

# A Culture of Peace, Democracy, and Human Rights

by Aung San Suu Kyi  
(1945– )

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1 At its third meeting held at San Jose, Costa Rica, 22-26 February 1994, the World  
Commission on Culture and Development set itself three goals, the third of  
which was “to promote a new cultural dynamic: the culture of peace and culture  
of development”. The Commission undertook to “endeavour to recommend the  
5 concrete measures that could promote, on a national and international scale, a  
culture of peace” and went on to state that:  
“a culture of peace, culture of democracy and culture of human rights are indi-  
visible. Their effective implementation must result in a democratic management  
and . . . the prevention of intercultural conflicts.” [1]

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Peace as a goal is an ideal which will not be contested by any government or  
nation, not even the most belligerent. And the close interdependence of the cul-  
ture of peace and the culture of development also finds ready acceptance. But it  
remains a matter of uncertainty how far governments are prepared to concede  
15 that democracy and human rights are indivisible from the culture of peace and  
therefore essential to sustained development. There is ample evidence that culture  
and development can actually be made to serve as pretexts for resisting calls for  
democracy and human rights. It is widely known that some governments argue  
that democracy is a western concept alien to indigenous values; it has also been  
20 asserted that economic development often conflicts with political (i.e. democratic)  
rights and that the second should necessarily give way to the first. In the light  
of such arguments culture and development need to be carefully examined and  
defined that they may not be used, or rather, misused, to block the aspirations of  
peoples for democratic institutions and human rights.

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The unsatisfactory record of development in many parts of the world and the ensu-  
ing need for a definition of development which means more than mere economic  
growth became a matter of vita concern to economists and international agencies  
more than a decade ago. [2] In *A New Concept of Development*, published in  
30 1983, Francois Perroux stated that: “Development has not taken place: it rep-  
resents a dramatic growth of awareness, a promise, a matter of survival indeed;  
intellectually, however, it is still only dimly perceived.” [3]

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Address, titled *Empowerment for a Culture of Peace and Development*, to a meeting of  
the World Commission on Culture and Development, Manila, November 21, 1994

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<sup>1</sup> Later, in the same book, he asserted that:

“ . . . personal development, the freedom of persons fulfilling their potential in the context of the values to which they subscribe and which they experience in their actions, is one of the mainsprings of all forms of development.” [4]

<sup>5</sup>

His concept of development therefore gives a firm place to human and cultural values within any scheme for progress, economic or otherwise. The United Nations Development Programme too began to spell out the difference between growth and development in the 1980s. [5] With the beginning of the 1990s the primacy  
<sup>10</sup> of the human aspect of development was acknowledged by the UNDP with the publication of its first Human Development Report. And the special focus of the 1993 Report was people’s participation, seen as “the central issue of our time”. [6]

<sup>15</sup> While the concept of human development is beginning to assume a dominant position in the thinking of international economists and administrators, the Market Economy, not merely adorned with capital letters but seen in an almost mystic haze, is increasingly regarded by many governments as the quick and certain way to material prosperity. It is assumed that economic measures can resolve all the  
<sup>20</sup> problems facing their countries. Economics is described as the “deus ex machina, the most important key to every lock of every door to the new Asia we wish to see”; and “healthy economic development” is seen as

“ . . . essential to successfully meeting the challenge of peace security, the challenge of human rights and responsibilities, the challenge of democracy and the  
<sup>25</sup> rule of law, the challenge of social justice and reform and the challenge of cultural renaissance and pluralism.” [7]

The view that economic development is essential to peace, human rights, democracy and cultural pluralism, and the view that a culture of peace, democracy and  
<sup>30</sup> human rights is essential to sustained human development, many seem on the surface to differ only in the matter of approach. But a closer investigation reveals that the difference in approach itself implies differences of a more fundamental order. When economics is regarded as “the most important key to every lock of every door” it is only natural that the worth of man should come to be decided  
<sup>35</sup> largely, even wholly, by his effectiveness as an economic tool. [8]

This is at variance with the vision of a world where economic, political and social institutions work to serve man instead of the other way round; where culture and development coalesce to create an environment in which human potential can be  
<sup>40</sup> realized to the full. The differing views ultimately reflect differences in how the valuation of the various components of the social and national entity are made; how such basic concepts as poverty, progress, culture, freedom, democracy and human rights are defined and, of crucial importance, who has the power to determine such values and definitions.

1 The value systems of those with access to power and of those far removed from  
 such access cannot be the same. The viewpoint of the privileged is unlike that of  
 the underprivileged. In the matter of power and privilege the difference between  
 the haves and the have-nots is not merely quantitative, for it has far-reaching  
 5 psychological and ideological implications. And many “economic” concerns are  
 seldom just that, since they are tied up with questions of power and privilege. The  
 problem of poverty provides an example of the inadequacy of a purely economic  
 approach to a human situation. Even those who take a down-to-earth view of  
 basic human needs agree that:  
 10 “. . . whatever doctors, nutritionists, and other scientists may say about the objec-  
 tive conditions of deprivation, how the poor themselves perceive their deprivation  
 is also relevant.” [9]

The alleviation of poverty thus entails setting in motion processes which can  
 15 change the perceptions of all those concerned. Here power and privilege come  
 into play:

“The poor are powerless and have no voice. Power is the responsibility of ex-  
 pressing and imposing one’s will in a given social relationship, in the face of any  
 resistance. The poor are incapable of either imposing, coercing or, in many cases,  
 20 having any influence at all.” [10]

It is not enough merely to provide the poor with material assistance. They have  
 to be sufficiently empowered to change their perception of themselves as helpless  
 and ineffectual in an uncaring world.

25 The question of empowerment is central to both culture and development. It  
 decides who has the means of imposing on a nation or society their view of what  
 constitutes culture and development and who determines what practical measures  
 can be taken in the name of culture and development. The more totalitarian a  
 system the more power will be concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite and  
 30 the more culture and development will be used to serve narrow interests. Culture  
 has been defined as “the most recent, the most highly developed means of pro-  
 moting the security and continuity of life”. [11]

Culture thus defined is dynamic and broad, the emphasis is on its flexible, non-  
 35 compelling qualities. But when it is bent to serve narrow interests it becomes static  
 and rigid, its exclusive aspects come to the fore and it assumes coercive overtones.  
 The “national culture” can become a bizarre graft of carefully selected historical  
 incidents and distorted social values intended to justify the policies and actions  
 of those in power. [12] At the same time development is likely to be seen in the  
 40 now outmoded sense of economic growth. Statistics, often unverifiable, are reeled  
 off to prove the success of official measures.

Many authoritarian governments wish to appear in the forefront of modern  
 progress but are reluctant to institute genuine change. Such governments tend

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1 to claim that they are taking a uniquely national or indigenous path towards a  
political system in keeping with the times. In the decades immediately after the  
Second World War socialism was the popular option. But increasingly since the  
1980s democracy has gained ground. The focus on a national or indigenous way  
5 to socialism or democracy has:  
“... the effect of stressing cultural continuity as both process and goals; this in  
turn obviates the necessity of defining either democracy or socialism in institu-  
tionally or procedurally specific terms; and finally, it elevates the existing political  
elite to the indispensable position of final arbiter and interpreter of what does or  
10 does not contribute to the preservation of cultural integrity”. [13]

It is often in the name of cultural integrity as well as social stability and national  
security that democratic reforms based on human rights are resisted by authori-  
tarian governments. It is insinuated that some of the worst ills of western society  
15 are the result of democracy, which is seen as the progenitor of unbridled freedom  
and selfish individualism. It is claimed, usually without adequate evidence, that  
democratic values and human rights run counter to the national culture, and  
therefore to be beneficial they need to be modified — perhaps to the extent that  
they are barely recognizable. The people are said to be as yet unfit for democracy,  
20 therefore an indefinite length of time has to pass before democratic reforms can  
be instituted.

The first form of attack is often based on the premise, so universally accepted  
that it is seldom challenged or even noticed, that the United States of America is  
25 the supreme example of democratic culture. What tends to be overlooked is that  
although the USA is certainly the most important representative of democratic  
culture, it also represents many other cultures, often intricately enmeshed. Among  
these are the “I-want-it-all” consumer culture, megacity culture, superpower  
culture, frontier culture, immigrant culture. There is also a strong media culture  
30 which constantly exposes the myriad problems of American society, from large  
issues such as street violence and drug abuse to the matrimonial difficulties of  
minor celebrities. Many of the worst ills of American society, increasingly to be  
found in varying degrees in other developed countries, can be traced not to the  
democratic legacy but to the demands of modern materialism. Gross individualism  
35 and cutthroat morality arise when political and intellectual freedoms are curbed  
on the one hand, while on the other, fierce economic competitiveness is encour-  
aged by making material success the measure of prestige and progress. The result  
is a society where cultural and human values are set aside and money value reigns  
supreme. No political or social system is perfect. But could such a powerful and  
40 powerfully diverse nation as the United States have been prevented from disin-  
tegrating if it had not been sustained by democratic institutions guaranteed by a  
constitution based on the assumption that man’s capacity for reason and justice  
makes free government possible and that his capacity for passion and injustices  
makes it necessary? [14]

1 It is precisely because of the cultural diversity of the world that it is necessary for  
 different nations and peoples to agree on those basic human values which will act  
 as a unifying factor. When democracy and human rights are said to run counter  
 to non-western culture, such culture is usually defined narrowly and presented as  
 5 monolithic. In fact the values that democracy and human rights seek to promote  
 can be found in many cultures. Human beings the world over need freedom and  
 security that they may be able to realize their full potential. The longing for a form  
 of governance that provides security without destroying freedom goes back a long  
 way. [15] Support for the desirability of strong government and dictatorship can  
 10 also be found in all cultures, both eastern and western: the desire to dominate and  
 the tendency to adulate the powerful are also common human traits arising out  
 of a desire for security. A nation may choose a system that leaves the protection  
 of the freedom and security of the many dependent on the inclinations of the  
 empowered few; or it may choose institutions and practices that will sufficiently  
 15 empower individuals and organizations to protect their own freedom and security.  
 The choice will decide how far a nation will progress along the road to peace and  
 human development. [16]

Many of the countries in the third world now striving for meaningful development  
 20 are multiracial societies where there is one dominant racial group and a number  
 — sometimes a large number — of smaller groups: foreign, religious or ethnic  
 minorities. As poverty can no longer be defined satisfactorily in terms of basic  
 economic needs, “minority” can no longer be defined merely in terms of numbers.  
 For example, it has been noted in a study of minorities in Burmese history that:  
 25 “In the process of nation-building . . . the notion of minority in Burma changed,  
 as one group defines itself as a nation those outside the group become minorities  
 . . . There were, of course, minorities in traditional Burma— people close to the  
 power elite who considered themselves superior and people estranged from the  
 power elite who were considered inferior. These criteria for establishing majorities  
 30 (who might in fact be a small portion of the population as, say, white people in  
 South Africa today) were not based on race or even ethnic group, but on access  
 to power. Minorities, thus, are those people with poor access to power.” [17]

Once again, as in the case of poverty, it is ultimately a question of empowerment.  
 35 The provision of basic material needs is not sufficient to make minority groups  
 and indigenous peoples feel they are truly part of the greater national entity. For  
 that they have to be confident that they too have an active role to play in shaping  
 the destiny of the state that demands their allegiance. Poverty degrades a whole  
 society and threatens its stability while ethnic conflict and minority discontent  
 40 are two of the greatest threats to both internal and regional peace. And when  
 the dispossessed “minority” is in fact an overwhelming majority, as happens in  
 countries where power is concentrated in the hands of the few, the threat to peace  
 and stability is ever present even if unperceived.

<sup>1</sup> The Commission for a New Asia notes that:

“ . . . the most rapid economic transformation is most likely to succeed within the context of international peace and internal political stability, in the presence of social tranquillity, public order and an enlightened and strong government; and in the absence of societal turbulence and disorder.” [18]

<sup>5</sup> This comment highlights the link between economic, political and social concerns. But there is a danger that it could be interpreted to imply that peace, stability and public order are desirable only as conditions for facilitating economic transformation rather than as ends in themselves. Such an interpretation would distort the very meaning of peace and security. It could also be used to justify strong, even if unenlightened, government and any authoritarian measures such as a government may take in the name of public order. [19]

<sup>15</sup> If material betterment, which is but a means to human happiness, is sought in ways that wound the human spirit, it can in the long run only lead to greater human suffering. The vast possibilities that a market economy can open to developing countries can be realized only if economic reforms are undertaken within a framework that recognizes human needs. The Human Development Report makes the point that markets should serve people instead of people serving markets. Further:

“ . . . both state and market should be guided by the people. The two should work in tandem, and people should be sufficiently empowered to exert effective control over both.” [20]

<sup>20</sup> Again we come back to empowerment. It decides how widespread will be the benefit of actions taken in the name of culture and development. And this in turn will decide the extent of the contribution such actions can make to genuine peace and stability. Democracy as a political system which aims at empowering the people is essential if sustained human development, which is “development of the people for the people by the people”, is to be achieved. Thus it has been rightly said that:

<sup>25</sup> “National governments must find new ways of enabling their people to participate more in government and to allow them much greater influence on the decisions that affect their lives. Unless this is done, and done in time, the irresistible tide of peoples rising aspirations will inevitably clash with inflexible systems, leading to anarchy and chaos. A rapid democratic transition and a strengthening of the institutions of civil society are the only appropriate responses”. [21]

<sup>30</sup> The argument that it took long years for the first democratic governments to develop in the west is not a valid excuse for African and Asian countries to drag their feet over democratic reform. The history of the world shows that peoples and societies do not have to pass through a fixed series of stages in the course of development. Moreover, latecomers should be able to capitalize on the experiences



1 of the pioneers and avoid the mistakes and obstacles that impeded early progress. The idea of “making haste slowly” is sometimes used to give backwardness the appearance of measured progress. But in a fast developing world too much emphasis on “slowly” can be a recipe for disaster.

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There will be as many kinds of democracies as there are nations which accept it as a form of government. No single type of “western democracy” exists; nor is democracy limited to a mere handful of forms such as the American, British, French or Swiss. Each democratic country will have its own individual characteristics.

10 With the spread of democracy to Eastern Europe the variety in the democratic style of government will increase. Similarly there cannot be one form of Asian democracy; in each country the democracy system will develop a character that accords with its social, cultural and economic needs. But the basic requirement of a genuine democracy is that the people should be sufficiently empowered to

15 be able to participate significantly in the governance of their country. The thirty articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are aimed at such empowerment. Without these rights democratic institutions will be but empty shells incapable of reflecting the aspirations of the people and unable to withstand the encroachment of authoritarianism.

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The democracy process provides for political and social change without violence. The democracy tradition of free discussion and debate allows for the settlement of differences without resort to armed conflict. The culture of democracy and human rights promotes diversity and dynamism without disintegration; it is indivisible

25 from the culture of development and the culture of peace. It is only by giving firm support to movements that seek to empower the people through democratic means that the United Nations and its agencies will truly be able to promote the culture of peace and the culture of development.

30 Let me in conclusion summarize my argument. The true development of human beings involves much more than mere economic growth. At its heart there must be a sense of empowerment and inner fulfillment. This alone will ensure that human and cultural values remain paramount in a world where political leadership is often synonymous with tyranny and the rule of a narrow elite. People’s

35 participation in social and political transformation is the central issue of our time. This can only be achieved through the establishment of societies which place human worth above power, and liberation above control. In this paradigm, development requires democracy, the genuine empowerment of the people. When this is achieved, culture and development will naturally coalesce to create an

40 environment in which all are valued, and every kind of human potential can be realized. The alleviation of poverty involves processes which change the way in which the poor perceive themselves and the world. Mere material assistance is not enough; the poor must have the sense that they themselves can shape their own

1 future. Most totalitarian regimes fear change, but the longer they put off genuine  
 democratic reform the more likely it is that even their positive contributions will  
 be vitiated: the success of national policies depends on the willing participation  
 of the people. Democratic values and human rights, it is sometimes claimed, run  
 5 counter to “national” culture, and all too often the people at large are seen as  
 “unfit” for government. Nothing can be further from the truth. The challenge  
 we now face is for the different nations and peoples of the world to agree on a  
 basic set of human values, which will serve as a unifying force in the develop-  
 ment of a genuine global community. True economic transformation can then  
 10 take place in the context of international peace and internal political stability. A  
 rapid democratic transition and strengthening of the institutions of civil society  
 are the sine qua non for this development. Only then will we be able to look to  
 a future where human beings are valued for what they are rather than for what  
 they produce. If the UN and its agencies wish to assist this development they  
 15 must support these movements which seek to empower the people, movements  
 which are founded on democracy, and which will one day ensure a culture of  
 peace and of development.

#### FOOTNOTES

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[1] “Draft Preliminary Outline of the World Report on Culture and Development”.  
 UNESCO, CCD-III/94/Doc. 2, Paris, 7 Feb. 1994, p.16.

[2] It has been pointed out that the idea of growth not as an end in itself but as a  
 performance test of development was put forward by economists as early as the  
 1950s; Paul Streeten et al., “First Things First: Meeting Basic Human Needs in  
 the Developing Countries”, Oxford, 1982 edn.

[3] Francois Perroux, “A New Concept of Development”, UNESCO, Paris, 1983,  
 p. 2.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 180.

[5] “Growth normally means quantifiable measure of a society’s overall level  
 of production or incomes such as GNP or GDP per capita, while development  
 involves qualitative aspects of a society’s advancement such as under- and un-  
 employment, income distribution pattern, housing situation, nutritional level,  
 sanitary condition, etc.” UNDP Selected Sectoral Reviews: [Burma] December  
 1988, p. 333.

[6] Human Development Report 1993, UNDP, Oxford, 1993, p. 1.

[7] “Towards A New Asia”, A Report of the Commission for A New Asia, 1994,  
 p. 39.

[8] “The logic of an economy governed by solvency and by profit, subject to the  
 increasing value attached to capital and to the power of those who command it  
 is to reject as ‘non-economic’ everything which cannot be immediately translated  
 into quantities and prices in market terms”: Paul-Marc Henry (ed.), “Poverty,  
 Progress and Development”, London, 1991, p. 30.

[9] Streeten et al., “First Things First”, p.19.



- [10] Henry (ed.), "Poverty, Progress and Development". p. 34.
- [11] The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago, 1993 edn., vol. 16, p. 874.
- [12] Edward Said comments that governments in general use culture as a means of promoting nationalism: "To launder the cultural past and repaint it in garish nationalist colors that irradiate the whole society is now so much a fact of contemporary life as to be considered natural". See Edward Said, "Nationalism, Human Rights, and Interpretation", in Barbara Johnson (ed.), "Freedom and Interpretation": The Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1992, New York, 1993, p. 191.
- [13] Harry M. Scoble and Laurie S. Wiseberg (eds.), "Access to Justice: Human Rights Struggles in South East Asia", London, 1985, p. 57.
- [14] See Clinton Rossiter's introduction to Hamilton, Madison and Jay, "The Federalist Papers", Chicago, 1961. I owe thanks to Lady Patricia Gore-Booth for the original quotation on which Rossiter presumably based his words: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary", from Reinhold Niebuhr's foreword to his "Children of Light and Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defence", London, 1945.
- [15] "The best government is that which governs least" are the words of a westerner, John L. O'Sullivan, but more than a thousand years before O'Sullivan was born it was already written in the *Lao Tzu*, A Chinese classic, that "the best of all rulers is but a shadowy presence to his subjects". The notion that "In a nation the people are the most important, the State is next and the rulers the least important" is to be found not in the works of a modern western political theorist but in that of Mencius.
- [16] Eshran Naraghi has shown in his memoirs, "From Palace to Prison: Inside the Iranian Revolution", London, 1994, that a critical attitude towards the monarch, decentralization of power and divisions of responsibilities were part of oriental tradition. His fascinating conversations with Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi throw into relief the dangers of cultural and development policies divorced from the aspirations of the people.
- [17] Ronald D. Renard, "Minorities in Burmese History", in K.M. de Silva et al. (eds.), "Ethnic Conflict in Buddhist Societies: Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma", London, 1988, p. 79.
- [18] "Towards New Asia", p. 40.
- [19] "Practically any human behaviour can be, and historically has been, rationalized as threatening to damage the security of the nation": Scoble and Wiseberg (eds.), "Access to Justice", p. 58.
- [20] Human Development Report 1993, p. 53.
- [21] Ibid., p. 5. Scoble and Wiseberg (eds.), "Access to Justice", p. 5, point out the difference between fundamental reform that "involves a redistribution of power, a broadening of participation and influence in the making of authoritative decisions" and contingent reform that "involves a sharing of the benefits of power holding, or the uses of power, in order to avoid the sharing of power itself".