Sri Lankan Visitors Learn How 'Politics Is A Good Thing'

April 1, 2009 — For people in the many of the world's democracies, professor Larry Sabato's famous motto – "Politics is a good thing" – rings hollow, and would require a good bit of explaining. A new initiative from the University of Virginia's Center for Politics is using citizen-to-citizen diplomacy to do just that.

A group of Sri Lankans came to U.Va. last week with a reluctance to be involved in politics in their country, "because its so corrupt, you don't want to be associated with it," as one of the visitors explained. Their young democracy, founded in 1931, also struggles with a long-running armed conflict between the island nation's two major ethnic groups, the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists.

After spending four days with the Center for Politics' inaugural Global Perspectives on Democracy program, they left with a newfound willingness to participate in the work of improving their democracy, as they came to appreciate how America's own democracy, the oldest in the world, has also struggled with many challenges, from corrupt leaders to voter apathy.

"We learned that democracy needs time to go through an evolutionary process," said Mohamed Hisham, a computer expert who has participated in a grassroots network called the Sri Lankan Youth Parliament. "It's easy to bash politicians, and put all the blame on those guys, but this whole program gives you a broader perspective, rather than just trying to put the blame on someone."

He and fellow participant Yogitha Karunanandham took inspiration from the election of Barack Obama. "If America could elect a black president within such a short period of time," said Hisham, "in five years' time in our country, it could be something completely different. You never know. It could be one turning point, as it has been for many nations."

Karunanandham is a graduate student and works for a Chamber of Commerce-type organization that advocates for small- and medium-size businesses in Sri Lanka. Before her visit, she had "never thought of striving to become a politician," but on Friday she was feeling empowered to get involved with Sri Lankan politics. "There are so many irregularities. Why can't we step in to correct this?"

"As Dr. Sabato says, politics is good, but politicians → depends on the individual," said Hisham. "I'm taking back a message of 'get engaged.'"

The four-day program was funded by the U.S. State Department as part of a longer cultural exchange program coordinated by Relief International.

A series of speakers who have participated in American politics addressed the group, including Lawrence Eagleburger, a former U.S. secretary of state; Virginia Attorney General William Mims; and John Hager, former lieutenant governor of Virginia.

"I feel privileged and lucky to be associated with these people," said Hisham, who was inspired by how much the speakers had contributed to their country. "If people can do that, maybe just a few of us getting through, maybe we might be able to do something for our country."

"They were speaking from their heart," said Hisham, noting that both Republican and Democratic speakers expressed respect for the people and ideas of the opposing party.
Hisham also said he was feeling empowered by the program and "seriously thinking" about getting more involved in politics. He had begun to think, "OK, I've got these skills. I've got this exposure. Let's try it out at least," he explained.

"These remarkable, thoughtful, young Sri Lankans are going to be the ones who produce a better future for their nation," Sabato said. "The Center for Politics and our U.S. and international partners accomplished the goal of arming the best and the brightest not with guns, but with powerful Jeffersonian ideas."

Ken Stroupe, the center's chief of staff, said, "Citizen-to-citizen diplomacy is what Global Perspectives on Democracy is all about; citizens of a democracy in one part of world learning from citizens of a democracy in another part of world.

"That type of grassroots diplomacy can do as much for strengthening democracy as summits with a few national leaders meeting."

Stroupe said the program promotes a two-way dialogue on how to build a better democracy. "It's important for us to realize that we don't have a hold on the perfect way to do it in this country. There's a lot that we hope to learn."

— By Brevy Cannon