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U.S. election tussle riveted foreign journalists

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NEW YORK — Jay Leno, David Letterman and the rest of America's late-night comedians aren't the only ones in the world joking about the election night that turned into an election month.

Other developed countries, long lectured about the virtues of democracy by American leaders, have been making the United States the butt of their own post-election jokes for weeks now.

But in less-developed countries, in areas where democracy is just beginning to take hold, the jokes are laced with fear. Government officials wonder whether the United States doesn't know what it is doing when attempting the most basic element of running a democracy: electing a leader.



AP Photo

Man looks at newspapers with reports of George W. Bush's victory in U.S. presidential election at a newsstand in Shanghai, China, today.

If democracy doesn't work in America, they ask, how can they trust it to work for them?

Those were the key points, and one of the key questions, that arose last night during a Freedom Form panel discussion at the First Amendment Center, at which journalists from Europe, Asia, South America and Africa fielded questions about how their countries view the U.S. election, and how the uncertainty of the past 37 days affects the United States' standing internationally.

The discussion, part of a "Press, Power and Politics" series sponsored by The Freedom Forum in countries ranging from the United Kingdom to Peru, evoked expressions of both amusement and concern among the four journalists on the panel.

Reader interest among the French increased dramatically the moment that events in Florida threw into doubt the likely outcome of the election, said Sylvie Kauffmann, a New York correspondent for the French newspaper *Le Monde*.

"We've covered it daily," she added. "At the beginning, everybody was laughing, really. It was really a subject of jokes. We had a little bit of fun at your expense."

But after the jokes came "bewilderment," she said.

"We discovered, I think maybe at the same time as a lot of you, how voting actually happened in this country," she said. "I must say, I covered the Eastern bloc, and the fall of communism and the transition to

democracy. I spent a lot of time in the voting booth and paid a lot of attention to how people were actually voting.

"But to find that you (in America) would have different voting systems, even in the same state, this is for us a matter of really big, big surprise. So there was this dimension of huge surprise in France, as well as the fun aspect."

In West Africa, fun took a back seat. There, leaders in developing democracies found themselves fending off accusations by countries that had rejected democracy that the United States' system was as flawed as any other system of government.

"In Senegal, we are very worried, because we are trying democracy with some degree of success, and what we see is people telling us it's not viable," said Dame Babou, the U.S. correspondent for Senegal's Sud Communication.

In essence, Babou said, anti-democracy forces began to use the United States' situation as "proof" that democracy cannot work, even in the most developed of countries.

"They were able to say, 'You see your model. You're telling us about democracy, You're gloating. You did a smooth transition, but you've haven't seen anything yet. This is just one success, and the failures are coming,'" Babou said.

In countries like the Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe, he explained, "people were rejoicing, because the U.S. is coming to tell us how we should conduct our elections, (but) look at what happened to them."

One popular joke in the Ivory Coast was that the West African country should send a team of observers to monitor the vote recount in Florida, Babou added.

In Zimbabwe, however, he said, "They almost say, clearly, (Florida Gov.) Jeb Bush, like many provincial governors in Africa, stole the election for his brother. As simple as that."

The panelists said they had to explain to their readers and viewers a range of issues not easily understood, from problems with ballot chads and voting machines to the even more complex issues of why the U.S. Supreme Court helped decide the election and why the Electoral College could award the presidency to one candidate even though the other received more popular votes.

"In most countries, the person who won the popular vote (wins) it," said Simone Duarte of Globo Television in Brazil. "In Latin America, we have this kind of feeling that we are always called the Banana Republic. And suddenly we were like, come on, they are the ones who cannot (choose a president).

"We know who is going to be the president in one days or two days, and 30 days later, they don't know who is going to be the president."

Much of the discussion focused on the flawed method of punch-card balloting in Florida.

In France and Senegal, the panelists said, all counting is done by hand: voters put the name of their preferred candidate into an envelope, and the vote is later recorded. Brazil uses a computer system.

"We didn't have the idea that you voted with these machines, these old ones," said Duarte. "The week after everything happened in Florida, we sent a team to Florida, the people who were the producers of the machine that we use in Brazil, to tell you guys how to do better."

The panel also discussed world reaction to president-elect George W. Bush.

In Taiwan, the people "cheered when we learned the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court," said Tony Lin of the Chinese Television System in Taiwan.

Although the Taiwanese worry somewhat about Bush's reputation as a foreign-policy lightweight, Lin said, Bush has voiced strong support for Taiwan — at least, greater support for Taiwan than for the People's Republic of China, which considers Taiwan to be a renegade province that should return to Chinese rule.

"We tend to think we will be better off, the Taiwanese people will be better off, under a Bush administration," Lin added.

Others on the panel were more skeptical. Babou said he worried that Bush would ignore Africa's problems, that he would consider Africa a matter of no interest to America.

Kauffmann, in a remark that seemed to surprise most of the more than 100 people in the audience, said Bush's "inexperience and apparent lack of interest" in foreign policy was not the only important reason people worry about his presidency.

"The second reason, which I don't think many people are aware of here, is the death penalty," Kauffmann said. "Bush is seen as the executioner-in-chief in Western Europe."

Despite the concerns, even despite the jokes, all the panelists said the people in their countries still respected the American system and, moreover, the American citizenry.

Even at the height of uncertainty, they said, nobody panicked.

"The way I reported it and the way I see it, the (U.S.) system is very complex, but it has powerful means to deal with difficulty, unlike what we see in Africa," Babou said. "If the system has some failures, it has mechanisms to deal with them. The tanks are not in the streets."

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