

**HIS EXCELLENCY JOHN DRAMANI MAHAMA
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GHANA**

OPENING ADDRESS

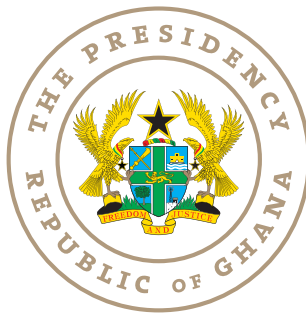
THE AFRICA REPORT DEBATES

“Is Democracy Getting in the Way of Development?”

MOVENPICK HOTEL, ACCRA

FRIDAY, 20th NOVEMBER, 2015

2:00PM -- 4:00PM



Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My brothers and sisters:

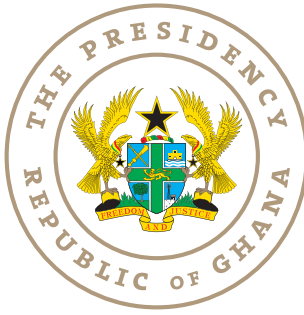
Good afternoon.

On behalf of the good people of Ghana, and myself, I would like to welcome you to our beautiful country. Akwaaba! I have no doubt that you will enjoy your time here.

This is the question that our esteemed guests will be debating today: “Is Democracy Getting in the Way of Development?”

As I was preparing to write this speech, trying to figure out what I wanted to offer as an introduction, as something of a prelude, to this discussion, the twin bombings in Beirut, Lebanon happened.

And then right on the heels of that the multiple coordinated attacks in Paris, France happened.



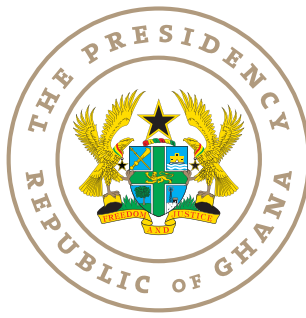
And then right on the heels of that, the back-to-back bombings in the cities of Yalo and Kano, Nigeria happened.

Several days before any of those attacks, I traveled to Malta to attend the Valletta Summit on Migration, where we discussed migration between Africa and the European Union. Because Malta is located right in the center of the Mediterranean Sea, which is fast turning into a cemetery for people trying to emigrate to Europe, we also discussed the current refugee crisis.

And so...as I sat pondering the question that is the topic of today's debate, this is the information, and these are the issues, that informed and shaped my thoughts.

"Is democracy getting in the way of development?"

I believe that question begs an answer to yet another, more urgent question, one that many nations will soon find themselves asking, if they have not already: What exactly is development? How are we defining it now, today, for this modern reality in which we live?



I know that development in the past has been defined by a country's level of industrialization, by their economy, their GDP. When we sit in a forum such as this and we discuss development, we more often than not use the word to mean roads and bridges, ports and harbors, railways and airports; we use it to mean reliable public utilities, available educational opportunities and accessible healthcare.

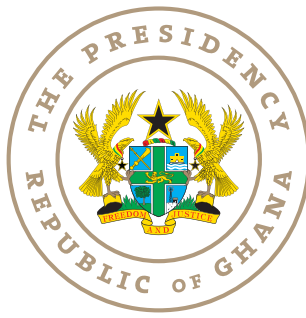
But does development, by that traditional definition, determine the success or failure of a nation?

Are there other factors that should be considered when defining or discussing development? Factors such as: freedom, dignity, quality of life, happiness.

Kofi Annan, the former United Nations Secretary-General has stated that he believes a developed country should be defined as "one that allows all its citizens to enjoy a free and healthy life in a safe environment."

So...is democracy getting in the way of development?

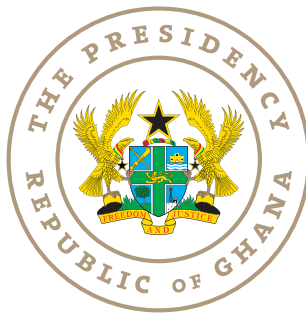
Using the traditional definition of development, history would have us believe that yes, of course it is. Democracy is an impediment to development.



Authoritarian governments are able to make economic and infrastructural progress at a rapid pace because there are no discussions to be had, appeals to be made, resolutions to be passed or permissions to be granted. All that is relevant is the omnipotent will and word of a single individual. One person; that's it.

It makes sense, then, that immediate change can happen; that unprecedented growth can happen. But are those the only things happening in countries where there is an autocrat, a dictator, a single individual who holds all of the power?

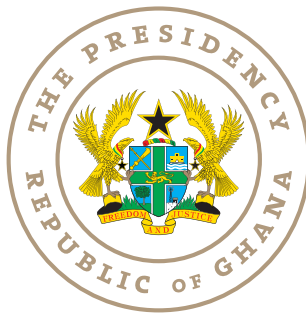
One nation that is often held up in political circles as well as by the general public as an example of what an authoritarian government can do for development is Singapore under the leadership of the late Lee Kuan Yew, who is often referred to as the father of the nation. Lee stepped into power in 1959 when Singapore gained partial independence from their British colonizers; he retained power until he stepped down in 1990, making him the longest serving prime minister in history.



When Lee Kuan Yew came into power, Singapore was one of the poorest countries in the world. And to make matters worse, there was very little land and the country had no natural resources. But Lee Kuan Yew was a visionary leader. He focused on growth and social cohesion; human capital became the country's key resource. He made Singapore attractive to investors by building state of the art infrastructure, creating a clean, green city-state with what appeared to be a fair judiciary, top-notch healthcare and a public education system that could rival any industrialized nation's private school system. He was a firm believer in meritocracy.

He turned Singapore into an economic capital, a major air and sea freight hub for multinational business in Asia. In 1965, when Singapore became an independent republic, its per capita GDP was \$500USD. In 1991 it was \$14,500, a 2800% increase. Based on the economic and growth models established by Lee Kuan Yew, the country continued to develop even after he relinquished power. In 2014, the per capita GDP was \$56,287.

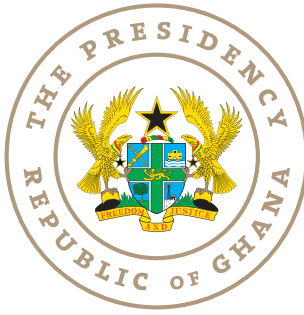
Be that as it may, during his tenure, Lee Kuan Yew ruled Singapore with an iron fist. There was no political dissent. There was no press freedom. He hated complacency, laziness and corruption and his chief instrument of punishment was caning.



Lee Kuan Yew's critics accused him of taking the concept of "rule of law" and perverting it into the practice of "rule by law." An example that is often given to substantiate this claim is the passage of the Vandalism Act in 1966. Vandalism was already illegal and punishable by a fine of \$50 and/or a week in jail. Under this new law, vandalism would be a non-bailable offence; the fine would be \$2000 with a maximum of 3-years jail time and mandatory caning—three strokes minimum, 8 strokes maximum. It was widely believed that the law was enacted to effectively stop opposition forces from posting signs, notices or bills.

Lee Kuan Yew was never a man to be shamed or outdone. Nobody spoke more eloquently about his rigid brand of leadership than the man himself.

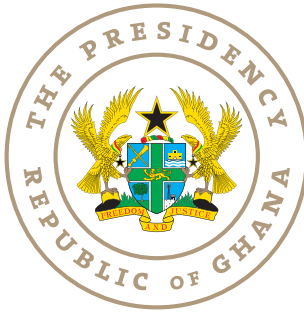
"I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens," Lee Kuan Yew quite famously admitted. "Yes, if I did not, had I not done that, we wouldn't be here today. And I say without the slightest remorse, that we wouldn't be here, we would not have made economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters - who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit, or what language you use. We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think."



Another nation that made remarkable strides in development under an authoritarian government is Chile.

In 1973 General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected government of Chile in a coup d'état, ending a 40-year span of political democracy. At the time of the coup, Chile's inflation rate was at 150% and the economy was in shambles. General Pinochet's stated goal was "to make Chile not a nation of proletarians but a nation of entrepreneurs." He began instituting a very detailed and specific economic plan. General Pinochet's dictatorship came to an end in 1990, through a national referendum. By the 1990s, Chile's inflation rate averaged just below 12%. The country's drastic transformation is often referred to as "the Miracle of Chile."

General Pinochet was also known to be a dictator who ruled through terror. It was either his way or the many, many ways in which he inflicted torture and death on people he believed to be his critics, opponents and enemies. Almost immediately after General Pinochet claimed power, he set up a death squad called the Caravan of Death, which was made up entirely of Army officers. During General Pinochet's 16 ½ year reign, 28,000 people were tortured; nearly 3,000 people were executed; over 3,000 people were counted as disappeared; and more than a quarter of a million were exiled.

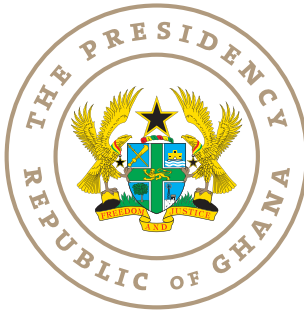


Citizens were imprisoned in camps, subjected to shock torture or a slow death, whereby they were shot and stabbed over a period of time in various body parts to drag out the process of dying. They were taken on death flights—forced into helicopters, flown out beyond the country’s coast; when the aircraft reached a certain altitude, they were pushed out over the sea, while still alive.

And yet in terms of development, Chile stands as an example of success.

It’s easy, at first blush, to be seduced by the wonders that can be—and sometimes are—achieved by authoritarian governments. The numbers from the “before” to the “after” are quite astonishing, so much so that one tends to overlook, minimize or altogether excuse the human rights abuses and other indignities suffered by the citizens in order to applaud or recommend that brand of development.

Ghana is often compared to Singapore because there are many ways in which our nations can be held side by side in comparison. The two nations became

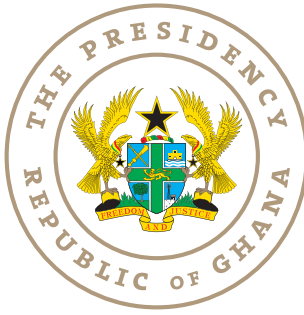


sovereign at around the same time. Their per capita GDPs were similar. In 1957, the year of Ghana's independence, our per capita GDP was roughly \$400USD, \$100 less than Singapore's. In 2014, Ghana's per capita GDP was \$1,442.80. Some might see this as a case against democracy, as proof that development will always crawl at a snail's pace if it is subject to the limitations and bureaucracy of democracy.

I disagree. In fact, I see it as quite the opposite. I see it as the perfect case for democracy. Why? Because Ghana has only spent about half of its years in existence as an independent nation under democratic rule. The rest were spent under authoritarian governments, usually military dictatorships.

The thing about dictatorships is that you don't get to choose which dictator you get. It's a roll of the dice. You could end up with someone like Lee Kuan Yew, who was a highly-disciplined Cambridge educated lawyer; or, you could end up with someone like Idi Amin Dada who, I dare say, was unwell in ways we've not yet begun to understand.

Then, too, there is the possibility that a dictator begins his tenure with the most altruistic intentions which, with a taste of unbridled power, slowly turn

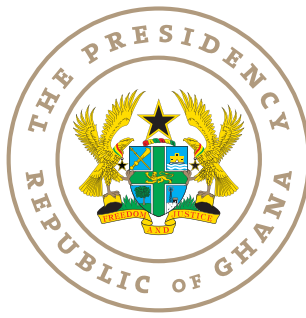


narcissistic, paranoid, and more draconian. This is, actually, a quite common occurrence with dictators.

In 1887 Lord Acton, the English historian and politician, wrote, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”

After the 1965 coup that overthrew Dr. Kwame Nkrumah’s government, Ghana wasn’t really able to get its footing back. During his tenure as President, Dr. Nkrumah invested a lot in Ghana’s infrastructure. After his removal from office, none of the other leaders who immediately followed place much, if any, emphasis on infrastructure, morale, social cohesion and national pride; certainly not like Dr. Nkrumah did.

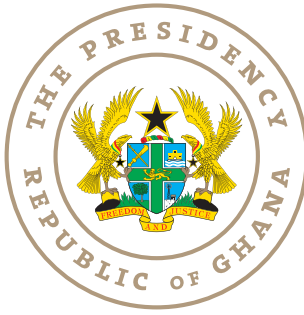
Then in 1972, as the result of a coup d’etat, Colonel I.K. Acheampong took power as the military head of state. I was in my early teenage years but I remember how much my father loved this man, who he thought was the exception to his widely held belief that all dictators were raving lunatics. My father knew a thing or two about politics. He’d been a Minister of State in Dr. Nkrumah’s government and, after the coup, was held in detention for a year.



My father felt that Colonel Acheampong had the best interests of Ghana at heart. He was the first leader since Dr. Nkrumah to focus his attention on expanding the country's infrastructure. He launched a number of impressive and successful programs, including Operation Feed Yourself, that encouraged national self-reliance. So impressed was my father that he believed Colonel Acheampong—who later promoted himself and became General Acheampong—had the ability to go down in history as one of Ghana's greatest leaders, if only he bowed out gracefully at the height of his success and didn't try to hang on to power as so many despots do.

Dad decided to write him a letter telling him all of these things. "Just remember to leave when the applause is loudest," my father advised Acheampong.

Shortly after the letter was sent, Dad was arrested and taken to the barracks for interrogation. Apparently, Acheampong didn't take kindly to my father's advice, which he suspected might be some kind of veiled threat of a coup. It was then that my father decided that he had been wrong; now, in his eyes, Acheampong was no different than any other dictator and coup-maker.

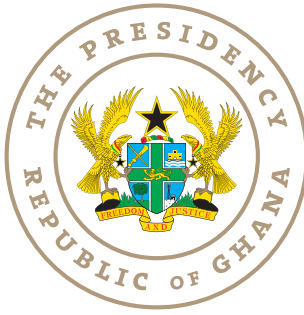


I made mention earlier that with both Chile and Singapore, I found the numbers, all those figures that determine the pace of a nation's development, quite astonishing. What else I find astonishing are the numbers of people who were abused, tortured or killed by their own government. In the case of Singapore, the numbers are not as clear since Lee Kuan Yew was accused of manipulating the justice system; thus, all alleged abuses supposedly occurred under the guise of the "rule of law."

28,000 people tortured. 3,000 people executed. 3,000 people made to disappear. When you add all of that together, including family members, loved ones, and friends, what is the sum total of human lives that were derailed, or totally destroyed?

It is difficult for me to ignore such numbers. They always make me stop in my tracks because like so many other Ghanaians, I know what it is like to have an encounter with military men operating under authoritarian rule, armed men acting with impunity.

At that time, Acheampong had been overthrown; the military dictator who overthrew him had also been overthrown; and, now, there was a new military



head of state and the military was operating in a state of anarchy, writing its own rules, sometimes at random, and arresting people who broke them.

I had completed college, and was fulfilling my national service requirement at Ghanasco in Tamale, where the military brutality was perhaps worse than anywhere else in the country because of the presence of so many garrisons.

The soldiers there drove around haughtily in Pinzgauers, intoxicated with the power they had over people. They could stop anyone at anytime for any reason. Their actions were guided only by their own discretion. In some, this license triggered their most brutal and inhumane impulses.

I'd like to share with you an incident that occurred one evening that forever changed my understanding of what it meant to live under an authoritarian government.

At the request of the Ministry of Education, we'd organized a symposium in connection with United Nations Day. The symposium ended shortly after 8pm and William, the other national service worker, and I were walking the students back to their dorms when we heard the unmistakable sound of a Pinzgauer. When we explained what was going on to the soldiers, they failed to understand.



They insisted that we had broken curfew and that they were going to take us back to the barracks. That's what happened when you broke curfew; you were taken to the barracks. Once there, you could be beaten and released or you could be detained. We'd even heard of people being taken to the armed forces farms and forced to labor. They'd be gone for as long as a week and their families would have no idea what happened to them.

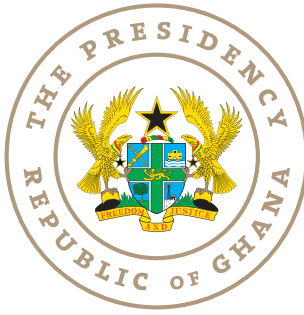
The soldiers told us to sit on the ground. We obeyed. Suddenly the soldier in the car said, "What they're saying sounds reasonable. Let's let them go." He spoke with an authority that suggested he was the other soldiers' superior, a lieutenant.

"All right," one of the soldiers responded.

"But we can't let them go just like that," the other soldier argued. "We have to punish them small." The lieutenant said nothing.

The soldiers' idea of a small punishment was to give everyone a knock on the head with the butt of their guns. When William and I tried to speak up for our students and plead with them to stop, one of the soldiers walked over to me and pointed his rifle at my face.

"Shut up!," he screamed. I was certain he would not hesitate to pull the trigger. Eventually, they let the students go. One of the soldiers ordered William



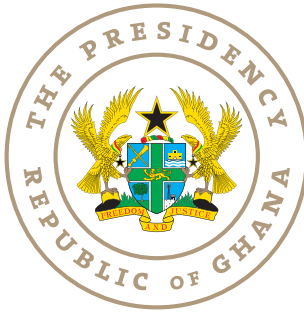
and me to get into the Pinzgauer. He didn't believe that we were national service personnel and he wanted to take us to go and verify that information.

"Let them go," the lieutenant instructed.

Even after they had driven off, William and I stood in place. We wanted the Pinzgauer to go completely out of view before taking another step.

As William and I were walking back to our bungalow, we saw the strangest sight: two lights moving in the distance, probably the glow of paraffin lamps, moving toward the direction of the dormitories. The Pinzgauer approached the two lights. For a few moments, the lights remained still, shimmering side by side next to the Pinzgauer. The lamps didn't illuminate the spot well enough for us to actually see the events as they were unfolding. However, when the lights moved into the Pinzgauer and the vehicle began to drive away, it wasn't too difficult to figure out what had happened.

The Pinzgauer drove for less than five minutes before coming to a stop. The lights moved out of the vehicle and once again became still. William and I couldn't bring ourselves to go inside the bungalow. We felt we had to witness the outcome of this confrontation.

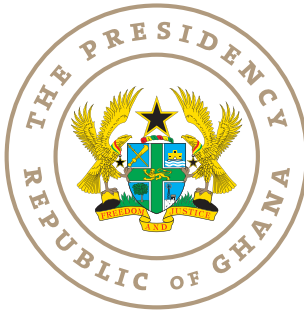


Unbeknownst to me, one of the unsuspecting students whom the soldiers had stopped was my brother Eben. He and his friend Fatawo had come to the bungalow that William and I shared to refuel their paraffin lamps. It was one of the perks of having an older brother living on campus. The boys had lost all track of time and were rushing back to their dormitory. The soldiers spotted them and made them get into the Pinzgauer. They were going to take the two boys, sixteen-year-olds walking from one end of their boarding school campus to the other, to the military barracks. The lieutenant interceded. He told the soldiers to let the boys go.

Eben and Fatawo got down from the vehicle, but they weren't permitted to leave. The two soldiers also got down. They asked the boys to set their lamps on the ground. Eben and Fatawo did it, terrified that the instant they let go of their lamp's handle, they would be shot.

"You," one of the soldiers said, pointing the tip of his rifle at Eben. "Slap him!"

He then pointed the rifle at Fatawo, the person he'd ordered Eben to slap. Eben didn't move. He was perplexed by the bizarre nature of the request. He should do what? Slap his friend?



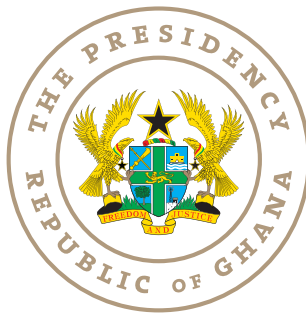
"Do it!" the soldier screamed. Eben raised his hand and gave Fatawo a quick slap on the cheek. The soldier was not satisfied.

"That was not a slap," he said, laughing. "This is a slap." The soldier hit my brother across the face with such force that Eben nearly fell down.

"Now slap him again," the soldier ordered Eben. "Properly this time." Eben stiffened his palm and fingers. He took a deep breath and then he slapped his best friend with all his might.

The other soldier leaned toward Fatawo and said, "Slap him back." Fatawo didn't want to be shown what a real slap was; he squeezed his eyes shut and used every bit of strength he could muster to slap Eben. The hit was hard and loud. The first soldier requested that Eben slap Fatawo again, harder. He did. Then Fatawo was told to slap Eben. Back and forth, back and forth, the hands and arms flew until the boys had exchanged over a dozen slaps. It was sadistic.

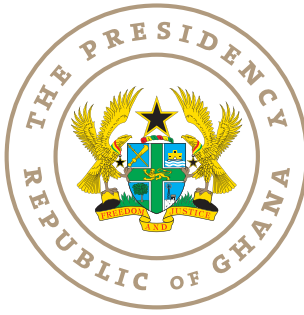
"Enough," the lieutenant finally commanded. "Let them go." The soldiers, who were laughing proudly at the show they'd staged, waved Eben and Fatawo off. The boys picked up their paraffin lamps and ran to their dormitory. The two of them were close friends. They had shared a lot. Now they could add to that list a distinct humiliation; they shared the knowledge of what those soldiers had done to them and what they'd been forced to do to each other.



There is nothing more valuable to human beings than freedom, and the happiness that can be found as a result of it. If that were not the case, General Gaddafi would be alive and still ruling Libya, a country that he transformed from the poorest African nation to the richest. In Gaddafi's Libya, there was free education, free utilities, free healthcare, free housing, interest-free loans. But evidently, there was no actual freedom and the citizens chose the possibility of that over the stability of development under dictatorship.

If we look around the world, millions of people are making that choice every single day. They are fleeing authoritarian governments that wish to restrain all civil liberties, and the violence inflicted by terror organizations that wish to remove the few freedoms that are left within those fragile societies.

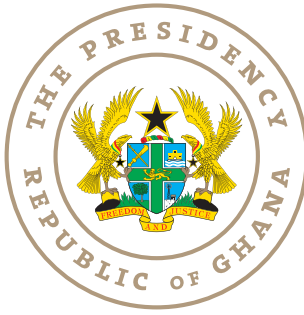
I appreciate the importance of gatherings such as this and the ideas that are exchanged. I understand the need for this sort of intellectual and political exercise to occur on a regular basis. Still, as an African leader who is a huge proponent of democracy, the very discussion of democracy as an impediment to development and the option of authoritarian rule as an alternative makes me



uncomfortable. When I think of what our forefathers and foremothers went through to claim independence from colonial rule; when I think of all the freedom fighters who were assassinated and overthrown and exiled; when I think of the lost decades of brain drain, poverty, disease, corruption and cruel despots, I can't help but wonder: progress at what price?

In the fight for his country's independence, Lee Kuan Yew often spoke up against the repressive nature of a colonial government. While in the legislative assembly, he once told the British chief minister, "Repression, Sir, is a habit that grows. I am told it is like making love—it is always easier the second time! The first time there may be pangs of conscience, a sense of guilt. But once embarked on this course with constant repetition you get more and more brazen in the attack. All you have to do is to dissolve organizations and societies and banish and detain the key political workers in these societies. Then miraculously everything is tranquil on the surface. Then an intimidated press and the government-controlled radio together can regularly sing your praises, and slowly and steadily the people are made to forget the evil things that have already been done."

What would happen to Africa as a whole if it were to willingly accept authoritarian rule for the majority, if not all, of its countries? We have been down

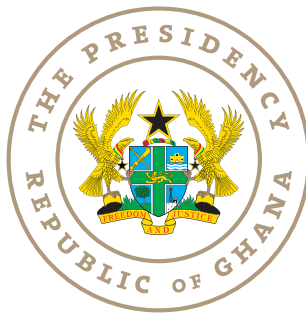


that road before. In fact, Africa has fought and scraped and pulled and pushed to get where it is today.

I don't think we have been practicing democracy for long enough to say that it isn't working, especially if we are comparing ourselves to nations who have been tweaking their democracies for centuries.

Democracy will never be a perfect system because people will always be imperfect beings. Also, democracies are not one-size-fits-all. The democracy of the United States is not the same as the democracy of the United Kingdom. Every country must, through trial and error, allow its democracy to evolve into a system that is representative of that culture, those people and their stated goals for their future.

In a democracy, the citizens of a nation do more than decide who their leaders and representatives will be. They also decide what their priorities are in nation-building. What makes a democracy, at once, both powerful and fallible is that it is the people who can decide, too, that the leaders and representatives they have chosen are not meeting those stated goals, and remove those individuals. Citizens have made good use of that power and removed politicians who were



not there to serve; citizens have also been shortsighted in the use of that power and have later come to regret not granting a particular leader or government the ability to complete the work that they had started and was already in motion.

Democracy affords citizens the ability to safeguard the rights, responsibilities and liberties they cherish most. It gives them the chance to challenge laws of the past, to modernize institutions and practices; to create a society of their choosing, as a majority, not a society of one individual's choosing.

In closing, allow me to admit that I envy you these discussions you are about to have today. Let us have a wise purpose here and attempt to find practical solutions to some of the very real problems that are facing our world today.

Allow me also to admit, plainly, that I am an unapologetic social democrat and I firmly believe that democracy IS an integral part of true development.

With that, I officially declare this debate open.

I thank you for your kind attention.