

Qatar stirs controversy proposing an office on world democracy

Agence France-Presse - 01 November, 2006

A Qatari proposal to set up a permanent office to follow up the recommendations of a UN-sponsored conference on democracy was met by reservations from Western countries.

A senior Western diplomat said "not every one was convinced of the Qatari project," and "countries like the United States and Russia expressed reservations because they want to explore the aims of the proposed office and forms of its funding.

"The funding of this office would raise a problem, mainly due to the presence of other (follow-up) mechanisms like the (UN) Democracy Fund, which was founded in 2005, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)," he told AFP.

The sixth edition of the UN "New and Restored Democracies" conference is being hosted by gas-rich Qatar. Ironically, the small Gulf emirate did not even have a constitution until last year, its legislative council is still named by the emir and political parties are banned.

Qatar's undersecretary of foreign affairs, Mohammed al-Rumaihi, said on the conference sidelines that "a number of countries expressed reservations over the idea, fearing the presence of a new pressure group within the United Nations."

He said the emirate's proposal is "a follow-up mechanism ... comprising the current and past presidencies of the conference, with an equal representation across the continents of civil society and parliamentarians."

One participant, who asked not to be named, said some Western countries, including the United States, do not wish to see non-governmental organisations (NGOs) represented within the proposed mechanisms.

An Arab human rights activist said the same thing.

"Some governments want to impose on us those who would represent us in this follow-up mechanism, while we prefer to elect our own representatives," said Haitham Manaa, the head of the Paris-based Arab Human Rights Organisation.

For her part, French delegation head Nicole Guedj said "conferences are not a place for action," but that "France supports Qatar," without giving any details.

Conferences "are frames for debate which remain absolutely necessary," she said, referring to the event, which brought together representatives of 82 countries, including Israel.

The conference was opened Sunday by Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabr al-Thani, who stressed that democratization should "take into account the specifics of each society."

Democracy must not "lead to anarchy," he said, adding that "armed conflicts are an obstacle" to democracy.

Without international justice "based on principles and rights in the United Nations Charter, primarily with respect for colonized people's right to self-determination, there is no real democracy," he told participants.

This year's conference, which concludes Wednesday, is expected to adopt a "Doha Declaration" and a plan of action for the coming three years.

The conference was launched in Manila in 1988. It was last held in Mongolia in 2003.