



WORLD MOVEMENT *for* DEMOCRACY

Confronting the Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century

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The World Movement for Democracy at Ten

*Address by David Lowe, National Endowment for Democracy
At a conference on the Movement's Tenth Anniversary
Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, India*

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Let me begin by thanking my friend George Mathew for taking the initiative to convene this important conference. It is a great honor for me to share this opening session with Najam Sethi, and I applaud the participation of so many distinguished guests from throughout the subcontinent whose presence here reflects a deep commitment to democratic values. I am also delighted to be reunited with my former colleague Gautam Adhikari, who did so much to make the initial conference such a success.

In this, a year of commemorations, two stand out as particularly significant. Last December marked the 60 th anniversary of the promulgation of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, a document that has stood the test of time in what its signers hoped would “promote respect for these rights and freedoms and, by progressive measures, national and international, secure their universal and effective recognition and observance.”

And this November we will arrive at the 20 th anniversary of one of the most thrilling events of my lifetime, when the Berlin Wall, which epitomized the contempt tyrants have for universal human rights, came crashing to the ground.

These two anniversaries are united by the idea that men and women around the world share what Abraham Lincoln—whose bicentennial we observed this month--characterized as “the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all people, in all lands, everywhere.” And so it is on this occasion, when we are brought together to recall and celebrate an event whose motivation derived from that same spirit.

When two highly respected Indian organizations, the Centre for Policy Research and the Confederation of Indian Industry, teamed up with my organization, the National Endowment for Democracy, to bring to the capital of the world's largest democracy several hundred democratic activists for plenary addresses and panel discussions ten years ago this month, we could not have imagined that within the relatively short space of a decade, the movement we launched would be able to boast all of the following:

-- A global network consisting of thousands of grassroots democratic activists linked through common values, shared objectives, and new information and communication technology;

-- An international Steering Committee led by the former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell that includes parliamentarians, representatives of political parties and democracy foundations, NGO leaders, journalists, and scholars;

-- Cross-border functional networks of like-minded democratic activists who share ideas and skills and who seek practical solutions on issues like local governance, the participation of women and youth, and others;

-- Regional networks of democrats whose work cuts across those functional categories who combine to tackle the major issues they face both nationally and regionally and to speak with common voice against autocrats in their respective regions; and finally,

-- Four global assemblies since New Delhi, where working groups have explored the key



challenges facing those striving, in the words of the Movement's Founding Statement, "to strengthen democracy where it is weak, to reform and invigorate democracy even where it is long standing, and to bolster pro-democracy groups in countries that have not yet entered into a process of democratic transition."

Each assembly since the first has concluded with the award of Democracy Courage Tributes, shining the spotlight on heroes of democracy working under the most adverse and often dangerous situations who have not, in many cases, attracted the world's attention. Last year at the Fifth Assembly in Ukraine, we paid tribute to journalists in Somalia, who face life threatening danger just to perform the simple but critical task of providing information to fellow citizens; the monks of Burma, whose peaceful demonstrations two years ago were met with violence by the junta that has tragically hijacked that country; and the courageous "dark suited" lawyers of Pakistan, whose protests to promote the rule of law inspired and prompted the larger democratic movement that sparked a national political transition. I might add that the tribute was received by the former President of the Lahore Bar Association Syed Muhammad Shah, who I am so pleased could join us here this morning.

It is worth recalling that two items on the agenda of that first Assembly had a particular impact on shaping the future course of the Movement. The first, to which I have alluded, was the adoption by the plenum of a substantive Founding Statement, in which the participants declared that the time had come "for democrats throughout the world to develop new forms of cooperation to promote the development of democracy." While the statement was clear that democracy is achieved primarily through the struggles of the people inside individual countries, "it is important to do what is possible in each situation to assist the variety of groups and individuals who are working through nonviolent means for democratic opening and change." Furthermore, with new opportunities arising to provide support, whether from established or emerging democracies, the network would be able to provide "an arena of interaction for all those who feel the need for support and those capable of providing it in various ways."

Of course, the goal of building such a movement presupposes—in the words of the statement—"the universality of the democratic idea," the very theme developed by the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in his eloquent and important keynote address that has since been frequently cited. The preeminent development of the 20th century, Dr. Sen argued, was the emergence of democracy as the normal form of governance, one that people would favor once exposed to it. Democracy, he contended, is important both intrinsically and instrumentally, whether in promoting human freedom, in keeping governments accountable, in forming values, or in understanding needs, rights, and duties.

The establishment of democracy as a normal form of government, a "default position" (in Dr. Sen's own cleverly descriptive expression) to which all nations are entitled, reflected a paradigm shift, "extending the potential reach of democracy," as he put it, "to cover billions of people, with their varying histories and cultures and disparate levels of affluence."

A very hopeful message it was, but few of us could have realized at the time that democracy's "Third Wave," a two-decade long tide of democratic expansion that brought the number of electoral democracies from under 40 in 1974 to well over 100 twenty years later, was about to be stalled and, in some regions, reversed.

The first warning signs would come only eight months after that first Assembly with the overthrow of the civilian government in Pakistan. This was followed by what a leading student of democracy, Larry Diamond, has referred to as a "democracy recession," which included serious backsliding in a number of electoral democracies as well as setbacks in countries that had experienced democratic revolutions. These setbacks resulted from multiple causes, including weak governing institutions, official corruption, poor economic performance, and internal conflict, among others.

The past decade has also brought about what Diamond calls a "consolidation of dictatorship" among authoritarian rulers wary of nearby democratic transitions and determined to prevent similar eruptions in their own countries. This "backlash" against potential democratic gains has resulted in serious threats to civil society. In many cases these threats have included outright crackdowns on democracy activists, human rights groups, and independent media, ranging from repression to imprisonment and even execution. But increasingly, it has taken more subtle forms of harassment, including efforts to close off political space for civil society organizations by creating legal or quasi-legal barriers to entry to prevent the activities of such organizations and even, in many cases, their very creation.



One common strategy of these regimes is to separate their own civil societies from international assistance, the very source of solidarity and support highlighted in the Founding Statement declared by the participants to the World Movement's founding assembly a decade ago. In response, the Steering Committee initiated a project toward the end of 2006 that has exposed the crackdown on democracy-related activity while identifying, articulating, and disseminating those well-defined principles, rooted in international law, that protect civil society and should inform proper government-civil society relations. The project, entitled "Defending Civil Society," and undertaken in partnership with the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, has included regional consultations with democracy activists to review, discuss, and provide input into the draft of the report, publication of the report in all UN languages, and dissemination to regional bodies such as the European Parliament and the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights. Let me note that with a generous grant from the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the World Movement will continue to implement the report by developing measures to counter the democracy backlash.

Establishing the principle that NGOs have the right to receive international assistance begs the question of how effective such assistance is in helping these groups develop their capacities and to carry out meaningful programs. In a workshop at the Fifth Assembly held last year in Ukraine that brought together assistance foundations with NGO representatives, it was argued that the time has come to make a comprehensive assessment of democracy assistance: what has worked best and why? In response, the Steering Committee has launched another venture along the lines of the Defending Civil Society Project, one expected to result in strengthening the effectiveness of international support to those on the ground who are struggling to carry out programs often in the face of great challenges. For this project, the Movement will partner with the European think tank FRIDE.

In all of the Movement's activities, our focus has been on the pragmatic. We have avoided involvement in divisive political issues, opting instead for practical support for democrats on the ground by serving as an ally, a lobby, a facilitator, an innovator, a big tent, a resource center, a monitor, and a catalyst for those working on a day-to-day basis to spread and consolidate democracy.

And what of the future? In addition to carrying out these roles more expansively, we will need to come up with creative ways to bring larger numbers of young people into the Movement. I am pleased to report that the development of a Youth Network for Democracy is well underway, having received seed funding from the Hurford Foundation and additional support from the U.S. Department of State to convene young leaders over the coming year to share ideas on how best to network, disseminate information, and organize in challenging environments. And the Steering Committee has authorized the creation of a new participants' database for the Movement that will be our own social network site, along the lines of Facebook, for deepening and expanding the World Movement as a global network.

Despite the "democratic recession" of recent years, there are a number of hopeful signs, which will not be unfamiliar to this audience. Indeed, the recent annual survey by the worldwide monitoring organization Freedom House, entitled, appropriately, "Setbacks and Resilience," describes developments in South Asia as the most significant gains for freedom in the year 2008. And although the "dire developments" of recent years, including terrorism, religious extremism, failed states, civil conflict, etc. have had a negative impact on democratic fortunes throughout the world, the Freedom House report echoes the argument made by Amartya Sen a decade ago by asserting that "democracy remains the only system of government that commands global respect."

Securing democracy anywhere it has not been consolidated is, of course, a long-term prospect. Those of us working to help bring it about will have to exhibit both patience and perseverance. I am confident that with the power of the democratic idea to guide its work, combined with the commitment and determination of its thousands of participants, the World Movement for Democracy will grow and thrive, and that it will continue to, in the words of its founders, "help people throughout the world who aspire to democracy as a way of life for themselves and future generations."