

Framing Insight, Analysis, and Acumen

At his second inaugural, U.S. President Barack Obama harkened back to some language of the original framers of the American Declaration of Independence from Great Britain and the constitution they created after they gained their liberty. “Each time we gather to inaugurate a president,” he reminded his audience, “we bear witness to the enduring strength of our Constitution. We affirm the promise of our democracy. We recall that what binds this nation together is not the colors of our skin or the tenets of our faith or the origins of our names.

“What makes us exceptional, what makes us America is our allegiance to an idea articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

But then he veered off to note the increasing polarity of the world, and even of the increasing gulf among Americans. “Today,” said Obama, “we continue a never ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time. For history tells us that while these truths may be self-evident, they’ve never been self-executing. That while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by his people here on earth.

“That is our generation’s task, to make these works, these rights, these values of life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness real for every American. Being true to our founding documents does not require us to agree on every contour of life. It does not mean we all define liberty in exactly the same way or follow the same precise path to happiness. Progress does not compel us to settle century’s long debates about the role of government for all time, but it does require us to act in our time.

“For now, decisions are upon us and we cannot afford delay. We cannot mistake absolutism for principle or substitute spectacle for politics, or treat name-calling as reasoned debate. We must act. We must act knowing that our work will be imperfect. We must act knowing that today’s victories will be only partial, and that it will be up to those who stand here in four years and 40 years and 400 years hence to advance the timeless spirit once conferred to us in a spare Philadelphia hall.”

In other words, as we have said many times, committing to democracy and the rule of law is hard, continual work that is never finished.

MARCH ELECTION CALENDAR

| DATE | COUNTRY | ELECTION |
|------|----------|---|
| 4 | Kenya | <p>President and Parliament</p> <p>Why It Matters: Kenya's elections five years ago were marked by bloodshed, and while the nation has settled down and has a new, more equitable constitution, a new election commission with more power and a reformed judiciary, the nation remains unstable. There is still far too much tribalism and ethnic voting, and Kenyans are nervous. In particular, they worry about how an International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation and forthcoming trial of candidates Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto will play out. Both candidates have pledged to respect the ICC's verdict, but meanwhile, both candidates, who stand trial the day after the election, are fanning the ethnic flames. A peaceful outcome will greatly enhance Kenya's investment climate at a time when it needs it.</p> |
| 7 | Malaysia | <p>Parliament</p> <p>Why It Matters: As one of Asia's fast-growing economies, Malaysia has depended on a ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), since its founding as a state in 1969. But due to increasing corruption and poor governance, plus a slowing economy, the BN coalition won the 2008 general elections with only 140 seats, its worst result since the 1969 elections. The opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition won 82 seats, thereby denying the BN its two-thirds majority which is required to pass amendments to the Federal Constitution. Pakatan Rakyat also gained five of the 13 state assemblies (has since lost one state assembly-Perak to BN due to defection) and 10 of the 11 parliamentary seats in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. That was the first major setback of the BN since the 1969 general elections. What the coalition needs is some new blood and less favor-trading among its members.</p> |

| DATE | COUNTRY | ELECTION |
|------|------------------|---|
| 9 | Malta | Parliament |
| 17 | Falkland Islands | Sovereignty Referendum Why It's Important: We've written recently about the referendum and Argentina's claims on the Falklands, which it insists upon calling Los Malvinas. The 2,563 residents of the islands have lived there without incident for over 200 years, with the exception of a disastrous invasion by Argentina in 1982, which was repelled by British troops. The Argentine military was discredited as a result, which led to the eventual restoration of democracy in Argentina. But now, beset by rising inflation and dwindling popularity, Argentine President Cristina Kirchner is again attempting to make the Falklands an issue. The referendum will almost certainly result in the islanders voting to retain their sovereignty and ties to Great Britain, and will also almost certainly be ignored by Argentina. With the likelihood that oil and gas finds will pan out, that could put both nations on a new collision course. |