

2013 Pluralism Lecture: Kofi Annan

Pluralism: a Key Challenge of the 21st Century*

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Your Highness The Aga Khan, Excellencies, fellow members of the Board, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a pleasure to be with you today. The Global Centre for Pluralism has an extremely important mandate, and I feel privileged to participate in its work.

Globalization has brought us closer together. In the 21st century, we live for the first time in one global community. But it is a community composed of many strands which must be carefully woven together into a whole. If diversity is seen as a source of strength, societies can become healthier, more stable, and prosperous. But there is another side of the coin if we fail to manage the conflicting pressures that pluralism invariably brings. Without the institutions and policies to manage diversity, whole communities can be marginalized and oppressed, creating conditions for conflict and violence.

This is why pluralism is a key challenge for the 21st century. Some look at recent developments and claim that our world is becoming fragmented into different civilizations. I strongly disagree. I see the world coming together in one global civilization, to which each of us brings our own traditions, cultures, and beliefs. My long experience has taught me that, whatever our background, what unites us is far greater than what divides us.

My experience has also taught me that strong, healthy, cohesive societies are built on three pillars - peace and security; development; and the rule of law and respect for human rights. Unfortunately stability and economic growth have, for far too long, been the principal responses to national and global problems. We must not fall into this trap. For there can be no long-term security without development and no long-term development without security. And no society can long remain prosperous or secure without respect for the rule of law and human rights. For a society to manage pluralism successfully, it must embrace and give equal weight to each of these three pillars.

* Check against delivery

But ladies and gentlemen, we must not shy away from the fact that plural societies, by their nature, are challenging to govern. They bring with them competing claims or entitlements - each of which can be justified and defended, but which are not always compatible. And it is important to recognize that no society - however democratic or respectful of the rule of law - resolves these challenges perfectly. Europe, for example, has well-established legal systems and arrangements to protect minorities and reach acceptable compromises. Yet even within Europe, pluralism is sometimes seen as a threat. Levels of social prejudice have been rising against religious and cultural minorities and new immigrants.

We have also seen a fall in trust and confidence in political institutions which has led to increased support for more extreme political groupings. These trends underline how important it is for countries to entrench democratic principles and norms, adopt inclusive policies to build and sustain trust, increase inclusion and reduce insecurity. And just as no country is born a democracy, no one is born a good citizen. Mutual respect and tolerance have to be fostered and taught. We have to promote dialogue to combat fear, intolerance, and extremism. We have to learn from each other, making our different traditions and cultures a source of harmony and strength, not discord and weakness.

The Centre must help us do that, and it will have plenty of work to do. Let's not imagine that it can come up with a simple, one-size-fits-all formula that will solve the problems of diversity in all societies. Diversity is about difference and there is diversity among countries as well as between them. The mix of policies and institutions required, for example, to manage relations between indigenous communities and a majority of long-established incomers is not the same as that required to integrate and protect "new" minorities who have only recently arrived.

Many countries have to manage both situations at once. Canada is one, and it has done so more successfully than most - although I'm sure few Canadians would argue or claim that there are no problems left to solve. Canada's prosperity, as well as its political system and strong institutions - including an independent judiciary - make it relatively well placed to deal with these challenges. But in countries without such advantages, tensions all too often spill over into violence and conflict, leading, in the worst cases, to ethnic cleansing and genocide, such as we saw in Rwanda, and in Bosnia Herzegovina.

Again, the origins of these stresses are different in each country. Most often majorities hold a minority group responsible for their problems, or see it as a threat, and turn on it in fury. But there are also cases such as we saw in South Africa, where a minority clings to power and privilege, partly because it fears what will happen if power passes on to the majority. Each of these cases involve different realities and different conditions. Each requires a different approach. But most have this in common: though these conflicts have security implications, they are, in essence, political problems requiring political solutions.

While numerous political factors come into play, a resolution of these conflicts often requires action to tackle long-standing injustice and discrimination. This was certainly the case in Kenya, a country in which I have been closely involved, after sectarian violence exploded after the contested Presidential elections in 2007. Kenya had successfully projected a vision of peace and stability so the violence, in which over a thousand people were killed and 650, 000 people were displaced, shocked the world. But this image was not rooted in reality. The truth is that widespread corruption and crony-capitalism had fueled a deep-seated sense of anger and grievance across the country. Kenya's political elite had sadly adopted the 'divide and rule' form of its former colonial rulers with little attempt to build a cohesive national identity. Wealth and influence were passed between interchanging ethnic cliques. The rule of law had become less important than tribal bloodlines. But while a few at the top amassed great wealth - which they spread to their close kin - the vast majority of the country's citizens lived in abject poverty.

This fuelled despair and resentment which exploded in the aftermath of the election, exposing the deep rifts within Kenyan society. The violence was terrible. But I, and many others, were aware that the far worse shadow of Rwanda and Bosnia hung over Kenya. This threat thankfully led to a concerted international response from within Africa and outside which persuaded Kenya's warring leaders to agree to mediation.

By the time the team of Eminent African Personalities, comprised of Benjamin Mkapa, Graça Machel and myself, had arrived, we had the undivided backing of the African Union, the UN, the US, and the European Union for our work. Such support made a huge difference and helped us, eventually, to persuade President Kibaki and Raila Odinga to agree to power-sharing.

But it was clear that what was needed was wide-ranging reform to address the country's deeper tensions and the failure of its political system. This required engagement not just from the political elite but right across society through the Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation process. This process delivered a new constitution, overwhelmingly supported in a national referendum, which provided Kenya with the chance of a fresh start.

It opened the way for a much fairer political system built around devolved government, a new bill of rights, land reform, and a permanent reduction in presidential powers. It gave each county and each community, including all its tribal and regional groups, access to power; a welcome antidote to the destructive winner-takes-all politics. Reforms were put in place to strengthen the effectiveness, independence and trust in the judiciary, police and electoral commission whose weakness had helped inflame the violence.

Alongside reform of the political system, work was begun to tackle the divisive political culture. Through the work of the Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence and the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission, Kenya began to look at not just the immediate events which led to the violence but the country's long history of human rights abuses. At the same time, the National Cohesion and Integration Commission was established to identify and eliminate all forms of discrimination.

Our aim was not to put a plaster over the wound but to try to help Kenya find a permanent solution to its deep divisions. In the past five years, it is to be welcomed – and to the credit of the country- that many of these reforms have been put in place. We saw as well how the recent elections passed off largely peacefully.

But the poll also confirmed that work must continue to reduce negative ethnicity and strengthen Kenya's institutions and electoral management bodies. It is also far from clear that efforts to reform the culture of Kenya's political leaders have taken hold. Reconstructing sound political institutions, and public trust in them, will require continued vigilance and effort over a long period from both inside Kenya and its friends. There are no short cuts and, unfortunately, progress can be quickly undone. But the rapid intervention of the international community to this crisis did help Kenya pull itself back from the brink of the abyss.

This is in contrast to the conflict in Syria – another country where I have been involved – whose trauma has been worse in almost every respect. Here too, for a brief period, the international community had an opportunity to act. Negotiation on a political settlement was, I believe, still possible a year ago.

On 30 June 2012, the Action Group for Syria, met to agree a comprehensive plan to resolve the conflict. The final communiqué established principles and guidelines for a Syrian-led political transition that would meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. These guidelines included:

- i. The establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers, to establish a neutral environment for the transition;
- ii. An inclusive national dialogue;
- iii. A review of the constitutional order and legal system;
- iv. Continuity of government institutions and recruitment of qualified staff;
- v. Commitment to accountability and national reconciliation, and a comprehensive package for transitional justice;
- vi. Gender equality, protection of vulnerable groups, and provision of humanitarian aid.

Had this moment been seized rather than lost, Syria might have avoided the extreme violence that has now cost over 80,000 lives, resulted in 1.5 million refugees, 4 million internally displaced peoples, and millions more facing daily terror and a humiliating struggle for survival. The involvement of regional interests, proxy wars, and the paralysis of international decision-making, has created a truly poisonous mix that threatens to spillover into neighboring countries.

And unfortunately, the conflict has taken a deeply sectarian turn. While it is not the primary or sole driver of the conflict, sectarianism and communal violence has risen to the fore. And while, of course, continued unrest in Kenya would have had a serious regional impact, the potential fall-out from Syria is far more dangerous.

Syria is an important country in a region that is strategic, diverse and unstable. Syria, unlike Libya, has not imploded, if anything, it is likely to explode, and explode beyond its own borders:

- a. Increased risk of ethnic conflict between Arab Sunni insurgents and Kurdish forces, which could drag in Turkey.
- b. The violence threatens to spillover to Lebanon and Iraq, sparking conflicts amongst their own communities.
- c. Rising tensions between the Gulf states and Iran, and the deepening of Sunni-Shia divisions could also increase regional instability.

This has already greatly complicated attempts to find a political resolution – and will greatly complicate the implementation of any eventual post-conflict settlement.

But I still believe that the conflict can only be ended through mediation and dialogue. So I am glad that Russia and the United States are working together on a ‘Geneva 2’ conference. It is imperative that the international community unites behind a plan to create new political arrangements that will be fairer, more tolerant and more accountable. Only with such unity can we hope to bring a halt to two years of violence and suffering.

Ladies and gentlemen, Kenya and Syria are two different examples from my own experience which show why the Aga Khan and the Canadian Government are to be commended for having the vision and generosity to create this institution. Sound policy advice on pluralism are indispensable to the creation of stable, fair, societies where people can fulfill themselves and live together in harmony. But to be effective such advice also requires the understanding that solutions have to be tailored for the unique situation of every individual society. This is where the Centre’s role will be invaluable.

The differing examples of Kenya and Syria, however, also underline the indispensable role that the international community can and must play in helping defuse trouble. In a world more inter-connected than ever, it would be reckless to believe that we can be indifferent to any country's traumas or let narrow national interests persuade us to stand back.

I wish the Centre well in its endeavors. It is hard to over-estimate either the urgency or importance of your work.

Thank you very much.