

Challenges of American Democracy

2008 AMU Federation Speech by Frank F. Islam

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to welcome all of you to this occasion and thank my host for giving me an opportunity to address you today on the subject of "Challenges of American Democracy".

At 30,000 feet, American Democracy appears to be functioning well. We have had more than 225 years to develop this bold concept of government; And, undeniably, democracy is a valuable form of government as it recognizes the self-determinative rights of people to create their own trajectory in life.

However, American Democracy, like any form of government, is not perfect. It is an ever-evolving, organic model that is grounded on proven principles, but periodically encounters challenges that impacts its development. Its evolution is a direct outcome of meeting obstacles, which brings about the impetus for change. At present, American democracy appears to be facing numerous challenges, which will determine the path of government in the future.

Simply put, America in the twenty-first century is faced with questions about how a democratic government should work. These include recurrent debates about the excessive influence of "special interests" and the inequality of political power and influence, which have challenged the democratically oriented pluralist theory in the United States. Recent events and circumstances have made questions about the meaning of democracy ever more pressing. The election of 2000, the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the 2004 election have raised issues concerning the central normative requirements of democracy in America.

Democracy requires more than effective institutions that hold leaders accountable and prevent them from abusing their powers. It is also essential that the rights and liberties of individuals be protected from possible abusive actions of the government, its leaders, or majorities of the citizenry. These protections are provided for in the Constitution and its amendments, and American democracy requires that such rights and liberties be defended and upheld.

Today, American Democracy faces several challenges (1) radical influences by those who try and steer government away from the will of the people; (2) population growth -- when you have so many voices, from multiple ethnicities, races, cultures, it is difficult to reach consensus; and (3) the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Whenever you have these gaps, it is difficult to find a common ground that is necessary for democratic governance.

I would like to speak about each of these issues in greater detail:

(1) Radical Influences:

certainly, there are extreme positions on most of the major issues that we face today. As an example, there are those that believe in no government authority and those that believe government can solve everything. The correct answer almost always lies in between. The majority of people tend to be pragmatic and centrist on many things. But, because our society has so many outlets for voices to be

heard, those who are on the fringes of issues can often elevate their voices above others simply by taking advantage of all of these outlets. For example, podcasting, blogging, and the hundreds of TV channels provide these radicals with plenty of opportunities to exploit issues. Plus, the passion is almost always with the radicals, so they tend to actually exploit them.

Of course, the very purpose of democracy is to allow people to let their voices be heard – so this is all consistent with the good things about democracy. However, if policy makers hear only the loudest voices, then the true will of the people gets lost. This is a real tension in democracy – not erecting barriers against free speech, yet trying to ensure that the majority opinion floats to the top. So, the very nature of democracy creates challenges.

Also, this issue is exacerbated by the fact that individuality is so strongly embedded into our current culture – at the sacrifice of a deep sense of civic duty. In other words, people tend to place more importance on their own concerns than that of the majority. This is what motivates people to attempt to force their will on the majority, even when the majority clearly dissents. While democracy is designed to allow the expression of individualism, sometimes civic responsibility can be forgotten and the will of the majority can be lost.

(2) Population Growth:

As I stated earlier, democracy in America is a representative form of government. To be effective, the elected representatives must be able to ascertain the needs of their people and then pursue public policy accordingly. However, as we all know, the more voices that are spoken, the harder it is to reach a consensus. On the one hand, a flourishing democracy always attracts people and America has traditionally welcomed people with open arms. But, as more and more people constitute the fabric of America, the harder it is to discern any clear patterns from the fabric. As our population grows, so does our diversity – which is itself a good thing. However, with the benefits of diversity, comes the challenge of finding consensus.

American democracy is now challenged by the very nature of its success. We are achieving our goal of being the proverbial melting pot. We now have raging debates over whether we should have a common language – English – or not. We have expressions of concern over whether people of a particular religion or race can be effective representatives for the majority, as evidenced by the campaigns of Mitt Romney and Barack Obama. We have racially motivated acts of terror in our own country – as evidenced by the Jenna 6 and the recent slaughter of a Mexican immigrant in Pennsylvania. And of course, we have continual debates over religion in government and whether America should be a Christian-guided nation. So, we have our challenges, but it is only because our experiment to create a diverse country has succeeded.

(3) Widening Gap between Rich and Poor:

American Democracy is rooted in the principal that there should be equal opportunity for all. Without that, democracy begins to fail because it can't enable its participants to realize their goals. Much talk has been made about the current widening of the gap between the richest Americans and the majority of the working class. John Edwards famously called this the existence of “two Americas” in his populist speeches. The truth is that the richest ten percent of Americans now is farther distanced from the poorest ten percent than ever before in our history. This creates a lack of interaction among various economic segments of the population and thus results in a divergence of interest and lack of understanding. The disenfranchised begin to lose faith in government's effectiveness and democracy

begins to unhinge. As this gap widens, the challenge is to bridge the gap in understanding and to ensure that the mandates of government are respected. Further, as the poor become poorer, the effectiveness of law becomes diminished when people are forced into choices between sustenance and compliance. So, the uncommon success that American Democracy has enabled also has created new challenges that we must overcome.

The new millennium finds the American Democracy in trouble. Symptoms include the excessive power of corporations, excessive power of the Presidency, narrowing of admissible issues and choices to the public, contested elections, erosion of civil liberties, corruption in high places, troubled domestic and foreign programs, and widespread public dissatisfaction and disengagement. Why has the system stopped responding to open debate? What has thrown relationships between power centers out of balance? What has narrowed the boundaries of acceptable debate? Since elections are where it all begins and since America's claim to a government by the people rests squarely on fair and meaningful elections, that is where the origins of problems can reasonably be found.

The so-called bottom line of this political process is that American Democracy is faltering and at risk of drifting into a deeper crisis in which the potential abuse of power could dash the hopes of the American people. The leading question asks how can that situation be turned around. Many have looked to "public interest groups" like Common Cause and The Environmental Defense Fund, but, overall, they have not significantly influenced elections or public policy.

Certainly, the challenges of American Democracy are important for any other democratic nation to consider. America is the world's oldest democracy and continues to be the great laboratory for democratic experimentation. We have enjoyed great successes and many obstacles along the way as well. How we have handled these obstacles and our successes has been telling – from the passage of civil rights laws to our role in helping develop the United Nations to our exercise of authority as a superpower.

In many ways, India is faced with the same challenges as America, with its own form of democracy. The radical left and right in India are equally extreme; the population growth and diversity is far greater than in the United States; the gap between the rich and poor is even wider; partisan politics more entrenched; and corruption very common and extreme. Yet, India also seems to have a greater tradition of public interest democracy, which appears to be the path that America is heading towards. So, the way American Democracy handles the challenges that have been discussed will be of direct relevance to India. This presents yet another opportunity for information exchange and knowledge transfer between these two great democracies, even if the ultimate paths chosen by these two great nations diverge.

Now I would like to speak to you about why should we participate in the political process? When I say "we" I mean as an Indian American and as a Muslim. However, before I continue I would like to stress the importance of the upcoming election. Election 2008 is very important because we are concerned about the dismal state of our economy, high gas prices, stagnant wages, the increasing health care costs, job insecurity, the credit crunch and the war in Iraq. As we have all been affected by these issues in one way or another, I feel that if we stand up together we will be able to help elect a government that will be able to resolve these issues.

I would like to share with you some questions and answers posed by the community about why we should participate in the political process:

Q: Why should anyone contribute money to candidates? How important is it to give money?

A: We contribute because we believe it is part of our civic duty. This is a democracy and we are lucky to be able to have our voices heard. And one of the best ways to ensure that our voices are heard is to provide candidates with the financing necessary to run their campaigns, interface with citizens and then carry their message back to Washington.

Q: Do we get anything in return?

A: Yes. The knowledge that we participated in this democracy and exercised our right to express our opinion. Again, it is our civic duty as citizens to participate in democracy.

Q: How strong and active is the Indian community in the presidential elections and What role are they playing?

A; The Indian community has recently become more active in the presidential elections. There are a lot of issues that impact us, so we should be involved. Immigration, taxes, global warming, and health care, to name a few. But, Indian Americans still participate much less than other communities. For example, the Jewish community is far stronger politically by proportion. We have a good start, but there is a lot of work to do. Early on, very few Indian Americans participated. Now, with the rise of the second generation, the global importance of India, and the incredible economic success of the Indian American community, there is some positive change: more participation, more activism, more contributions, and even Indian Americans being elected.

Q: Do Indian Americans play any role in shaping the Indo-U.S. relations?

A; Yes. We are increasingly involved in this process. Indian Americans are helping politicians understand the dynamics of both countries and find a common ground. Bicultural status of Indian Americans places them in a unique position to broaden understanding between the countries. This is evidenced by the progress in international trade and in the nuclear 123 deal.

Now I would like to speak to you about why it is important for the Muslim community to be heavily engaged and participate in the political process.

As I said earlier, civic engagement is one of the fundamental ways of taking ownership of our future as controlled by the politics in America. Various Laws and Ordinances which are passed at local, state and national levels impact our lives directly and regularly. They define the extent of our opportunities and limits of our rights and liberties in all aspects of civic life. Given our low level of political engagement preceding the 911 terrorist attacks, we found very few friends in the government in the aftermath of the 911, the legacy of which is still felt today. Aside from the practical reasons, there is a religious obligation for us as well.

First, it is the duty of American Muslims to participate constructively in the political process, if only to protect their rights and support the views and causes they favor. Their participation may also improve the quality of information disseminated about Islam. We call this participation a “duty” because we do not consider it merely a “right” that can be abandoned or a “permission” which can be ignored. It falls into the category of safeguarding of necessities and ensuring the betterment of the Muslim community in this country.

Second, every legitimate means or tool that helps to achieve these noble goals is similarly judged. This includes:

1. The nomination of any competent American Muslim for election to any post where his or her presence may ensure either bringing benefits to American Muslims and other citizens or preventing harm to them. These posts range from those of mayor, state governor, and membership in educational and municipal councils, all the way up to membership in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.
2. Self-candidacy by an American Muslim, if the initiative for his/her nomination is not undertaken by the community, or if election laws require this form of candidacy.
3. Adopting a non-Muslim candidate if he/she would be either more beneficial or less harmful to the American Muslim community and the rest of the country.
4. Providing financial support to a non-Muslim candidate.
5. Obtaining American citizenship. Such citizenship emphasizes the true diversity of this country and is a necessary condition for participation in the political process.
6. Both registering to vote and participation in elections and voting are means to a goal.
7. Protection of Muslim civil rights in this country and the enjoyment of positive interaction with other Americans require American Muslims to engage in acts of deliberation to reach consensus on general principles, and to tolerate disagreement on disputed matters.
8. The Muslim minority must have a fair opportunity to practice their faith (as guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States).
9. Both the art of persuasion and the science of public relations have an important role that should not be ignored.

Every credible Muslim American organization needs to step up to the plate for the purpose of our community empowerment within the scope of its legal framework. Community empowerment is successful only when the whole community becomes involved. Take for example, the civil rights movement. It was successful because all African Americans were united in their demand for constitutional rights.

Most of the issues directly impacting us are indeed decided at the local levels. However, we should also note the importance of domestic and foreign policy issues as Muslim Americans - which is largely an immigrant community – and those issues fall under the purview of the federal government and national politics.

If we don't participate in politics of those arenas, we would deprive ourselves from having a voice in issues like the US foreign policy toward Muslim countries, laws impacting immigrants and immigration, policies governing civil liberties and profiling, judiciary appointments, etc. Therefore, we have to keep in mind that although it is important to focus on the local politics, we simply cannot neglect the politics at the national level.

There are many more compelling reasons one can come up with to make a case for the importance of local political engagements. However, as we move forward, let us not forget the possibility of developing Muslim candidates. Like the development of any candidate, it must start at the local level. As they mature, we should also be mobilized to support their aspiration for national offices.

We should establish a network of active state PACs and coordinate these with a federal PAC, we can indeed have a very powerful political engine with far-reaching impact in upholding the constitutional rights and promoting the fair interests of the Muslim American community.

I know I have taxed your patience. Thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today. I wish all of you continued success in the future and look forward to when our paths cross again.

Thank you for your time.

God bless you.