

## **H. HOW CAN A NATION BUILD AND SUSTAIN DEMOCRACY?**

### **Conditions That Sustain Democracies**

Generally, certain conditions must exist in a nation in order for democratic government to become firmly established and survive over time. Throughout the latter part of the 20th century, the United States and the democratic nations of Europe attempted to “export democracy.” They believed that if all nations operated under democratic principles, the world would be open to trade and relatively free of wars. Attempts at exporting democracy often involved ridding the country of a dictator, helping a perceived elite write a constitution (often patterned after the United States), and holding elections. Unfortunately, democracy is not quite so easy to export. A truly functional democracy requires certain social and economic conditions. Among them are:

#### **1) A strong middle class**

A middle class provides a large pool of people who pay taxes and want a say in how the government is run. This gives the democracy a strong base of support and a group of people who will serve as leaders, both at the local and national levels.

#### **2) A relatively classless education system**

To sustain a democracy a nation needs political participants and discerning citizens who are able to make sound political decisions. These decisions cannot be made solely by an elite or an elite working with the middle class. The generally large working class and the poor must also have access to opportunity and the ability to affect the political system. This is achieved through education. Moreover, if all people are literate, they are better able to develop an understanding of political issues, make informed judgments about candidates for elective office, and participate in political discourse in the “marketplace of ideas.”

#### **3) An understanding of democratic principles**

An important contribution education makes to a nation is to teach democratic principles to the young. This gives the nation a strong base of support for its institutions as well as a pool of participants and potential leaders. It should also be noted that Western Democracies sprang from the Europe's Enlightenment period, when belief in the value of science, secularism, and modernity accompanied the development of democratic principles. These principles may not be easily understood in a nation that does not share the history of the Enlightenment.

#### **4) A political consensus**

Nations torn by years of dictatorships or internecine wars among tribes, ethnic groups, or religious groups have a difficult time sustaining a democracy. In order to create and sustain a democracy, the majority of people need to believe in democratic principles and must see the establishment of a democracy as a positive force that will help them in the long run. Democracies cannot be forced upon an unwilling people because the system requires the participation and commitment of the people in order to survive.

#### **5) A growing economy**

Poverty and stagnation do not foster democracy—in fact, these conditions tend to foster authoritarian systems of government like fascism. Democracy is inefficient and expensive because it requires group decision-making, lobbying, and campaigning. As a result, democracy tends to work best in economies that can support it. In addition, under democratic governments the people expect the government to support and grow the economy. This is one of the major expectations people have of a democracy—access to economic opportunity. Authoritarian

systems generally have an elite that is unwilling to share the nation's wealth. To foster democracy the elite must be committed to diversifying the economy, providing economic opportunity for the middle, working, and lower classes, and sharing the wealth.

**6) Support from other nations**

Democracies in their infancy can be fragile and unstable. Many new democracies in their beginning stages stumble and become authoritarian systems, military or civilian dictatorships, or revert to monarchies. This often can be prevented if neighboring countries or trading partners offer their support for the new democracy by way of loans, trading preferences, education and health services, or building roads and communication systems. Support can be as direct as sending United Nations advisors during elections. It can be as indirect as symbolic visits from popular presidents of major nations who show a kinship with an elected government.

**7) A free press**

Democracy requires a free press that is allowed to report information about what the government is doing. In a democracy citizens are responsible for participating in their government's decisions and are expected to vote for political leaders. In order to participate wisely, citizens must have information and the opportunity to critique the work of the government and politicians. A free press also helps to limit government corruption. Finally, a free press in its finest form seeks the truth and shares with citizens new arguments and ideas.

**8) A professional military**

A democracy is expected to have a professional military that serves the people and is controlled by the civilian elite—the chief executive and the legislature. A professional military does not participate in politics, and its leaders do not hold political office or control legislative or executive functions. As a result, the military is not used as a repressive force against its own citizens.