

The La Baule Speech (1990)

La Baule, June 20, 1990

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In any case, we are ready to help you establish this movement, which I believe to be indispensable in order to obtain the political, geographic, and economic instruments that would permit us to continue battling the crisis. But I would like to say the following: just as there is a vicious cycle between debt and under-development, there is another vicious cycle between economic crisis and political crisis. One nourishes the other.

This is why we should examine how to proceed together so that, politically, a certain number of institutions and ways of acting allow trust to be restored, sometimes trust between a people and its leaders, most often between one state and other states, in any case the trust between Africa and the developed countries. I'd like to borrow His Majesty the King of Morocco's observation, both ironic and serious, as he described the way in which democracy was established in France. It was not without evil, or repeated accidents. Expanding my talk, I will borrow the words of one of the Heads of State here this evening: the Europe we come from, we French, had, at the same time, Nazism, fascism, Francoism, Salazarism, and Stalinism, no less...

Were these the models on which you have built your states, you who have taken, in the best case, just a quarter of a century?

It took us two centuries to try to create order, first in our thoughts and then in reality, with successive descents; and we are teaching you about it?

We have to talk about democracy. It's a universal principle which seemed so incontrovertible to the peoples of central Europe that in the space of a few weeks, the regimes considered the strongest were overthrown. The people were in the streets, in the squares, and the ancient power, sensing its fragility, gave up all resistance, as if it had already been void of substance for a long time and it knew it. And this revolution of the peoples, the most important one we have seen since the French Revolution of 1789, will continue.

I said recently about the Soviet Union that this revolution has come from there and it will return there. The one who governs there knows it well, he who is, with courage and intelligence, leading a reform that, already, is facing every kind of opposition, that which, attached to the former system, refuse the reform, and that which wants to go faster. So the story is still unfinished. It must be said that this wind will go around the world. We already know it well: one of the poles freezes or heats up and voilà: the entire globe feels the effects. This thought does not have to remain climate-related, it applies to the society of men!...

Finally, we can breathe, finally we have hope, because democracy is a universal principle. But we cannot forget the differences in structures, in civilizations, in traditions, in customs. It is

impossible to propose a ready-made system. It is not for France to dictate some constitutional law that would then be de facto imposed on people who have their own consciousness and their own history and who must know how to lead towards the universal principle that is democracy. And there are not thirty six paths to democracy.

As Mr. President of Senegal reminded us, development is needed and freedoms must be learned...How can you engender democracy, a principal of national representation with the participation of numerous parties, organize the exchanging of views, the resources for the press, when two thirds of the population would be living in misery. I repeat, France does not intend to intervene in the interior affairs of friendly African nations. It has its say, it intends to pursue its work with aid, friendship, and solidarity. It does not intend to be questioned, it does not intend to abandon any African country.

This also about liberty: it is not only states that can provide it, it is citizens. Therefore, we must ask their opinion. And it is not only public powers that can act, it is also non-governmental agencies who often know the situation on the ground the best, who embrace the inherent difficulties, who know how to heal the wounds. We do not want to intervene in interior affairs. For us, this subtle form of colonialism, which consists of permanently teaching and giving advice to African states and those who lead them, is as perverse as all other forms of colonialism. To do this would be to believe that there are superior peoples, who hold the truth, and others, who would not be capable of it, but I know about the efforts of so many leaders who love their people and intend to serve them, even if not in the same way as on the banks of the Seine or the Thames. That is why we must begin a methodical study of everything to do with economic life. We must put customs arrangements in place that would prevent the tax evasion and other financial crimes that often justify the criticism we hear. Again, from this point of view, France, if you wish, is ready to offer aid in people and technology, to train officials, to be beside them. I have seen the birth of most of your states, I have known your battles to put an end to the colonial condition.

These battles often pit you against France, and only the wisdom of French and African leaders, at the end of the day, prevented the tragedy of a colonial war in Sub-Saharan Africa. It was necessary to build a state, a sovereignty, with internationally-guaranteed borders, the ones that were drawn and regulated by colonial countries, in gilded lounges of western Chancelleries, tearing apart ethnicities without understanding the nature of the terrain. And here we are: the new states have to manage the old contradictions inherited from history, they have to build a central administration, train and appoint civil servants, manage public finances, enter into the grand international circuit, often without having received the necessary training from the old colonial countries.

And we have to deal with these states, as we would with nations that have been organized for a thousand years, as is the case with France, Great Britain, Spain, or Portugal!

Customs and traditions just as deserving of respect as yours, the history and nature of these peoples, their own culture, their own way of thinking, could all this be reduced to a solved equation in a northern capital?

Really, I appeal to your reason, and I think that we know each other well enough to know that nothing will happen between us without respect or disregarding the esteem in which we hold each other. If there is dissent in some particular country, well then the leaders of the country will discuss it with their citizens. When I say democracy, when I chart a course, when I say that this is the only way to get to a state of equality when the need for greater freedom is apparent, of course I have a plan ready: representative system, free elections, multiparty politics, freedom of the press, independent judiciary, rejection of censorship: here is the plan that we have.

We have discussed this many times, and here, tonight, again in particular. I know how much some scrupulously defend their people and seek progress, including in their own institutions. Many of you said, "If you transpose the single party and arbitrarily decide on a multiparty system, some of our populations will refuse it, or else will immediately suffer from its deleterious effects."

Others said, "We have already done this and know about its disadvantages." But the disadvantages are still less important than the advantage of feeling that one is in a civically organized society.

Others said, "We have started, the system is not there yet, but we are going in this direction." I am listening to you. And, as I agreed more easily with those of you who defined a political system close to the one I am used to, I understood the reasons of those who believed that their country or their population was not ready. So who will decide? I believe that we could decide by saying that, in any case, this is the direction in which we all must go. Some have put on the seven league boots, either in civic peace or in disorder, but they have acted quickly.

Others are walking step by step. May I say that the most important thing is to go in the right direction. I am speaking to you as one citizen of the world to other citizens of the world: it is the path of freedom that you are advancing on at the same time as you advance along the path of development. Moreover, the thought can be reversed: by taking the road towards development, you are committed on the road towards democracy.

To you free people, to you sovereign states that I respect: choose your path, determine the steps and the pace. France will continue to be your friend, and if you wish, your support, internationally as well as domestically. You bring a lot to the relationship. When I see, for example, that the flow of capital that goes from the poor South towards the rich North is bigger than the flow of capital that goes from the rich North to the poor South, I say that there is something wrong.

Colonialism is not dead. This is no longer the colonialism of states, it is the colonialism of business and of parallel channels. We are speaking as sovereign states, equal in status, even if not always in means. There are all kinds of conventions between us. There are military conventions. I repeat the principle of the French policy: every time a foreign menace appears, that could attack your independence, France will be by your side. We have already demonstrated this many times, and sometimes in very difficult circumstances.

But our own role, as a foreign country, even though we are friends, is not to intervene in domestic conflicts. In these cases, France, with the country's leaders, will ensure the protection of its citizens, its nationals, but does not intend to arbitrate conflicts. This is what I have been doing as part of my responsibilities for nine years. In the same way, I will always forbid a practice that sometimes existed in the past which consisted of France trying to organize domestic political changes by plot or conspiracy. You know well that, for the last nine years, this has not happened, and this will not happen in the future.