LAKSHMAN KADIRGAMAR INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND STRATEGIC STUDIES

SPEECHES

Hon. Professor Norbert Lammert on 'The Future of Liberal Democracy in International Relations'

4h April 2017

Your Excellencies, Ministers, Ambassadors, Esteemed Hosts and Distinguished Guests.
Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much for this kind invitation to address this quite challenging and obviously urgent issue, which unfortunately is even more complicated than it seems to be.

About 25 years ago, we observed the miraculous process of political systems transforming themselves in Middle and Eastern Europe. We observed the self-dissolution of an empire – the Soviet Union – and we observed a series of free elections in a part of Europe, which for two generations did not experience the result of freely elected parliaments and democratically legitimised governments.

It was precisely this background which caused or convinced a well-known American author, Francis Fukuyama, to publish a famous book with the headline 'The End of History'.
Francis Fukuyama of course didn't mean that we are facing the end of the world, but he was indeed convinced that we have reached a stage of development in which all significant questions have been answered for good: democracy being the only acceptable political system, market economies being the only efficient economic systems, and international cooperation founded on treaties being the only suitable and accepted form for cooperating with each other. This assumption was at least plausible, but in the meantime we know it was a bit exaggerated. Certainly and obviously we haven't reached the end of history. And many of the questions, the questions which he thought would have been answered for good, have been opened again, and we are approaching an unpredictable future.

So, if you expect me to provide a definite answer to the future of liberal democracy in international relations, I unavoidably will disappoint you. I can only give you some observations and expectations, which are connected to the developments we have experienced over the last twenty, thirty years, and some perspectives which are connected to those experiences.

Last week a well-known German political magazine, Der Spiegel, published an interesting interview with the African philosopher and historian, Achille Mbembe. In this interview, he explained, and I will cite him, "We have more and more indications that the model of liberal democracy which has been developed since the end of the Second World War, particularly in Europe, has come to its limits. Today we face the domination of financial capitalism and we observe that those principles tend to become incompatible with the principles of democracy." And again, he underlines that the principles of liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism have become more and more incompatible. This, in his understanding, and again I quote, "is the conflict between the power of the people and the power of money." It is my understanding that this again is a bit exaggerated, but it's obviously not completely wrong.

Most of us share at least this feeling that there are developments which not only fail to fit each other but are also in conflict with each other. And we need to orientate ourselves with the kind of principles we think are appropriate for organising our private life, our political life, and our economic relations. The Foreign Minister kindly referred to Europe as the region in which major principles of our modern understanding have been developed and been founded, and historically, this is certainly true. It is precisely in this part of the world – for understandable reasons – that the development of philosophy, social development, economic development, and political development found its format.

A famous German historian described the process of developing the principles of western civilization as a process during which for more than 200-250 years we observed a history of offenses and violations of these principles, and a not at all as strong and undisturbed line of following these principles. This is obviously true; Germany is a particular example of violating those principles and at the same time or later on claiming them as indispensable orientations for political life and for organising a modern society. This is an interesting experience and it is worthwhile to take note that there might exist – and historically does exist – a discrepancy between certain principles being regarded as indispensable and those same principles being violated by societies, political systems, political parties, governments etc.

But the equally important second lesson which we should learn is that, all over this long period of more than 200 years, never ever did the violation of principles lead to the conclusion that the principles are no longer true. On the contrary, the more unbelievable the violation has been felt, the more indispensable the principle seems to become. So, we live now in societies which are even more convinced that they have to keep the principles, being aware that there is always a temptation to violate them. In other words, it's not the values of the western civilization or of liberal democracy that are in doubt, for these have lost none of their validity. What is in doubt is our concrete attitude to human rights, the separation of power, the rule of law, and principles of representative democracy.

Whoever calls for isolation rather than openness, whoever calls for new walls instead of open frontiers, whoever opts for protectionism instead of accessible markets, whoever preaches isolationism in preference to international cooperation, should not be surprised if he provokes similar reactions in other societies and regions with all the disastrous consequences for international relations. This should be sufficiently familiar to us given the developments of the 20th century. I would be happy if this was limited to a theoretical remark. Unfortunately, it is a practical one, because we have experienced elections in significant countries – which are of similar significance to Sri Lanka as they are to Germany and Europe as a whole – where we observe orientations and tendencies and announcements which differ to at least some extent from what we expected those principles and orientations would be. And this makes it necessary to think at least for a moment about what kind of world we live today.

It is of course not a very original remark to say that times are changing and we live under new circumstances compared to the situation 50 years ago, nor to speak about the situation that in the last century most people have the feeling that we live in a world that is greater than it ever has been in terms of inhabitants. For example, 100 years ago we had less than two billion people living on earth, now we have about seven billion people. And if you take into consideration the time necessary for mankind to reach one billion and then in less than hundred years to double the first billion and then less than hundred years to get three times as much people living on the same globe, it is obvious that circumstances must have changed significantly. At the same time, we all feel this world has never been as small because today we are in a position to reach any single point on earth within at most 24 hours, and whatever happens anywhere in the world is visible simultaneously at any point in the world. This again is a completely new experience, although we have become familiar with it. But from time to time we should remind ourselves that for decades, for centuries, it normally took weeks or months or years, sometimes even decades, to gain information on or access to a development available in another part of the world. This, in my understanding, is what we mean when we talk about globalisation.

We live in a global world, which is another type of world different from the world we have been familiar with, and I will tell you what my understanding of globalisation is in terms of political implications. My understanding is that the most significant political effect of globalisation is that the nation states steadily lose what over centuries they thought would be their major job: carrying out their own affairs, independently from others. This is the core meaning of nation-states – we are responsible for ourselves and we are entitled to care about ourselves and we do it with our own means and our own institutions. We do it for ourselves, as others do it for themselves. However, this time has gone. We have for a few years now been living in a world where no country is any longer independent from others. And the only, if at all, difference between countries and states is not that there are dependent or independent states and nations but rather that there are nations who are aware of losing their independence and others refusing to accept that they are losing their independence. And to be quite frank, even the United States and China are no longer as

independent as they would like to be. And I sometimes get the impression that several announcements are made to compensate this feeling, but it won't change the situation.

I've been advised that I shouldn't talk too much about Europe because the last speaker on a similar occasion, Laurent Fabius, addressed this issue. Therefore, I will reduce my observations to this single remark: to my understanding, the process of European integration is probably the most intelligent answer which has been developed as a common solution to this open question. Accepting this lack of sovereignty and accepting the necessity to share sovereignty in order to keep arrest of influence on your own affairs. And here again we make the interesting and disturbing observation that precisely in such a situation, during which the European Union celebrates its 60th Anniversary, a major country like Great Britain decides to leave it. Everybody may answer for himself the question of whether this move will increase the sovereignty of Great Britain and increase its political or economic influence on global affairs. I don't think so, and so far, we have a particularly interesting and irritating example of deciding on precisely the opposite of what probably would have been appropriate in the present situation.

I will make one last point. Observers in most of our societies (open societies and democratically organized political systems), have stated that we are living an age of populism. We are seeing more (and this is certainly true in many European countries) populist parties and populist candidates (even for presidencies and high-ranking government positions) who have the tendency to try and find simple answers to complex questions. However, the world in which we live in is more complex than any other time which we have experienced or have knowledge of. And more people are getting irritated by developments that they cannot control and are expecting politicians to deliver convincing answers to more and more complex questions.
In this regard, I would like to quote the famous British author, George Bernard Shaw, who again about hundred years ago made the simple remark: "For every complex question there exists a simple answer, and this simple answer is regularly wrong." If this has been true at all, it has never been more true than today. Wherever we go, in whatever direction we look, we are confronted with complex developments and complex questions for which everybody would like to get a simple and convincing answer. But unfortunately, this simple answer doesn't exist. Let's talk about migration for example. Given the seven billion people living under very, very different circumstances in different parts of the world, nobody believes that we won't have to deal with this development over the next few decades. Again, for me at least, it seems obvious that there is no chance of us finding convincing answers at the national level alone. We either find international solutions or we won't meet these challenges.

Let's talk about digitalisation, which is necessary not only for our respective economies but for communication and political understanding as well. Is there anybody who pretends that there is no need for regulation? No. On the contrary, everybody is convinced we need regulation. Does anybody believe it could be done on the national level? Silly! Every attempt to solve the problem

at the national level is hopeless. We either find common solutions or we won't find any solutions. But again, there is no simple solution. Whatever we might decide to do will have implications which we would like to avoid but have to take in account in order to get the kind of result in which we are particularly interested.

Let's talk about financial markets, which in precisely the same period of years which I've mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, 25-30 years, have by far overrun the amount of traits between existing economies. And in the meantime the volume of financial transactions is by far bigger than the total amount of all trade, of all products of all services being delivered all over the world. So, in the meantime, complicated, highly sophisticated financial transactions dominate our respective national economies. Is there a need for regulation? Obviously. We urgently need regulation for financial markets. Is there any simple solution available? Certainly not. The only simple answer is, again, it can't be done on the national level. It doesn't make sense. We either get international agreements or we don't address the problems.

In so far, we have indeed to be aware that perhaps, the most irritating discrepancy we are facing at the moment, is the tendency in more and more countries – major countries and smaller countries – to claim national sovereignty to gain more influence on their own affairs, precisely during a time when we need more cooperation and more international agreements than before. And to be honest, this is one of the tensions and discrepancies which make the state of the European Union so complicated. Much more complicated than on the occasion on the 50th anniversary of the European integration ten years ago. And this is one of the open questions for international relations, not only between neighbouring countries but also between continents. And the simple truth is that we are confronted with a situation where neither Europe nor Asia can rely on American policies in the way we have for many years and decades. Perhaps the new administration is still unaware of how it will orient itself in the coming months and years. But the situation is what it is, and we have to come to terms with it.

To conclude, again, I don't believe that any of the major principles of liberal democracy have proven to be invalid. Rather, even in cases in which we have observed an obvious violation and neglect of these principles, they have proven to be valid. We have to keep them as indispensable orientations for our respective societies and the political organizations of our societies. But we have to be aware that in the meantime, we have already left the age of nation-states and exist in a global society without a 'global state,' which doesn't exist and probably won't be established. So, we have to fill the gap between the existing and non-existing structures, and probably between institutions and structures which are not suitable or don't yet exist. The future of liberal democracy lies in finding intelligent types and formats for international cooperation in order to keep and maintain the principles of liberal democracy.

Thank you for your attention.