

Reflection on my time in Athens as an ADF Student Delegate

Athens Democracy Forum is one of the most incredible experiences of my life. It is a highly commendable initiative undertaken by the Global Liberal Arts Alliance. If I were to describe this in a few words I would say “adventurous and astonishing”.

Adventurous

The most positive part of the ADF experience for me were the interactions and discussions that I had with my fellow student delegates. Sharing thoughts and ideas with them, and learning more about their perspectives was the most fascinating experience during my time in Athens. Often times I had lengthy and rather eye-opening discussions with many of the students. It was an exciting experience to discuss with each student his regions’ politics and explains to him the political dynamics of my region. The social events during the program which mostly included elegant European style dinners were a great opportunity for such kind of discussions.

Another important takeaway was the network and a bond of friendship that I had built during this time with the fellow students from around the world.

The visits to various places in Athens and exposure to Greek culture was also an ecstatic experience. The thrilling tours of the Athenian monuments guided by Ms. Maria Mavreli, were unforgettable. My time in Athens also provided me with a chance to observe closely the Greek culture and value system, which I had always been eager to explore.

The interaction with ADF mentors also had an extremely positive impact on me. Their constant guidance and encouragement throughout the program was an important learning experience for many of us. The ADF mentors had put in a lot of effort to make sure that we were adequately prepared for the role that we had to play at ADF.

ADF is going to be a memorable experience of my life since it is the first time that I had the opportunity to attend such a high-profile conference involving people from the upper echelons of power from around the world. The conference played a major role in boosting my overall self-confidence. Getting myself familiar with the culture and etiquettes of such events and learning how to interact with high profile people to build network and find opportunities for mutual benefit was very valuable and will go a long way in helping me socialize in future. Meeting with corporate executives and civil society personnel, and getting to know how they were changing the world was another important learning opportunity.

Astonishing

There were also a number of things which I didn’t like or felt uncomfortable with at the conference. The most disappointing part was that the discourse throughout the conference was very western centric, and most of the issues discussed were basically the challenges which western democracies are facing. Although democracy faces greater challenges in other parts of the world yet organizers didn’t bother putting them on table. Very few intellectuals and policy makers from non-western countries were in attendance at the conference which led me to think that the name of the conference should have been “Athens Forum on Western Democracy”. I dare say that the debate and discussion which the student

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delegates had among themselves during the preparation was much more meaningful than the actual event.

The most astonishing realization that I had during the forum was how the western elite remains disconnected from their masses, and how there is a lack a vision on how they are going to tackle the problems in western democracies i.e. Globalization, Rise of the Right, Populist Politics and Increasing Inequality.

Another disappointment was how the ADF student delegates were given a limited role in the conference; I feel that they could have contributed much more than they were given the opportunity to.

Impact on my career and plans

ADF has had a strong impact on me in terms of my future plans and career goals. I was able to acquire an enhanced understanding of issues like globalization, and how democracies can play an important role in development of countries. After attending this conference, I have come to believe that the need for a stronger democracy is more now than ever before in my country. My foremost career goal has been to join the ranks of policymakers in Pakistan, and while initially I was focused more on the economic side of Pakistan's development, I now feel that the political side is equally important. I have also come to appreciate that the policymakers in Pakistan have much to learn from the policymakers of western countries. To this end, I plan to spend a part of my career time with policymakers in a western country, most probably as a think tank associate.

Action Plan

I have also realized that only the youth of Pakistan can play a decisive role in bringing stronger democratic values into our political system. To this end, I have been planning to launch a youth advocacy group for democracy on my campus. The involvement of youth in political sphere remains limited and I believe that through sufficient effort one can bring about the necessary understanding of democracy among the Pakistani youth.

Suggestions to GLAA

GLAA and its partners have done an outstanding work in materializing this initiative; this program has been a life changing experience for many of us. One of the ways through which, I believe, GLAA could have made this program even more meaningful and sustainable would have been by organizing the students into an inter-campus group which will work together to promote democracy across the GLAA campuses.

The 23 students could have developed a joint project, which then all the students would have implemented on their respective campuses. I strongly believe that the ADF student delegates can organize themselves into a meaningful international youth organization on college campuses around the world; and thus, sustain the momentum and spirit gathered by this initiative for the long run. I also think that the Endeavor Foundation could develop a long-term program to engage 'The Endeavor Fellows' for promotion of its objectives, and the personal development of all the Fellowship grantees.