

**Address by the Prime Minister  
At Symposium on**

**“Strengthening Democracy in South Asia”,  
(Islamabad-May 29, 2008)**

Bismillah-hir-Rahman-ir-Raheem  
Honorable  
Excellencies,  
Ladies & Gentlemen,

Delegates,

I am grateful to Citizens' Commission for Human Development (CCHD) for having invited me at this Symposium on „Strengthening Democracy in South Asia“.

I take this opportunity to appreciate CCHD for organizing this Symposium;

This event has brought together the people from different fields from South Asian countries to discuss an issue that is of great importance to all of us.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

Here is an opportunity for the participants to learn and appreciate each other's experience and suggest ways for improving our contributions to democracy.

It's a forum for dialogue and interactions amongst policy-makers and intellectuals. They can vastly contribute to each others understanding of democracy through such interactions.

The dialogue can be extremely useful in:

Both policy making and research;

Strengthening the institutions; and,

promoting the best democratic practices in the region.

I hope this event would become a regular platform for debate on democracy. We can take back some of the lessons that we have learnt here. These can be used to make our contributions to democracy more meaningful and productive.

I hope this gathering will also contribute in promoting peace and prosperity through dialogue, understanding and cooperation.

This Symposium demonstrates our commitment to democracy. It also shows our will to find ways and means for improving governance.

We are honoured to have our friends from neighbouring countries to forge a new

vision of cooperation for social, political and economic development in South Asia.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

South Asia has immense potential for development. It is rich in human and natural resources.

We constitute one-fifth of humanity. We have demonstrated remarkable ability to respond to the requirements of changing times and become a useful member of the global village.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

The implementation of democratic system in our region faces region specific challenges.

The South Asian states are divided on ethnic, communal and linguistic lines. The horizontal and vertical polarizations are big hurdles to creating a harmonious society in our respective countries.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

Different states in the region have different experiences with democracy. We are at different stages of democratic development.

Some amongst us have been successful in maintaining continuity in the democratic process. Yet they are far from the cherished goals of tolerance, harmony, peace and progress in their societies.

There are several issues, both political and developmental, that could reignite conflict and violence.

Moreover, there is structurally ingrained violence that could flare up in this transitory phase. This may create problems for the peaceful transformation of our societies.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

Peace, development and democracy constitute the cherished desire of humanity for ages.

Societies have, nevertheless, often been deceived by their elected representatives, shaking their faith in these lofty ideals.

Our experience shows that democracy does not let the people down. Rather, it upholds their interests and welfare.

We should, therefore, be on constant guard against forces bent upon destroying democratic institutions from within.

People of Pakistan are witnessing the dawn of democratic rule. For the first time a unanimously supported representative government is given a chance to work; a chance to implement their vision and programmes.

I expect that the learned participants must have identified the major impediments towards democratization in South Asia.

They must have deliberated upon the role of political parties, judiciary, media, the civil society, and other pressure groups.

Electoral process is at the heart of any democracy. Several experiences across the world and also in South Asia, demonstrate that a democracy can only be as good as the electoral processes underlying it;

It needs to be ensured that the process is transparent and the people associated with the process are neutral.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

There are various forces that are sidelining democracy in the region. The main pillars of democracy need to be protected for an efficient system. Which are:

Respect of the Constitution

Supremacy of the parliament,

Strong National Institutions

Promotion of democratic norms in the society

Independent Judiciary, and

Responsible free media

Sound Civil Military relationships call for adherence to respective constitutional roles. This should further widen the scope for democratic success in South Asia.

The people of South Asia have rendered exemplary sacrifices for democracy.

We must recall that the very foundations of Pakistan are based on the democratic principle of self determination as advocated by Quaid e Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

The Party I belong to, has also made great sacrifices for the cause of democracy.

From the confines that I personally endured to the great sacrifices of our two leaders, Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Mohtrama Benazir Bhutto must not be forgotten. They form a vital part of our struggle for democracy in South Asia.

The people of Pakistan have recently given their verdict on February 18, 2008.

The unanimity expressed in reposing confidence in the elected Prime Minister reflects the political maturity of the elected representatives.

It also shows that the politics of polarization has now become a part of history.

Despite serious constitutional controversies surrounding some key state institutions, the political process of dialogue and accommodation continues.

The unhealthy political trends of the past have been buried by the current political leadership. These lessons have however not been learnt without paying a price.

I sincerely hope that we would be able to overcome the controversies as quickly as possible, in order to bring our focus back to real issues.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

The debate about whether or not Islam and liberal democracy are compatible with each other is a longstanding one, and various positions have been taken in this regard.

With due deference to the interpretations of some religious scholars, democracy is, in fact, the bed-rock of the Islamic political system.

The democratic norms are in our blood and soul. It is deeply entrenched in our psyche.

Therefore, it would not be correct to state that Islam and democracy are incompatible.

Islam promises universal peace, equality, harmony, and respect to every one's rights. And so should our endeavours aim at and contribute to make a better world for all mankind.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

It is highly satisfying that the Symposium has brought together leaders from all tears of society to share their research and experiences.

This would help in building a partnership for pursuing the common goal of improving democratic practices in the region.

We need to establish networks of eminent personalities in South Asia with achievements in human rights and democracy; they can inspire the younger generations and renew their faith in true democracy.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

South Asia has the potential to become an economic powerhouse and a better place to live for our present and future generations.

We need peace; cooperation, development and stability in this region. We need to resolve our differences and forge a new partnership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

History has set the stage for South Asia to accomplish this vision.

It is now the responsibility of every South Asian citizen to make untiring effort to leverage this great potential. This will ensure a better, brighter, and vibrant future for us all.

I thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen. Pakistan Paindabad

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