In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly on September 25th, President Barak Obama articulated several principles that should shape the mission of the United Nations, guide international relations and influence the actions of governments. His comments pointed both to the achievements of the past and the trends shaping the future. Among his philosophical statements was a defense of freedom of speech.

The President stated: “... the attacks of the last two weeks are not simply an assault on America. They are also an assault on the very ideals upon which the United Nations was founded – the notion that people can resolve their differences peacefully; that diplomacy can take the place of war; and that in an interdependent world, all of us have a stake in working towards greater opportunity and security for our citizens.”

“If we are serious about upholding these ideals, it will not be enough to put more guards in front of an Embassy; or to put out statements of regret, and wait for the outrage to pass. If we are serious about those ideals, we must speak honestly about the deeper causes of this crisis. Because we face a choice between the forces that would drive us apart, and the hopes we hold in common.”

After summarizing his perception of the support of the United States government for the ‘Arab Spring’, President Obama explained: “We have taken these positions because we believe that freedom and self-determination are not unique to one culture. These are not simply American values or Western values – they are universal values. And even as there will be huge challenges that come with a transition to democracy, I am convinced that ultimately government of the people, by the people and for the people is more likely to bring about the stability, prosperity, and individual opportunity that serve as a basis for peace in our world.”

“So let us remember that this is a season of progress. For the first time in decades, Tunisians, Egyptians, and Libyans voted for new leaders in elections that were credible, competitive, and fair. This democratic spirit has not been restricted to the Arab World. Over the past year, we have seen peaceful transitions of power in Malawi and Senegal, and a new President in Somalia. In Burma, a President has freed political prisoners and opened a closed society; a courageous dissident has been elected to Parliament; and people look forward to further reform. Around the globe, people are making their voices heard, insisting on their innate dignity, and the right to determine their future.

“And yet the turmoil of recent weeks reminds us that the path to democracy does not end with the casting of a ballot. Nelson Mandela once said: ‘To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.’ True democracy
demands that citizens cannot be thrown in jail because of what they believe, and businesses can be opened without paying a bribe. It depends on the freedom of citizens to speak their minds and assemble without fear; on the rule of law and due process that guarantees the rights of all people.”

“In other words, true democracy – real freedom – is hard work. Those in power have to resist the temptation to crack down on dissent. In hard economic times, countries may be tempted to rally the people around perceived enemies, at home and abroad, rather than focusing on the painstaking work of reform.

“Moreover, there will always be those that reject human progress ... we’ve witnessed convulsions that can accompany transitions to a new political order. At times, the conflicts arise along the fault lines of faith, race or tribe; and often they arise from the difficulties of reconciling tradition and faith with the diversity and interdependence of the modern world. In every country, there are those who find different religious beliefs threatening; in every culture, those who love freedom for themselves must ask how much they are willing to tolerate freedom for others.

“That is what we saw play out the last two weeks, as a crude and disgusting video sparked outrage throughout the Muslim world.... I know there are some who ask why we don't just ban such a video. The answer is enshrined in our laws: our Constitution protects the right to practice free speech. Here in the United States, countless publications provoke offense. Like me, the majority of Americans are Christian, and yet we do not ban blasphemy against our most sacred beliefs.

“We do so not because we support hateful speech, but because our Founders understood that without such protections, the capacity of each individual to express their own views, and practice their own faith, may be threatened. We do so because in a diverse society, efforts to restrict speech can become a tool to silence critics, or oppress minorities. We do so because given the power of faith in our lives, and the passion that religious differences can inflame, the strongest weapon against hateful speech is not repression, it is more speech – the voices of tolerance that rally against bigotry and blasphemy, and lift up the values of understanding and mutual respect.

“I know that not all countries in this body share this understanding of the protection of free speech. Yet in 2012, at a time when anyone with a cell phone can spread offensive views around the world with the click of a button, the notion that we can control the flow of information is obsolete. The question, then, is how we respond. And on this we must agree: there is no speech that justifies mindless violence.
“There are no words that excuse the killing of innocents. There is no video that justifies an attack on an Embassy. There is no slander that provides an excuse for people to burn a restaurant in Lebanon, or destroy a school in Tunis, or cause death and destruction in Pakistan.

“A politics based only on anger – one based on dividing the world between us and them – not only sets back international cooperation, it ultimately undermines those who tolerate it....... It is time to leave the call of violence and the politics of division behind. On so many issues, we face a choice between the promise of the future or the prisons of the past. We cannot afford to get it wrong. We must seize this moment. And America stands ready to work with all who are willing to embrace a better future.”

Although one could question fully if the United States government has lived up the principles and goals articulated by the President, one can welcome the publicity given them. Too often the focus of contemporary politics is on interests and accusations. Progress for mankind historically has come from the proclamation of fresh ideas that inspire actions to put them into practice. Some fresh statement of the principles that should be guiding the exciting and unpredictable development of a world culture is long overdue. Otherwise, the 7 billion citizens of the world remain vulnerable to the politics of power, rationalization and repression.