



PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS **International Day of Democracy**

Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (11.10 a.m.)—15 September 2008 was the first International Day of Democracy after the United Nations General Assembly decided to observe that day last year. Let me say at the outset that there are many countries in the world that should model their government's processes and democratic institutions on Australia. These democratic processes and the way that Australians exercise those freedoms can be held up as examples to other countries.

I am proud of this country. It is a great country which has always stood up for the weak, the defenceless and the besieged. The strength of our country is in our traditions, our institutions and our values. The will of our country to act when the hard decisions need to be made comes from the collective faith of the great Australian culture—a majority culture forever grounded in the belief of the supremacy of the democratic tradition; a majority culture that will forever be guided by the one and only set of secular laws; a majority culture that supports those who aspire to improve themselves, while also being there to support those who need it and cannot provide for themselves. This is a majority culture that has a strong belief in the principle of personal responsibility. It has a strong belief that all citizens and residents have rights, but never without responsibilities. This country has a majority culture of Judeo-Christian values, and there is nothing wrong with that and nothing to be apologised for.

In making my comments today, I intend to speak about several countries that could greatly improve their political systems, and I do this to highlight the stark difference between those countries and Australia. But, before I do that, in general terms I would like to start with Africa. In Africa, internal conflicts continue to rage in several states—and I draw a lot of the material I have from Amnesty International's 2008 report. In certain states in Africa there have been gross human rights abuses. Killings, torture and rape are common. Rights have been suppressed; freedoms have been trampled upon. Excesses and human rights abuses by police and other law enforcement officers in many countries are not being dealt with. There is no accountability. Furthermore, millions of people in Africa continue to live without their basic needs being met.

A particularly abhorrent example of poor governments hiding behind cultural excuses is the case of Sierra Leone, which, in 2007, passed a children's rights bill—but only after the provisions criminalising female genital mutilation were dropped. I say that female circumcision is an uncivilised practice, and I am not afraid to say that any religion that prescribes it is a very strange and barbaric religion indeed.

I now want to go back to the manner in which some of these governments act, and I will make this point before I go any further: the fact is that there are certain governments in Africa and elsewhere in the world which do not exercise authority for the people; they exercise power for elites, and normally they do so for the ruling junta, elite class, or a governing party. It is corruption, whichever way you want to cut it. Governments exist because the people set aside some personal freedoms in exchange for the protection and services provided by the state. Yet, wherever countries rule for the few, as opposed to the many, you find other forms of government apart from real democracy. I will just mention a few countries where there is a long way to go.

How can you talk about countries ruling for narrow interests without covering Zimbabwe? I believe that everyone who has spoken before me has covered Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, throughout the year, police instituted severe restrictions on the right to freedom of association. What we are talking about here is the suppression of democracy. Let us not beat around the bush: ZANU-PF and its leader Robert Mugabe orchestrated torture, maiming and murder to undermine the democratic process.

Few commentators would disagree that the Movement for Democratic Change, or MDC, were victorious in the election earlier this year, yet the results were fixed and it has only recently been resolved with power-sharing arrangements. It should never have come to this. It was my view that the African Union should have acted decisively months ago and forced compliance with the democratic decision of the people, yet that did not occur, and I wonder what price vacillation will have in the end. Sadly, the continuing presence of Robert Mugabe, his ZANU-PF party and the military strongmen behind Mugabe do not augur well for the future of democracy, although we hope that recent events are a step forward. I would say that when the news vision of the power-sharing agreement was aired, it said it all about the limitations on the Zimbabwean democracy: the backdrop was uniformed generals. Such a link between government and the military is undesirable and should ring all the warning bells.

Of course, in any discussion on democracy it is also hard to go past Venezuela as an example of a democracy teetering on the brink. Socialist President Hugo Chavez was, I understand, re-elected in January 2007. The congress granted him powers to pass certain legislation by decree for 18 months, and that is not a good thing. But, on a more positive note, Venezuelans rejected significant changes to the constitution put forward by the President that included one amendment that would have seen President Chavez installed as President for life—clearly, that is not democracy. It has also been suggested that other amendments would have removed important human rights. I pray for the people in the democracy of Venezuela and hope that the people do not lose control and that President Chavez does not seize absolute power in that country.

Closer to Australia, I also want to address the matter of democracy or the tragic lack of democracy in the Union of Myanmar, or Burma, as most people would know it; this is clearly a military junta. After 1962 Burma was run by a military dictator, General Ne Win, who seized power when he took advantage of instability in the democratic government. From late 1985, student protests gathered intensity and culminated in 10 demands for a return to democracy. The result was the fall of General Ne Win's government on 8 August 1988 in what is

called the 8888 Uprising or 'Four Eights' Uprising, yet what then happened was the declaration of martial law and General Saw Maung seized control of the country. General Maung formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council, which then suspended all elements of the 1974 constitution. He was replaced with Senior General Than Shwe in 1992, and in 1997 SLORC was renamed the State Peace and Development Council. It made no difference to the way the regime operates, as it is still defined by its excesses in murder, torture, rape, forced relocations, forced labour, recruitment of child soldiers and imprisonment of political opponents.

I would also speak, as others have done, about the leader of the National League for Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi, and her detention. In 1990 an election was held and 392 of the 492 seats were won by the NLD yet, soon after the election, SLORC reimposed its own control and did not let the NLD assume government. Aung San Suu Kyi is the 1991 Nobel Peace Laureate, and she has been in detention or house arrest for 13 of the last 19 years. She is the icon of liberty and democracy in Burma, and arguably in the world, and her courage and the resolute way she conducts herself ensures that the SPDC will always be seen as an illegitimate government standing in the way of democracy in Burma.

I would now like to turn my attention to Vietnam. As a member who has thousands of Vietnamese constituents in my electorate I remain concerned for the people of Vietnam, many of whose friends or family are my constituents. It is known that in Vietnam freedom of expression and freedom of association remain tightly controlled, and arrests and detentions do occur. By example, on 30 March 2007 Father Nguyen Van Ly was sentenced to eight years imprisonment for conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. I recently received a letter from a Vietnamese friend in Perth who told me:

Recently there have been religious and human rights violations against Catholics by the Vietnamese government. The archbishop of Hanoi's residence ... and the convent of Sisters of Adorers of the Holy Cross are under siege by the Vietnamese police, militia and security personnel.

He tells me that before sunrise last Friday morning hundreds of police assembled in front of the archbishop's residence, blocking access to the residence, the cathedral, and all roads leading to the nearby nunciature, which is an embassy of the Holy See. Bulldozers were brought into the area and began digging out the lawn. Later, at 6 am, after police and demolition workers were in place, the state-controlled television and radio stations made the announcement that the government had decided to abolish the embassy to convert the land into a public playground. An American reporter, Ben Stocking, who I understand is the Hanoi bureau chief for Associated Press, was an eyewitness at the site. He was attacked by security force personnel as he tried to take photos. He was later released, but his camera was confiscated and he needed medical attention.

The suppression of the Catholic religion in Hanoi is very concerning. From reports I have had in the past, it seems that freedom of religion is getting worse in Vietnam and that freedom of the press is also near to impossible. It is my understanding that the extreme action of the Vietnamese government was a reaction to peaceful and lawful protests by Catholics in Hanoi seeking the return of a building seized in 1959. That property was the former embassy for the Holy See. I have been informed that these protests took the form of prayer vigils. The

Vietnam Conference of Catholic Bishops had by that time repeatedly sent petitions to the authorities for the return of the building, yet their petitions had gone unanswered. The protests—or the vigils—only came to a halt after the government had agreed to restore the building to them in February this year. However, repeated delays saw no action. Then, all of a sudden, the Vietnamese government announced that the embassy would be demolished for a playground and immediately carried this out with the support of security forces. This action seems to be a reversal of the policy of dialogue that the government had been having with the Catholic Church. It is greatly concerning because the action of the government disregards existing policy and existing laws, and clearly demonstrates religious repression.

The seizure of property of the Catholic Church also took place at the Thai Ha parish in the Hanoi archdiocese, with 15 acres of land that had been owned by the church since 1928 slowly being taken away since the Communist Party assumed power in 1954, leaving the church with only half an acre. As I understand it, the Redemptorist congregation purchased the disputed property in 1928, but following the Communist takeover in 1954 most of the parishioners had been jailed or deported, leaving Father Joseph Vu Ngoc Bich alone in charge of the 15 acres of land and the parish church. Despite Father Vu's protests, the authorities slowly took the property piece by piece, leaving only that half-acre. Since 1966, Father Vu and other parishioners have been repeatedly requesting the restoration of the property, claiming that it was seized illegally—all to no avail. Daily protests broke out after Thai Ha parishioners discovered that local government officials had sold the land to individuals. The Redemptorists and their followers, in their desperation, were left with no choice other than holding peaceful and lawful protests to call for justice from the authorities. They began occurring from 5 January.

The government has not listened to them and has repeatedly attempted to silence protestors by using security forces. The Hanoi authorities also claimed that Father Vu had donated the land to the government, but their claim has never been proven and in fact has been repeatedly discredited or contradicted by their own documents. I understand that according to church rules only the bishop of the diocese can dispose of church property. Father Joseph Vu was only a local priest who neither was owner of the land nor had any authority to make such a decision. It is noteworthy that so many properties that once belonged to the church were transferred to state administration under coercive conditions on the grounds that they were needed for social purposes. Even when these purposes are no longer required, the properties are seldom returned to their owners. Recently it has been reported that they have been used as financial resources for government officials. Some of them have been turned into movie theatres, restaurants, nightclubs or government offices. Some were simply destroyed. Others were sold or provided to selected government officials for personal use.

I am informed that the Vietnamese government has been cracking down on protests for eight months and has launched a campaign against Hanoi Catholics, accusing them of using their influence to incite all Catholics to confront the government as well as, amongst other things, assembling and praying illegally in public areas, therefore disturbing public order. The campaign has apparently intensified since 28 August, with more arrests. I have other examples from Vietnam as they relate to both the Catholic and Buddhist faiths, but I will not deal

with each of them as these events were reported in the *Australian* on 24 September. From these events it would appear that the government of Vietnam struggles to maintain political control, yet at the same time it wishes to portray an image of religious tolerance, and this is not working.

Furthermore, I was this morning informed that there had been a recent crackdown against dissidents in Vietnam, and in particular a crackdown on legitimate protests of political dissidents and human rights defenders trying to exercise their right. My view, and I believe the view of Vietnamese in the electorate of Cowan, is that we all look forward to a future when religious and political freedoms can be achieved. It is my view that democracy is the best form of government and here in Australia we have a very good example of it. The International Day of Democracy was 15 September. I strongly support the day and this motion.