clear that those who are assuming power are oath-bound to respect the Constitution, its fundamental principles, which defined the basic structure of the Constitution, and the fundamental rights of citizens, guaranteed by the Constitution. These constitutional obligations provide a shield against abrupt constitutional amendments by a transient majority for gaining some short-term political advantage, disregarding the national consensus on which the original Constitution was based.

In a multi-party democracy, political parties have a vital role to play, but that role has to be played subject to the Constitution, which requires that power is to be exercised, strictly in accordance with the law and the Constitution, in the national and public interest. This requires fairness and impartiality in the making of public appointments, and dealing with public resources. The oath taken to exercise power in accordance with the Constitution and the law is a solemn pledge not to allow party considerations to prevail over national or public interest. The role of parliament and its members could become more effective if the functioning of parties could be brought into conformity with the mandates of the Constitution and law.

FORUM: *How can the dreams woven into the Constitution almost four decades ago be realised today?*

KH: We need to recognise the imperative of nurturing in civil society a durable unity based on a sincere commitment to certain core human values -- human dignity and the fundamental rights that derive from it, equality of all persons, equality before the law, equality of opportunity, the rule of law including independence of the judiciary. This unity must transcend the diversity of ethnicity, gender, religion, or political affiliation which tend to divide us. We must be vigilant to ward off the threats to this unity and assaults upon it from those powerful forces who feel threatened by a strengthened civil society. These forces exist in every society -- a mutually-supportive alliance of power and wealth, which are self-serving and willing to use any means to achieve their purposes. Examples abound of how they promote violence, discord and division by inciting communal and ethnic conflict, thus undermining the development of democratic institutions. Where these forces prevail we witness the phenomenon of the cartelisation and criminalisation of politics, and the consequent disempowerment of people and weakening of civil society.

Military rule is certainly a threat, but it is not the only one, civilian autocrats also disempower the people. As former US vice-president Al Gore has written in his book The Assault on Reason, "The derivation of just power from the consent of the governed depends upon the integrity of the reasoning process through which that consent is given . . . If the reasoning process is corrupted by money and deception . . . extorted through manipulation of mass fears, or embezzled with claims of divine guidance, democracy is impoverished. If the suspension of reason causes a significant proportion of the citizenry to lose confidence in the integrity of the process, democracy can be bankrupted."

We must never compromise on core human values for short-term political or commercial advantage, or in response to narrow parochial, partisan or communal loyalties. Healthy politics and the spirit of the young generation are what brought us liberation from oppressive foreign forces as well as from local autocratic rule. These, mobilised by the media, are what can bring change today. Instead of engaging in unnecessary controversies, we should be positive, constructive and forward-looking, upholding and realising the true vision of the Constitution, which was the development and betterment of all people.

FORUM: *Does the failure to realise the dreams embodied in our Constitution only frustrate or do you believe that there is still room for hope?*

KH: Dr. Ambedkar, one of the architects of the Indian Constitution, said, "If atrocities against the impoverished and oppressed untouchables do not stop, I would myself like to burn the Constitution." Many of us may have shared this sentiment at times, when we see provisions in constitutions which proclaim that all power belongs to the people, and guarantee fundamental rights, including economic and social rights, reduced to mere paper pledges. The proper response is not to burn constitutions, but to make them into living realities. This is possible if citizens resolve to play a proactive role as members of a vibrant civil society so that the pledges that "we the people" -- the opening words in our Constitution -- had made to ourselves, may be truly fulfilled.

We are far from the vision of the Constitution, but if we follow its principles -- some of which are similar to the pledges outlined in the government's charter for change -- we may come close to fulfilling it.