

Written Testimony of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI)

**Submitted to the Foreign Operations Subcommittee
of the Senate Committee on Appropriations**

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The National Democratic Institute (NDI) appreciates this opportunity to present its views on U.S. democracy assistance programs.

Promotion of Democracy and U.S. Interests

The worldwide democratic revolution of the 1990s demonstrated the nearly universal appeal of democratic values and cemented a unique leadership role for the United States in advancing those values. A bipartisan policy consensus emerged that nothing better serves the interests of the United States than the promotion of democratic practices and institutions.

Since September 11th, some analysts have argued that strategic considerations should take precedence over policies that promote respect for human rights, religious tolerance and democratic decision-making.

The notion that there should be a dichotomy between our moral preferences and our strategic goals is a false one. The United States' ultimate foreign policy goal is a world that is secure, stable, humane and safe, and where the risk of war is minimal. Yet the undeniable reality is that geostrategic "hot spots" most likely to erupt into violence are found, for the most part, in areas of the world that are nondemocratic.

NDI firmly believes that the United States should attach the highest priority to democratic development as an essential element of its foreign assistance programs. The promotion of democracy should be seen as a robust and necessary element of our strategy to confront the new global threat of terror.

Terrorism and political extremism pose an immediate security threat that must be confronted directly and forcefully. Concurrently there must be a new urgency in the promotion of the rule of law, pluralism and respect for human rights. Democracy and human rights are not only ideals to be pursued by all nations -- they are also pragmatic tools that are powerful weapons in the worldwide confrontation of terror and extremism.

In his address to Congress in the aftermath of September 11, President Bush said, "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." His warning registered everywhere, precisely because it was universally understood that terrorism is a threat to civilization and those who sustain the threat will suffer the consequences.

Most governments, including undemocratic ones, understand that terrorism threatens them as much as it does the United States. Indeed, many leaders in countries yet to join the democratic community have joined the U.S.-led coalition because terrorism threatens their own survival in power. Our allies in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have faced political extremism and appreciate what the Talibanization of their societies would mean.

However, the price for their cooperation should not include an open-ended sanction for their governing style, nor should the price of coalition exclude, even unintentionally, support for democratizers.

Political extremists live in a symbiotic relationship with nondemocratic regimes. Autocracy, corruption, and the lack of accountability feed powerlessness, poverty, and despair. Authoritarianism bars change within the system; among its subjects, it produces easy rationales for extra-legal methods. Radical groups cynically exploit the discontent created by such an environment, in which the only outlet for political expression becomes the mosque. Some disaffected people come to relish their role as “fighters” against what they perceive as corruption and repression.

During the 1980s, an important lesson was learned about political transformations in countries like the Philippines and Chile -- that political forces on the far left and far right enjoy a mutually reinforcing relationship, drawing strength from each other and, in the process, marginalizing the democratic center. Prospects for peace and stability only emerged once democratic political parties and civic groups were able to offer a viable alternative to the two extremes – a “third way.” These democratic forces benefited from the solidarity and support they received from the international community and, in the U.S., Republicans and Democrats joined together in bipartisan efforts to champion their cause.

As the United States pursues its current strategic imperatives with allies like Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Egypt, we can also work to promote a “third way” between authoritarianism and religious extremism. As much as the strongmen whose cooperation we need presently, democracy-builders in these countries also are our allies against political extremism. Their voices are important in challenging the misconception that democracy and Islam are incompatible, and they are a force that can build a genuine constituency for peace, development and prosperity.

However, many democratic activists in the Middle East and Asia now fear that they might be caught in a kind of “squeeze play” between governments that are using the call to action against terrorism to root out even benign forms of political participation, and fundamentalists who have always regarded democratic reform as a threat to their vision of a religious state.

The U.S. agenda in these countries can include help for the war effort, as well as support for those working for freedom of speech and expression, for fair elections that reflect the will of the voters, for representative political institutions that are accountable to the public, and for judiciaries that uphold the rule of law.

There are many examples of democracy building successes, even in regions of the world most afflicted by terrorism and extremist violence.

In Pakistan, the Human Rights Commission has been organizing community groups to address problems of freedom of the press and to encourage women to participate in political life. In Uzbekistan, the Human Rights Society is supporting the legal right of political movements to register with the state as official entities.

In Kazakhstan, a coalition of nongovernmental organizations has lobbied the Parliament to overturn legislation that would eliminate the last remnants of independent media. In Egypt, a number of civil society groups led by respected academic Saad Eddin Ibrahim monitored parliamentary elections and reported on abuses.

Harassment or jail has often been their reward, but in all cases, these democratic activists are not trying to overthrow governments -- they are trying to take away the lifeblood of extremism by providing political space for debate and peaceful dissent.

Future Challenges

Even in countries which are widely regarded as democratic success stories, "next generation" democracy challenges, such as corruption, economic progress, political party reform, technological issues like e-governance, women, youth and minority participation, leadership development and addressing public apathy and disaffection, must be tackled through greater linkages between the citizenry and political institutions and politicians.

NDI has never believed that democracy promotion is a panacea but sees these activities as one element of a mix of foreign aid and development initiatives that include economic development and socio-political considerations. But economic reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, for example, are unlikely to succeed in the long term unless democratic political institutions are also developed.

Democracy promotion programs, to be effective, must identify specific challenges in each country, and address those challenges while taking culture, tradition and history into consideration.

It could be demoralizing and ultimately self-defeating to yield ground to those professional cynics who describe democratic development in Hobbesian terms in which war, poverty and autocracy are the natural state of affairs. To them, the promotion of democracy is at best a distraction. This pessimistic view of the world contradicts the reality on the ground where courageous democrats with outside support can help realize their people's democratic aspirations.

The *realpolitik* approach is to support democratic change and take on the tough work that will lead to stability and economic growth in the long term. Who can doubt that the support the U.S. provided Solidarity in Poland, the pro-democratic forces in Chile, those struggling against

apartheid in South Africa or Milosevic in Serbia have not been worthwhile investments in peace and prosperity.

Elements of Political Democratization

While there is no single model for a democratic political system, the components of a political democratization process are fairly common. Each represents key mechanisms of conflict resolution within a society:

- 1) Civic culture – this is the most fundamental level of democracy promotion, where the goal is to educate citizens on their rights and responsibilities.
- 2) Intermediary organizations – citizens’ organizations such as labor unions, business groups and other associations are needed. In societies where these groups have not existed, outside assistance to develop them is required.
- 3) Political parties – these are the vehicles for healthy political competition, the institutional mechanisms that allow a society to aggregate ideas. If these groups are not organized democratically, or if they fail to perform their role, the democratic system will be threatened.
- 4) Election systems – developing election processes capable of producing a valid and representative reflection of the electorate’s will is essential in establishing legitimate governments.
- 5) Governmental institutions – executive branches, parliaments, judiciaries and local governments must function effectively, with openness and integrity.

Role of U.S. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

While the U.S. government can set the tone, and foreign aid can provide needed resources for democratic development, much of the real work must be done by non-governmental organizations. Groups such as NDI are capable of assuming responsibility, yet are not constrained by the stringent rules of formal diplomacy. NGOs can readily share information, knowledge and experiences with groups and individuals who are pursuing or consolidating democracy, sometimes without the cooperation or sanction of their government.

Moreover, in countries where one of the issues being addressed is the paucity of autonomous civic and political institutions, the fundamental idea that government ought not to control all aspects of society can be undermined by a too-visible donor government hand in the development and implementation of these programs.

NGO initiatives must grow out of the needs of democrats struggling on the ground in the host country. The work should always be in the open and should be conducted with partners committed to pluralism and nonviolence. At the same time, consultation is necessary with the

Congress, USAID missions and embassies. When public funds are used, transparency and accountability should always prevail.

U.S. Government Support

NGOs such as NDI have greatly appreciated the expansion of democracy initiatives undertaken by USAID. These programs have provided the resources necessary to maintain a permanent field presence in many countries and to sustain, on a long-term basis, political development activities. We hope that needed democracy assistance resources will be maintained and even expanded by AID and that these programs will not, even unintentionally, be reduced as a result of earmarks for other worthy development programs.

The U.S. Congress can play an important role by ensuring needed support for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its core institutes, NDI, the International Republican Institute, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity and the Center for International Private Enterprise.

These organizations have the expertise and the networks of relationships necessary to conduct effective programs around the world, but the need for assistance far outstrips the available resources. The NED's original authorization in 1984 was \$31.4 million; its current budget, which includes the first increase in many years, is \$33.5 million.

The NED and its core institutes give concrete expression to America's democratic values while serving our country's national interest by promoting political environments that are inhospitable to political extremism.