

REPORT ON the WCFIA/BBLP April 12, 2019 Assembly

*What's Wrong with Democracy?*

By Dick Friedman

“Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.” That timeless saying of Winston Churchill framed a day-long discussion on the question of “What’s Wrong with Democracy?”. The program was presented on April 12 by the Benazir Bhutto Leadership Program of ClassACT HR73 and the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University.

The main focus was “the challenges and promise of democracy in the Middle East, South Asia and the U.S.: Investigating the barriers to effective leadership in the Muslim world and seeking potential solutions.” The topic had specific resonance for members of ClassACT HR73. The organization was created in 2013 by members of the Harvard and Radcliffe Class of 1973 and was founded on the premise (as members of the class were approaching their mid-60s) that “it is not too late for us to change the world” by employing our collective talents and connections.

One class member was Benazir Bhutto, who was Prime Minister of Pakistan when she was tragically assassinated in 2007. To honor her memory, ClassACT established the Benazir Bhutto Leadership Program (BBLP). The BBLP aims to advance peace and human rights consistent with the principles advanced by Bhutto: democracy, equality for women, reconciliation of religious and cultural differences, and education for all without gender or religious bias, supporting leadership development of individuals from a range of predominantly Muslim nations. Among the ten panelists at the April 12 event were two BBLP fellows from Pakistan, Roohi Abdullah and Natasha Jehangir Khan, whose Edward S. Mason Fellowships at the Harvard School of Government are supported by BBLP. Two other panelists were members of the Class of 1973: Roger Myerson, who in 2007 was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in economic sciences and is currently the David L. Pearson Distinguished Service Professor of Global Conflict Studies at the University of Chicago; and award-winning journalist Sylvester Monroe, now a senior fellow at USC’s Annenberg Center of Communications Leadership and Policy.

In morning and afternoon sessions, the panelists grappled with the many challenges besetting both established and emerging democracies. The morning panel, “Democracy and Globalization,” dealt with why this system of government seems a bit out of fashion. In an age when authoritarianism is showing strength, “the word democracy has become quite loaded,” said Natasha Jehangir Khan. “But you

still see the struggles to achieve good governance, better human rights, and economic equality.” Hicham Alaoui, a Research Associate at the Weatherhead Center, was particularly concerned about the prospects for the seemingly dormant “Arab Spring,” the pro-democracy protests that swept the Middle East in 2010 but that since seem to have been dormant. “The Arab Spring is not an event, it’s a process,” said Alaoui. “It will take a lot of time.” The movement he said, imploded for two reasons. “We were dealing with strong and entrenched regimes and elites. We’d have to go back to the European spring of 1848 to see [something like] it: a massive counter-revolutionary camp that has basically provided massive resources to reactionary forces to stage a counter-coup and a counterrevolution. It’s an appeal to order, to authoritarian rule.”

Cameron Munter, a former United States ambassador to Pakistan and Serbia and currently chief executive officer of the EastWest Institute, has witnessed the frustration of trying to impose previous models on budding democracies. “Those of us coming in from the outside tended only to supply old solutions to new problems,” said Munter, who also is a non-resident fellow at the Kennedy School’s Future of Democracy Project. Monroe saw the same problem from a journalistic standpoint. “The media write without complete understanding of what they’re talking about, as if democracy is a one-size-fits-all,” he said. “There’s a sort of cultural arrogance.”

The morning session’s moderator, Ayesha Jalal, the Mary Richardson Professor of History at Tufts, noted, “I’ve discovered that democracy is conflict. It’s competition.” That very struggle, though, creates have-nots as well as haves. The afternoon’s panel, titled “Identity Politics: Inclusion/Exclusion,” grappled with that issue. Erum Sattar who grew up in Karachi, co-founded the Water Law Study Group at Harvard Law School and teaches water law and policy at Northeastern, Pace and Tufts. “In Pakistan your identity is really tied to an agricultural rural idea of democracy that the British tried to institute in India,” she explained. “But it then gets tied to where you are on a [particular] river system.” And that may determine whether “you get into the rooms where decisions are made.”

Roger Myerson would have democracy begin at the grass roots. “Democracy can do harm, and Pakistan is a good example,” he said. “When generals ran the country they knew they needed some legitimation, some mechanism for tolerating popular input into their political system...Once you had [democracy] at a national level you had backbenchers in the provincial assembly who didn’t want the competition from mayors at the local level. They wanted to be the only person [citizens had] to go through in their district...This is where [democracy] does harm and there will be groups who will be left out.”

Nevertheless, all agreed democracy is an end worth pursuing. The panel's moderator, Sonu Jain, senior communications officer at the World Bank, sounded the most positive note when talking of her homeland. "In India 1.3 billion people are casting ballots now...and it's hard to not feel optimistic about the process," she declared.

For his part, Munter gets excited "when people show local initiative." Some panelists had specific prescriptions. Pakistani business leader Muhammad Ali, former chairman of the country's Securities and Exchange Commission, would like to attack the pervasive corruption. ["To get elected] people are spending half a million dollars from their pocket," he said. "They want to make [as a payoff] four times the money. So corruption is at a very high level. [Those elected] want to encourage identity politics. They want to control the masses through jobs, through finance, through the livelihood." And despite 70 years of independence, Pakistan has only four provinces. "Karachi is a city of 20 million people," Ali said. "If we could just break down the units, identity politics would be weakened."

Abdullah, one of whose areas of expertise is water distribution in the parched region, suggested that "Karachi needs to have a movement like 'MeToo'—'Me-TooWithoutWater'."

Sugata Bose, the event's convener and Harvard Professor of Oceanic History as well as Chair of the Weatherhead Research Cluster on Global Transformations, declared, "A healthy dose of democracy has to be an intrinsic part of what we might call good governance." He added, "Tolerance has to be a key element of democracy. Intolerance is bad, but tolerance is not good enough. We must aspire to something higher. We must aspire to a level of cultural intimacy within communities. We must elevate our political discourse to a certain level of respect and dignity."

At afternoon's end, Bose declared the event "an extraordinary day of animated and vigorous conversation." Sattar said such dialogue is happening everywhere in her home region. In Karachi, a book festival attracted 260,000 people "who were interested in listening to an alternate, independent, non-official discourse. There are a lot of creative spaces that people are making to talk to each other. Plan a trip to one of these book festivals. You will be blown away."