

Community of Democracies

An Organization to Meet 21st Century Challenges to Democracy

In June 2000, Polish Foreign Minister Bronisław Geremek and then U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright launched the Community of Democracies in Warsaw with over 100 other democratic countries. Ten years later, the state of democracy in the world is troubled. The democratization wave of twenty years ago which produced a flowering of democracy in much of the world, especially in the OSCE region, has slowed and in some places, reversed itself. Improvements and backsliding have not been restricted to any one part of the world; In Europe, the Balkans have made great strides, but Belarus remains unfree and Russia slides further into authoritarianism; Indonesia is a notable success story, Burma/Myanmar is firmly in the grip of the military junta; much of Latin America is strengthening its democratic credential, while Venezuela (one of the founders of CoD) has descended into totalitarianism and Cuba is still under authoritarian control. Throughout the world civil society is under attack by authoritarian governments, closing the space for democratic change. Authoritarian states have become more skillful at clamping down on free speech and assembly even as technology provides new tools for activists to communicate with each other and the world.

Most troublesome is the questioning of the democratic-liberal economic model that has emerged in the wake of the financial crisis and the growing economic reach of undemocratic China. The so-called Chinese model of authoritarian governments with limited market economy reforms is attractive to countries which fear democracy's impact on the existing power structure. The failure of unregulated capitalism in the financial crisis provides a rationale for the alternative model. Furthermore, democratic governments find themselves under attack by their populations when they are forced to respond to financial problems by tightening budgets and cutting popular social welfare programs. Some of the tension between strong governance and democracy is evidenced in the tendency for weak democracies to elect strongmen who lead their countries away from democracy. Large, emerging democracies which could provide an alternative to the China model have been reluctant to promote their own democratic values and to speak up about violations of human rights. In part, this reflects their overarching concern for securing resources and expanding markets.

This pessimistic situation calls into question the effectiveness of existing democracy promotion efforts. The issue is not one of lack of organizations or tools. The mechanisms are many and varied: bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and assistance, sanctions, UN and other international governmental agencies, NGOs (domestic and international). It seems unlikely that additional institutions or methodologies could help to reverse the negative trends. Perhaps the problem lies not in failed approaches to democracy promotion, but in the nature of human society itself. The premise that democracy can be successfully promoted from the outside might itself be flawed.

At the Community of Democracies we believe that democracy can be nurtured from inside societies with the support and encouragement of the international, democratic community. But a fresh approach is needed. While all of the instruments and organizations noted above are useful and valuable, on their own they fall short of meeting the demands of the 21st century. The Community of Democracies is based on the premise that all elements of society are critical to the development and sustainment of democracy. Although the CoD is an intergovernmental organization, it

recognizes that governments are not able to bring about democratic change nor withstand the threats to democracy without the active participation of civil society, individual activists and the private business sector. Governments need the rest of society for information on democracy developments in each sector and for reach into the nooks and crannies of that society. Democracy is built on a multiplicity of institutions, which are developed by and serve different constituencies, such as business. And the very foundation of democracy stands on civil society defending its own interests – not only in defense of democracy, but the full range of human and citizen rights. Youth are also integral to the process for the fresh ideas that they bring and, most importantly, to ensure that the work begun today will be carried out in the future.

The governmental pillar of the Community of Democracies is comprised only of democracies. There is no permanent membership. Governments are invited to participate in ministerial conferences and other events based on evidence of their democratic credentials at that specific time. Thus, it is only real democracies that gather together at the UN Democracy Caucus, organized by the Presidency of the CoD, to discuss common positions on issues.

During the past decade in which democracy languished in many places, the CoD struggled to live up to its potential. The rotating presidencies convened ministerials every two years, but there was no mechanism to take action in between sessions. Under the Lithuanian presidency and with the support and encouragement of the Polish government, over the past two years the CoD has taken upon the task of revitalizing itself. To provide continuity between ministerials, the Convening (governing) group of countries endorsed the proposal to establish a Permanent Secretariat, based in Warsaw. The July 2-4 Krakow High Level Democracy Meeting (HLDM) organized by the Permanent Secretariat and hosted by the Polish Foreign Ministry, was a critical step in the process of revitalization.

The HLDM program exemplified the CoD's approach. It brought together 87 government delegations, more than half headed at the ministerial level, over 200 civil society activists, as well as many leading academics, former dignitaries and prominent human rights and democracy defenders. The meeting launched the Corporate Democracy Forum, establishing the private business sector as a critical third pillar of the Community. The Young Diplomats for Democracy and the Young Leaders Forum brought the next generation of civil society and government democracy activist leaders into the community. The Parliamentary Forum which also took place within the framework of the HLDM ensured that the legislative as well as the executive branches of governments will take an active part in building democracy.

The topics for discussion in the thematic panels and the working groups were chosen for their relevancy to democratization today. The potential power of rapidly evolving information technology for advancing democracy was explored by a panel of assistance providers, activists and technology company representatives. At the same time, they acknowledged the risks that these innovations present to activists when they are in the hands of authoritarian governments. Democracy promotion efforts must take into account and address both aspects of technology.

The American Secretary of State's keynote address underscored the importance of civil society and the responsibility of governments to protect it and provide an enabling environment for its growth.

A working group under Canadian leadership and opened by the Canadian Foreign Minister is already developing concrete measures to provide this support. A thematic panel on democracy activists explored the successes and remaining challenges that civil society organizations are experiencing in authoritarian regimes and struggling democracies. Decades ago women were discovered as the essential “key” to economic development in the third world; today, the world has begun to acknowledge that the empowerment of women in society is critical to democratic development as well. A thematic panel at HLDM and a working group were dedicated to discovering how women can play a more active and positive role in the political discourse. Members of the working group are planning a number of events and mentoring opportunities to educate women how to take up this important responsibility. They are also working on using internet resources to expand the networking and information sharing possibilities for women activists.

The Krakow HLDM made clear that the working groups form the heart of the CoD process. They involve all sectors in questions of vital interest to them. In addition to the WGs mentioned above, working groups are also concerned with regional cooperation, threats to democracy and reform of the CoD. We are looking to further expand the geographic and sectoral representation of the working groups. In Krakow, the working groups presented recommendations for the draft Global Democracy Work Plan. The draft plan emphasized the creation of various mechanism for government and civil society representatives to inform each other about threats and opportunities, coordinate their response measures and share best practices. Partnership among private sector, governments and civil society was a key element in many of the recommendations, especially from the working group on Poverty, Development and Democracy, which also called up on governments to prepare policy options for mitigating the impact of the financial crisis on populations. The Permanent Secretariat will be guiding and advising the working groups over the course of the year as to develop and refine these recommendations for inclusion in the final Global Democracy Work Plan, to be formally adopted in Vilnius.

In September, the CoD commemorated International Democracy day with events strengthening the youth pillar and the parliamentary forum. Parliamentary leaders from around the world, including the Speaker of the U.S House of Representatives, NGO leaders and other governmental and non-governmental foreign policy opinion makers emphasized the key role the Community of Democracies plays as a global effort to support and strengthen democracies. Past and current female heads of state and government, including the recently appointed head of UN Women Michele Bachelet, underscored the CoD’s key theme of women and democracy at the September 23 UN General Assembly session of the Democracy Caucus devoted to Women and Democracy.

In October, we will hold the first Corporate Democracy Forum event since its soft launch at the Krakow conference. Representatives from leading Polish and international business organizations and companies will meet to discuss the CDF concept and programmatic direction at a roundtable discussion with Foreign Minister Sikorski. A new feature of the CoD website will allow businesses and business organizations to register for the Corporate to make suggestions and offer their thoughts on the role of business in promoting democracy.

The Krakow HLDM succeeded in engaging the world’s democracies and generating interest in our approach to democratization. The next test will be in July, 2011, when the Lithuanians will host a

ministerial conference in Vilnius to conclude their presidency. At the time, the result of the initiatives launched at Krakow will be presented. Mongolia will then assume the Presidency for the following two years.

We invite your comments and suggestions at this Review conference or afterwards. We also invite you to our side event on October 8 at 1300 in Room 1, when we will have the opportunity to discuss our work and plans in more detail. Representatives of each pillar of the Community of Democracies – government, civil society and private business – will be on hand to present views on their sector's role in the democracy project.