

Remarks to the Convening Group of the Community of Democracies
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Ten years after the founding of the Community of Democracies, the High Level Democracy Meeting takes place at a time of political as well as economic recession in the world. Democracy continues to be the predominant form of government in the world, and the preferred form of government among publics in every region of the world, but there are a growing signs of a contraction in freedom and democracy globally. This “democratic recession” has the following elements.

First, after a long period of expansion—during which the number of democracies roughly tripled from 40 in 1974 to 120 by 1999—the number of democracies has stagnated and more recently contracted. According to Freedom House, the number of democracies at the end of 2009 was the lowest number (116) since the early 1990s. This is because democratic transitions are becoming less frequent and the incidence of democratic breakdown has been increasing in the last decade. If we count not only blatant reversals of democracy—by either military or executive coup—but also incremental degradations of the democratic process, about one of every five democracies that has existed during the third wave has been reversed. And the vast majority of all the democratic reversals (30) that have occurred during the last 35 years have occurred since 1999—nine just in the last three years.

Second the level of freedom in the world, as measured annually by Freedom House, has been declining for the last several consecutive years. Every year except one between 1996 and 2005, the number of countries improving their freedom scores (on either political rights or civil liberties or both) exceeded the number of countries declining in freedom—and usually by a large margin. However, the last four years (2006-2009) have been the first consecutive years since the end of the Cold War in which the number of countries declining in freedom exceeded the number gaining. Nearly four times as many countries declined as improved in freedom in 2007, and during 2008 and 2009 well over twice as many declined as improved.

These two negative trends are related. When democracy is lost, freedom levels decline. But, in addition, virtually all of the democracies that have broken down since 1999 were illiberal, and a number of them had gradually been getting more so over time. These democracies were poorly governed, with high levels of corruption, weak rule of law, and low state capacity. In other words, there is an apparent correlation between bad governance and democratic vulnerability. The widespread persistence of corrupt, crime-ridden, abusive, highly illiberal and superficial democracy—with little or no improvement in many cases of new democracies—is a third worrisome trend.

The fourth reason for concern is “authoritarian resilience”—and one could add, increasing authoritarian self-confidence—of the Chinese Communist regime, along with the apparent vitality of a number of autocracies, such as Russia, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, and Venezuela. Even where authoritarianism has been in palpable crisis, with mass mobilization for

democratic change—in countries like Zimbabwe, Burma, and Iran—the regime has hung on, at least for now.

Fifth has been the escalating assault on civil society and on democracy assistance. Many authoritarian regimes have persisted in part by sharing “worst practices,” such as techniques and strategies for censorship and suppression of Internet freedom, closure of civic space, and criminalization of civil society linkages to international democracy networks and donors. Authoritarian regimes may be highly illegitimate, but they have engaged in learning and adaptation for survival. The backlash against democracy assistance has made it more difficult to provide the kinds of aid that helped independent organizations in other countries to build the organizational and civic infrastructure for an eventual transition to democracy.

Sixth, the energy and resolve to push political values and models appear to be shifting from democracies to autocracies. Post-communist Russia has long been active, particularly under Putin, in pushing its authoritarian model with a claim to be differently democratic. China has been energetically extending its economic reach and other dimensions of its soft power into Asia as well as Africa and Latin America. The Islamic Republic of Iran has been intervening with great resourcefulness and Machiavellian skill to shape political developments in Lebanon and Iraq. While Iran has lost what remained of its appeal as a model with its brutal repression of the Green Movement, Hugo Chavez (and other versions of authoritarian populism) continue to resonate among some Latin America constituencies. And African autocrats love to cite China’s authoritarian success as an “alternative” and in fact superior model of development.

Finally, there are signs of a loss of self-confidence and political will among the democracies of the world, particularly the more mature, industrial democracies of Europe, North America, Australia and Japan. Part of this stems from the recent global financial crisis and its origins in the advanced democracies. But much of it represents a backlash against “democracy promotion,” both in reaction against the perceived excesses of the George W. Bush Administration and in exhaustion with the efforts at state building and democracy building in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result of this, and perhaps a more diffuse political fatigue, more and more people in democracies are asking if it’s really their concern or responsibility to assist or support democracy elsewhere in the world.

These trends do not amount—yet—to a “reverse wave” of democratic breakdowns. The trend is negative, but still only modestly. It can be tilted back toward democratic progress.

There are still some significant positive elements. One is that many substantial emerging-market democracies have experienced noteworthy progress toward democratic deepening and consolidation over the last decade. The survival of democracy is not in question in most of Central and Eastern Europe, or in such other third-wave democracies as Brazil, Chile, Taiwan, South Korea, Ghana, and South Africa. Even most democracies that have been hit hard by the global recession seem to be weathering the storm.

Second, the economic dynamism of many emerging market democracies is itself a cause for hope. And related to this is the fact that, finally, economic growth appears to be lifting the incomes of the poor in a number of these countries, though not rapidly enough. Much has been

learned about the kinds of institutions and policies—including conditional cash transfer programs and other targeted forms of assistance—that can reduce poverty and inequality and widen the stakes in democracy. The recently released Social Agenda for Democracy in Latin America, produced by 20 former Latin American presidents, represents an important vision for deepening democracy socially as well as institutionally.

Third, popular support for democracy remains perhaps surprisingly robust. Public opinion surveys in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the postcommunist states, and the Arab states all show that majorities of the public within reach region prefer democracy as the best form of government. Strikingly, this is true even in the poorer countries of Africa and Asia, and in Arab countries with no direct experience of democracy.

A fourth hopeful trend is the rapid growth of the new technology of information and communication, what I call “liberation technology.” Authoritarian regimes are doing much to control and suppress it. But the rapid growth of the new social media and of technologies of circumvention of censorship offer hope of empowering democratic actors. These new media are proving to be potent tools to document and challenge authoritarian abuses, to monitor elections, to detect and expose corruption, to defend human rights, to organize civil society, and to provide new arenas for public expression, reporting, and debate. The positive impact on democracy will grow if the established democracies exercise restraint in monitoring and constraining the Internet themselves while standing up for Internet freedom and investing in technologies to promote secure and free access.

The world is perched precariously now between renewed democratic progress and accelerated democratic erosion. Because there are strong factors pulling in opposite directions, what the existing democracies of the world do—individually and collectively—can have a powerful effect on the global fate of democracy. Passivity, division, and ineptitude among established democracies could enable teetering autocracies to persist while leaving struggling democracies to wither and fall. On the other hand, renewed energy, resolve, and cooperation among the democracies could revitalize democracy globally. In short, an effective Community of Democracies is needed now—more than ever.