One day, one of Nadia's captors forgot to lock his door and it was then that Nadia managed to escape and run away to safety. She was taken to a refugee camp and managed to eventually escape to Germany.

Nadia Murad's courage deserves to be acknowledged again and again. It is a testament to the callousness of the world that it is permitting such crimes to occur against women like Nadia. Even more troubling is the fact that millions of Muslims, who take to the streets to protest against controversial images, do not feel similarly compelled to do so against the militant group's distortion of their faith.

Thousands of Yazidis remain in IS captivity and undoubtedly many women like Nadia are being abused even as this article was being written. Many Muslims refuse to believe the accounts of suffering so as to absolve themselves of the responsibility to act.

As Nadia received the award, named after Czech writer and dissident Vaclav Havel, the Czech government was proposing a complete ban on all refugees from the region. As is well-known, most Western countries have undertaken similar legislative measures in recent months, tightening refugee and asylum procedures such that they do not have to provide refuge to the hapless masses that are driven out by the fighting.

It is believed that sectarianism runs in the blood of the IS fighters, who operate under radical ideology. They seek to stoke sectarianism around the globe murdering ethnic minority groups in Islamic societies and extend their realm of influence in Europe through acts of terror and violence. Gaining foothold in Afghanistan, the IS insurgents have engaged in sectarian violence and target the innocent civilian across the country. As a result, a number of travelers, including women and children, were abducted and beheaded within the two past years.

Hence, since there is no room for tolerance in the radical ideology of the IS militants, they seek to kill people on the basis of their race and faith.

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The Many Faces of Malnutrition

By Adebimpe Adebiji

If you happen to be sitting with two other people right now, chances are one of you is malnourished. And you might not even know it. Yes, that's right: one in three people worldwide suffer from malnutrition, and it does not always look the way one might expect.

From the two billion adults who carry too much weight to the 159 million children with stunted growth, malnutrition takes many forms. As a doctor, I see women who appear healthy, but who suffer from anemia, owing partly to low iron intake.

And I see relatively able-bodied men with big bellies, which elevate their risk for heart disease.

West Africa is home to some of the world's highest rates of malnutrition. That includes the most obvious "face" of the condition: roughly 9% of West African children under five are wasted, or too thin for their height. At its most severe, wasting is fatal.

But West Africa also suffers from many other forms of malnutrition. One-third of children under five in the region are stunted (too short for their age), a condition with irreversible effects on cognitive development.

According to the Cost of Hunger in Africa studies, stunted children across the continent receive up to 3.6 fewer years of schooling than well-nourished children.

The problem does not affect only children. Half of all women of reproductive age in West Africa are anemic. Not only does anemia contribute to almost one-fifth of global maternal deaths; babies born to anemic women are also more likely to be underweight. The result is a vicious cycle of poor health.

Perhaps the least obvious face of malnutrition is not undernutrition, but excessive weight and obesity. Today, 31% of adults in West Africa are overweight or obese. In Nigeria, my home country, the share is 33%. Beyond heart disease, that extra weight raises the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, and more.

Malnutrition also has serious economic consequences. The 2016 Global Nutrition Report estimates that, across Africa, malnutrition results in a loss of 11% of GDP – more than the annual losses brought about by the 2008-2010 global financial crisis.

On an individual level, adults who were stunted in their childhood – a condition that has affected nearly 70% of the working population in some areas – often face a diminished capacity to work and earn a living, owing to

the developmental challenges they faced. The effects of wasting on human development and economic progress are almost as profound.

The imperative to tackle malnutrition could not be clearer. Yet progress has been mixed, particularly in West Africa.

To be sure, some countries have had impressive success, thanks to decisive government action.

In just a decade, Ghana cut stunting by nearly half, partly through investment in areas that affect nutrition, such as agriculture and social protection.

Niger's government halved the number of deaths of children under the age of five over a similar period, by making specific budget and operational decisions to tackle severe wasting.

But other countries have hardly made a dent in the malnutrition problem.

In Togo, stunting rates have barely moved in the last decade. In Mali and Guinea, wasting is on the rise. And these countries are not alone.

Many other African countries may be poised to start writing their own success stories.

Côte D'Ivoire has positioned itself to reduce stunting, while Senegal is close to being on track to address wasting. In both countries, extra investment – both political and financial – could have an outsize impact.

Yet donors and governments remain reluctant to provide the needed funding. According to the 2016 Global Nutrition Report, donor funds for nutrition-focused interventions are stagnating at \$1 billion.

Nine West African governments spend, on average, just over 1% of their budgets on nutrition.

And yet nutrition is one of the best investments we can make, with every \$1 invested in nutrition yielding \$16 in returns. In many countries, such as India, obesity-related illnesses like heart disease are consuming up to 30% of families' annual incomes. Unless African governments start making smart choices and smart investments, the continent may face a similar fate.

Many African governments have set out ambitious goals relating to security, stability, and long-term economic prosperity. Nutrition is critical to achieving any of them. It is central to our continent's development, and should thus be a high priority for our policymakers. Millions of lives depend on it. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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