Well, once again, it’s my honor to introduce another distinguished and brilliant guest, Professor Ruhi Ramazani. You heard from his wife Nesta last night and it’s a pleasure to have them both back today. Professor Ramazani, as you heard his story, departed Iran in 1952 and he and Nesta are right here in Charlottesville and he was a Professor at the Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics here at the University of Virginia for a good number of years. He’s now Professor Emeritus. He has authored numerous books and articles, most of which pertain to Middle Eastern affairs. Many have been translated into multiple languages. He has worked with the State Department and the White House. His viewpoints are very well respected in the United States and I also passed out earlier your article that he wrote. Please read it later. With no further ado, I will go ahead and present Professor Ruhi Ramazani.

DR. RUHI RAMAZANI: Thank you. Good afternoon. I’m so glad to see some of you I saw last night and I’m going to share with you some remarks, ideas. Everybody was talking about my many years here. Some of my colleagues talk to me, they say did you meet Mr. Jefferson. Well, Mr. Jefferson was the 19th century. I’ve been here for 57 years and I lived under the shadow of Thomas Jefferson who founded this University and is the intellectual father of America by reputation.

First of all, I would give myself the advantage of welcoming you to this University. I’ve been so long here I call it my university. Thomas Jefferson, just briefly stated, was a world citizen. That was the expression used by Franklin. He was [00:03:01 / ] and therefore his messages were not necessarily always for Americans. It was for world citizens and I thought I would take three different issues that I think I can talk about from Jeffersonian perspective but relate it possibly to your situation in Sri Lanka in terms of your society, your politics, security, etc., so the first one I would like to talk about the rule of the majority and Thomas Jefferson believed that the rule of the majority is the law and there is no if and but about it.

I quote him. He says, “legitimate foundation”— Let me start from the beginning: “the will of the people is the only legitimate foundation of any government and the only and to protect its free expression should be our first objective.” This was in 1801.
Jefferson believed that the rule of the majority somehow has at its [fountainhead] the law of nature and the law of nature I don’t know, if in legal philosophy it is opposite obviously of the [positive] law because it means it is not a command of a superior or a legislative body but it is somehow there and human beings discovered the law by the exercise of reason, so the rule of the majority, in other words, with that foundation in natural law, therefore, you can imagine why Jefferson as an enlightenment philosopher and like others, somehow put at the top of his efforts and interests the rule of [00:05:56 / the rule of reason] human society ________.

Here at the University of Virginia at the entrance of one of the buildings there is a Jefferson statement which I always try to put on my syllabi for my students and I even dedicated a book to that precept of Jefferson and I quote it: “we are”— That is we are here at the University of Virginia, “we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead nor tolerate any error so long as the reason is left free to combat it.” That’s very profound, that emphasized the role of and importance of reason in human society.

Now, the rule of the majority without going into too much detail is inextricable. In other words, it’s inseparable from the concept, the notion, of democracy. The rule of the majority inseparable from democracy. Now, he says, that is, Jefferson again, “bear always in mind that the nation ceases to be republican”—means democratic—“when the will of the majority ceases to be the law.” See the connection between the majority rule and democracy.

Now, I think most important of all is Jefferson’s notion which is not exclusively his but certainly again I consider him the leader in that kind of idea and that is Jefferson firmly believed that as important as the rule of the majority is that it is the law of the land, that is the rule of the majority. It is equally important to know about the rights of the minority. This is relevant to your country that we [quote it]. Bear in mind, the [sacred business] that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be a reason. That’s one reason, one condition. That the minority possessed— they’re equal to the majority which equal laws must protect. Equal law protect the majority and the minority and to violate would be oppression, tyranny, [dictatish], autocracy, if the rights of the minority are not equally considered important.

Now, in Sri Lanka, you have the majority [Sinhala] and you have the minority, Tamil, and this is a significant question in your [00:10:38 / ________] society. Your state of _______ faces this very important question. Yes, the majority rule but what about the Tamil minority. Are they equally protected by law and that is a question of what we can discuss.

The second issue I wanted to talk about is a very fundamental question really. We have it in this country. It is everywhere especially in societies which consider themselves to be democratic. That is the relationship between security and liberty. We have had in this country particularly during President Bush’s [00:11:42 / ________] my paper you will see that this is one of the questions that I have at the very end emphasized, that at his time, George Bush’s time, eight years, there was no real balance
between the requirements of security and civil liberty and I criticized that. This took
place after 9/11. I hope you know what that means. Terrorists attacks on the United
States killing some three thousand people and therefore President Bush thought this is
war on terror or one war on terrorism and therefore without going into detail, that
seemed to become the basis for calling, for example, the detainees caught in Afghanistan
or elsewhere as “enemy combatants.” The president would decide who was an “enemy
combatant.” And this, of course, went to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court was
critical, was critical of the treatment of detainees because some of them had been there
for six, seven years without even any charge, let alone any trial and that is the prison in
Guantanamo Bay that is still there and there is at least a couple of hundred people are
still detained in that prison. That is taking care of security of the United States. They
were terrorists, they attacked us, they were aggressive and we have to protect ourselves
from future terrorists.

Now, I talked about balance but in human history, there are times that security
might even override, surpass security; in other words, security might override laws,
[strict] laws, so I quote Jefferson on that very important point. Why, by the way, why
Jefferson, I quote Jefferson? Because there was something in American history called
the Louisiana Purchase, 1803. That was the purchase from France by the United States
and the reason for Jefferson going ahead and doing it, getting the buy after the offer from
the French, was two things: one was that the United States needed access to the
Mississippi River for commerce and the other one was that there was a looming war
between the French and the British that would affect America, as he perceived it. This
was main reason he went ahead and bought Louisiana. Of course, we all celebrate now,
but at the time, it was very controversial that the president was acting beyond the law
and you say that of course it was legal in terms of our Civil War but that’s another
matter, but I’m talking about Jefferson.

Now, what did Jefferson say? How did he seem to justify bypassing, if you wish,
law? “A strict observance of the laws is doubtless one of the high duties of a good
citizen, but it is not the highest. The laws of necessity, of self preservation, of saving our
country when in danger, are of higher obligation. To lose our country by a scrupulous
adherence to written law, would be to lose the law itself.” You see how [00:16:54 /
__________]. Now, this you remember from the American Declaration of
Independence, “with life, liberty, property and all those who are enjoying them with us;
those absurdly sacrificing the end to the means.

Now, you’re from Sri Lanka and you say, well, if the government is not really
paying much attention to the civil liberties, let’s say, of the Tamil, that you call Tamil
Tigers, terrorists in your government, if you do that, now you might say, well, Jefferson
said that, the security, you’ve got to somehow transfer the law but that’s not the point.
This was a case, exceptional case. Jefferson quoting Benjamin Franklin’s statement of
1755, wrote “those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary
safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” Again, from my perspective, the need for
balance. Minority again. I talked about it earlier, must be rights [equally], rights of the
minority must be protected in a society that consider itself to be democratic and your constitution, of course, says that socialist democratic share a language.

And thirdly, and finally, I would like to mention something that is true throughout the world in this sense, that the countries that are considered democratic, well-established democracies like the United States, all right, Britain, France, one might assume that these countries are established democracies and that’s it. That’s not it. Democracy, liberty, these are ideals and societies and governments try to approach or approximate that ideal. In America, we still are trying to maintain and promote and sustain and nurture democracies. Still, despite the fact, this [00:20:17 / is a well] established democracy. This becomes a very major question in regard to underdeveloped or less developed or developing whatever term you use, countries that are trying to transit from traditional way of life where the family is important most of all, where tribe is important, when religion is important, sect is important, from the traditional primordial loyalties and values to transit to modernity. It’s not the same as modernism. Modernity is related to enlightenment. Enlightenment [00:21:06 / varies and so on].

Now, what about these societies and Sri Lanka will be in that kind of a category about transition to democracy. You call yourself democratic. Transition to democracy is one of the very most complicated issues and there are as many theories as you can imagine about how to make transition to democracy and, of course, in Europe, you have had the process in southern Europe, eastern Europe, and, of course, in western Europe and so on. And there are all kinds of writings, books, articles, [and so on] but the theoretician I chose in the article that you have from me has three theories that are just mentioned because you can be here very briefly and very— [He’s also brief].

One is that has issue to democracy mostly requires good “governance.” Now, how do you go about it? Of course, that will involve a structured government, a government can maintain order and security and so on. Regarding in other words, order, stability, safety. You cannot really transit democracy.

Another theory says, no, the best way is to have free market economy, trade and so on as a transit to democracy and a third one says, no, you have to really aim at and rush to freedom of religion and, of course, in the American political culture, legal culture, it’s very important. Religious freedom and this University with Mr. Jefferson who authored religious freedom document. I don’t want to burden you with official names. Jefferson’s ideal of freedom of religion today is in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Now, some say without freedom of religion, you cannot transit to democracy. I’ve always had fun and I will share it with you, said to my students and others that what attracts me to Jefferson above all is not freedom of religion only because freedom of religion means if you are Buddhist, Muslim, whatever religion, Christian, whatever, you can just practice it as long as you’re, you know, able to do so. Your rituals, your prayers, whatever. Your synagogue for Jews or whatever. But Jefferson talked so much about freedom of conscience. It means you can always be an atheist as [00:24:57 / __________].
How, again, what Jefferson thought was important way of the common man and my 
friend, Scott Harrod knows that I did a lot of digging about this idea and I have given 
talks in places about it, what would Jefferson say today about how to get close to the 
balance. Jefferson sees— These are not his words, these are mine. He would say about 
the best way to make transition to democracy, Jefferson believed that democracy could 
flourish only in societies where people are prepared to receive on their own initiative and 
in their own time such democratic values as the rule of law, religious freedom, and 
government by the consent of the governed [for the people].

He also believed that above all else democratic evolution requires liberal education. 
You can see the importance of education, liberal education, not the kind of education 
Nazi Germany and many of these dictatorial countries have. They used their textbooks 
to indoctrinate and to suppress freedom, not to promote [it].

In Jefferson’s mind, to end autocracy, killing, oppression, you have to educate the 
public. Scott Harrop and my wife know my favorite favorite favorite quotation on this. 
Jefferson said— I know it by heart now, “enlighten the people generally tyranny and 
oppression of body will vanish like the spirit at the dawn of day.” Isn’t that beautiful? 
Now, it’s appropriate to say what I think, but I believe in living under the shadow of Mr. 
Jefferson, soon I can claim to be six decades, almost 60 years. This is my model in life. 
There can be no power without principle, no security without justice, no order without 
the rule of law and none of these without liberty. Thank you. I’m done. [applause]

I’d be happy to receive questions if there is time. I tried to stay within the time. We 
started a little late. You’ll speak louder, please, so I can hear. It’s not your problem. 
It’s my problem.

__________ : __________

DR. RUHI RAMAZANI: Western and eastern. Well, you can tell me that, but do you— 
Let me put it this way. There is really no such a thing as western [00:29:38 / 
__________.]. There’s no such a thing. Every society which is what I was saying, every 
society whether west or east, has developed its own democracy. This is why democracy 
cannot be imposed from one country on another country by coercion, by force, but by 
education, by talk, by discussion, there’s no harm in that. So, it’s very difficult to say 
eastern or western, even within western, let’s say, democracy, all right? British 
democracy is quite different from American democracy, all right? Its political structure, 
how it is structured different from America or France [00:30:34 / __________] so there 
is no monolithic, western monolithic, eastern democracy.

__________ : __________

DR. RUHI RAMAZANI: That’s very important. Civil liberty is [00:31:21 / __________ ] 
of democratic __________. In other words, it is difficult in American context to think of 
democracy without civil liberties because once you suppress civil liberty, then you are
getting closer to autocracy and oppression and what is civil liberty after all. Individuals and groups would be able to speak their mind, to have freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, all the things that not only concerns groups in a society but even individuals. I ran out of my land of birth. You know why? Because not only me and [00:32:30 / __________]. You’re talking about 57 years ago, more than half a century because there was [next to no civil liberty]. There was a shah, autocratic. He had all the powers, all the __________, all the [string to pull]. You couldn’t speak against or criticize government. Here I am doing it every day of my life, say both good or bad. Is that important or not? So, it's not the question but the question is that civil liberty and democracy are inseparable just as freedom of religion and democracy are inseparable. You cannot have one without the other.

__________: __________

DR. RUHI RAMAZANI: Again, you see when a government—let’s put it this way—says shut up, put up or shut up, don’t criticize us, we know all the what is good for the country, we are protecting the country. Therefore, we cannot do wrong. Where would civil liberty be? I was almost killed for speaking my way, my mind. That’s why. That was part of the reason I left that country. Now, today is another matter. The question of the degree when Iran had President Khatami, a reformist and moderate president, there was a greater number of newspapers. You can imagine they were critical of his presidency, government and so on. Then this other president came, Ahmadinejad. You’ll hear about him. Well, there is not that much press freedom, that much ability to criticize the government. That is why hundreds, thousands, millions of younger people, university-educated people, they don’t want to see reelection of Ahmadinejad in Iran. Do you follow me? It’s the people. The important thing is the people. The government, the people who hold power are not going to give you civil liberty. You see, your country’s Constitution says that you have— the people have sovereignty. You know your Constitution better than I do. You have sovereignty. Now, popular sovereignty means that people are the foundation of the laws of the land and protection of free speech and protection of free association.

__________: __________

DR. RUHI RAMAZANI: Very good. First of all, [00:36:50 / __________] American in terms of loving this country and living it, breathing its air and __________ and this is a little off the record I should say. I was advisor to President Jimmy Carter here in 1979 and we had the hostage crisis and these Americans were taken, diplomats, 54 Americans were taken hostage in Iran for their own reasons. I can’t go into that. So here I am with my land of birth, Iran, but I’m helping an American president to figure out how we can get the Americans out. This is on this side. On the Iranian side, whenever I’m lecturing there, that’s not very often, but I’m on constant telephone conversations, fax, __________, trying to—

For example, I’ll give the perfect example. The president knew the man who is going to try to be reelected, said, you know, Iran is very angry Israel because Iran
considers Israel an oppressor of Palestinians, all right? I’m not saying that’s good or right or bad. I’m just saying what Iran says and many people also say, like the recent development in Gaza killing of civilians, so when Ahmadinejad said Israel wiped off the map and my friend Scott knows I wrote the newspapers that that was an imprudent statement, all right? I still believe it is. It wasn’t in Iran’s interests to make such a statement, so I’ve tried to see if after 30 years of animosity between Iran and America I can help through writing, through talking, through consultation, to bridge between [two of them]. That has been my dream and I will have it until I die. So, you can be useful in terms of being bi-cultural.

Thank you. Thank very much. I appreciate it. I enjoyed being with you and I hope you will have a great time the rest of your time here. It’s a beautiful place and I hope you’ll come back and visit. Read a little about America and not being for or against but, you know, the fundamental value is the oneness of humanity whether you’re a Sri Lankan, Iranian, American. Always bear in mind that we are all interconnected.

The 13th century poet of Iran that President Obama quoted in his New Year congratulations to the Iranians, he quoted the Persian poet of the 13th century. He said what. The words are beautiful, but, you know, I can’t say them. It says humanity is like the arm, the leg, the head of a body. One arm hurts, everybody suffers. One nation, one people hurt, the whole humanity suffers. That’s the way we have to [00:41:36 / __________]. That’s the way we can reach across instead of talking like, is Sam still living? Like Sam [Huntington] whose name was big in this country and everywhere else about clash of civilizations, like on the steps of this Cabell Hall, we had a [plaque]. I was given Jefferson Award and I gave it to him. I said we should talk about blending of civilization, not clash of civilization. Blending. I have talked [too much]. [applause]

Thank you very much.