

Speech: Lord Ahmad Opening Speech at the Governing Council of the Community of Democracies

Distinguished Guests. Ladies and Gentlemen. I welcome you all here formally. I was just saying to the Secretary General that I have had a rather interesting start to my morning – when we talk of Human Rights and Democracy and the rule of law, I had a fascinating insight this morning, and quite privileged to do so, in the company of Henry Kissinger – so that is my reason why I am slightly late; the Foreign Secretary, together with a few other Ministers today hosted Henry Kissinger and it was a fascinating insight into his own life, but also his world view on where we are today.

The issue of democracy and human rights is very close to my heart, as someone who is also Minister for the United Nations and the family of the Commonwealth 53. It is something that defines a nation, it defines how we are, it defines our interaction on the world stage.

Since the United Kingdom joined the Community in 2016, we have played an increasingly active role. The focus of our time as chair over the past 6 months has been to maximise the organisations practical impact; the need for that is clear: when we cast our eyes around the world today, there are far too many countries where it is not just a democratic deficit, but where democracy does not exist. Institutions are weak, at best constrained and those that are operational, we find quite often are being eroded – the rule of law is not being applied or indeed is struggling to take root.

That is why, once we have concluded our procedural business this morning, we will hold sessions designed to share know-how and understanding on how we can support democracy in both Mali and in the Maldives, followed by sessions on strengthening democratic participation and media freedoms – both of which are vital to the functioning of a successful democracy.

One thing I have always been mindful of as I travel around the world is that we have got to be very careful, that this is not a question of pointing fingers or a blame game – to say, look at us, aren't we a great democracy; we have press freedom, we have religious freedoms, so on and so forth and you do not, that can never be the approach.

Indeed, on a bit of self reflection, our own journey in the United Kingdom to get to where we are today, has not been an easy one. One only needs to cast one's mind back 100 years ago, women did not have the right to vote. The struggle that women had to go through to get that basic right and democratic right.

So this is not one, as I say, about blaming others, but how through sharing experiences of our own journeys in our respective countries we can help strengthen those vital pillars of democracy, the rule of law, the importance

of governments and institutions around the world.

Therefore, I am delighted that we will be hearing later from the Foreign Minister of the Maldives, His Excellency Mr Abdulla Shahid, and from His Excellency the Ambassador of Mali to the United Kingdom. I welcome you both here today. Your countries face various hurdles in their democratic journeys, and I hope we can collectively, from our own experiences, we can help you overcome them.

In Mali, a key component of the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation offered greater autonomy to the regions. This process of devolution is still in progress. From our own experience, in the United Kingdom. I would always say that devolution is important, regional governance is important, but also defining what devolution actually means is also equally important. Devolution takes different forms as well – no one type fits all. This afternoon we will look at how devolution works in the UK, in order to stimulate a broader discussion, which I hope will show the benefits to democracy of bringing decision-making closer to those it affects the most. Political participation in the second item on our agenda this afternoon, will be a key focus in our discussions.

Engaging all people in democratic processes and decision-making is a challenge for us all. Certainly here in the UK there are still too many people not engaged in, or disillusioned by politics.

A personal reflection, if I may, I remember my time in local government – there quite often the biggest challenge was not just about winning, which is important for any democrat as you want to be the first past the post, but it was about participation. On average, the participation in local elections in the United Kingdom, at best in the high thirties. Now thirty-odd percent, means that two thirds of your local electorate are disengaged or not interested. They are not interested in local governments and therein lies a great challenge, and I hope our discussions later on will shed light on how we can improve that.

Last year we held our first National Democracy Week to encourage participation from the most under-represented in the country. When I talk about the under-represented, we need to ask the question; why? Why are people not participating? It is very easy as a politician, or those in government to say it is about disillusionment – but there are often real reasons why people are not participating and we need to bridge the gap.

Therefore, I am delighted that my colleague, the Chloe Smith MP, the Minister for the Constitution, will be joining us this afternoon to discuss this issue in detail. I will also be interested to hear your thoughts and experiences of political participation in your respective countries.

A note of apology, right from the outset, some of you may have noticed we have a few things happening in the British parliament today and who knows for the next few days – so if my attendance or that of my colleagues is somewhat intermittent, it is because we have various bells ringing in both the House of Commons and House of Lords, requiring us to be in attendance. But that is

an important part of democracy – making sure your representatives go and vote.

So, turning back to our agenda, if we truly want citizens to engage with democracy and democratic processes, we have to ensure some vital components of that democratic process are in place. First of all safety – when we again look around the world, the safety and security of citizens casting their votes for their representatives is paramount and therefore that is an essential part of ensuring a vibrant democracy. It needs to be open, there needs to be free space to express contrary opinion and to challenge. There needs to be an opportunity for those who come from minority perspectives to also, not only feel they have a right to expression but to be fully integrated into the norms of society in the country. And for all of those minority views to be represented, so they can be heard.

The final issue we are going to explore today is media freedom. On that particular issue, our Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, has made media freedom his priority focus for 2019.

If we reflect on history, if we reflect on current situations around the world, where freedom of expression is unduly restricted, either in the real world or online, there follows that democracy is damaged, accountability is constrained or restricted, and rule of law is weakened.

We hope there will be opportunities to work with you in the run up to the international conference on media freedom we are hosting later this year, where we intend to shine a spotlight on media freedom, and to galvanise a consensus behind the need to protect journalists.

I was in the United Nations, attending the Security Council last week, and one of things I did, whilst I was there, was convene a round table of the media who is often questioning us – Ministers who are attending the UN on important issues of international affairs – and I asked those representatives of the media as to what they felt were the major challenges and what more could governments do to ensure the kind of media freedom we all need to see.

The need for action is clear. Quite often it is asked where is the evidence? And the evidence, the stark evidence is right there in front of us. 80 journalists killed in 2018, almost 350 are in prison, and 60 journalists are currently held hostage.

Therefore I hope that discussions today lead to a Call for Action on the important issue of media freedom from all Governing Council members present.

Finally, I am pleased to announce that as part of our continuing commitment to this important organisation, to the Community of Democracies, the UK is pledging £60,000 to the Community's fact-finding missions, including the mission, which is planned to Mali.

I wish you all a productive morning and I look forward to joining you together with Chloe later this afternoon. And ultimately, we all have the shared objective and the shared vision to strengthen democracy, to strengthen

media freedoms, to strengthen the rule of law and to ensure all citizens of the world have a voice.

Thank you very much.