

Speech: International Day of Democracy

15th September marks the United Nations International Day of Democracy. I wanted to take this opportunity to restate the UK's strong support for democracy and human rights at a time when civil society is under increased threat in many parts of the world. If democracy is to flourish in Britain, Rwanda and the world, we need to discover a mutual trust—a trust of citizens in their politicians and, perhaps most difficult of all, a trust of politicians in their citizens. Democracy, like any important moral consideration, is not a state but an activity, a way of behaving. It is an active, living contract between the politician and the citizen. If the International Day of Democracy is about anything, it is about citizens.

Democracy carries risks, of course, including that of over-promising or blaming all of a country's ills on a particular group of people but adopting the citizen-based approach that democracy implies is the safest best for long-term stable and effective government. There is a strong correlation between societies that are secure and prosperous and those that enjoy participative democracy.

The UK supports democracy worldwide because we believe it is the system of government that best allows for individual freedom. It rests on foundations that have to be built over time: strong institutions, responsible and accountable government, a free and responsible press, the rule of law and equal rights for men and women. The UK supports a wide range of democracy initiatives, including funding NGOs that increase citizen participation, promoting inclusion of marginalised groups, providing training for legal professionals, promoting freedom of expression and helping strengthen parliaments.

We all need to recognise that different societies have different responses to democracy. Rwanda has unique circumstances and history which has shaped the political system we see today. Models of democracy also cannot and should not be imposed by others and necessarily need time to take root. Democracy is an evolutionary process rather than a fixed end result. No model is perfect, and all remain works in progress.

Elections are rightly seen as important barometers of a country's democratic credentials. I was lucky enough to be an official observer in Muhanga district during the August Presidential elections and was pleased to see the people of Rwanda participating peacefully and in great numbers, with a result which I believe reflected the will of most Rwandans. I was particularly encouraged to see broader media coverage than in the last elections, and some instances of the obstruction of opposition candidates reported and addressed rapidly by the National Election Commission and the government.

I was concerned, however, by the lack of clarity in the registration process for candidates which appear to have made it impossible for certain credible candidates to register. Along with other international observers, I personally saw irregularities with the counting of ballots and vote

tabulation. I know that the National Electoral Commission is committed to improving the system and I very much hope that Rwanda will take the opportunity to continue to amend its electoral processes in advance of the 2018 parliamentary elections as part of the democratic journey here. This is important not just for its own sake but for people's faith in the process.

I am concerned by the arrests and legal challenges in recent weeks. While Rwanda's political situation and recent terrible history is unique, it is concerning to see the targeting of opposition figures.

As diplomats, we are often (rightly) accused of focussing too much on the short term. If I step back, the progress Rwanda has made towards becoming a modern democracy during my four years in Kigali is clear. The transformation since the horrors of 1994 are nothing short of incredible. The UK is proud to be a friend and partner of Rwanda, and to play its part in assisting with Rwanda's democratic development.

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