

Walking the Talk of Democratic Governance

Parliamentary Forum
Community of Democracies Conference
Hon. David Kilgour
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As prepared for delivery:

This forum is organized by Lithuania on the premise that parliamentarians should have a major role in strengthening democratic institutions and good governance worldwide. No longer will foreign ministers and their ministries alone be seized with the business of this Community. Congratulations to the government of Lithuania as the new chair of the Community for its innovative work, including electing rotating leadership of the Council.

Elected legislators can make a important contribution. They carry the hopes and dreams of constituents and as such their adrenalin ought to surge every day in office. They know that their employment contracts come up for renewal at each election, but should not forget the importance of vigorous opposition parties to good governance.

Civil Society

Civil society should also be partners with governments. The civil society dimension gives the Community representation at the grassroots level throughout the democratic world on a range of issues from the rule of law, fair and free elections, human rights, to social programs. The Council for a Community of Democracies acts as secretariat for 25 civil society partners to the Community governments.

This parliamentary forum should use its new role to make concrete proposals at each Community meeting. Despite financial problems everywhere, support must be provided to the institutions of the Community.

The waves of multi-party democracy sweeping through much of the world during the past thirty years have been extraordinary achievements, resulting in the empowerment of many civil societies, including Poland's world famous Solidarnosc. We democrats need to remember to place good governance processes above ourselves and our ambitions.

Perceptions of Democracy

A 2007 paper by the Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California (Irvine)*, based on then recent opinion surveys from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, provides

encouragement to democrats everywhere. "In country after country throughout the world, a clear majority of the population endorses democracy. This is some good news that emerges from the latest wave of WVS/EVS surveys, covering over 80 percent of the world's population." The paper also indicates that "democratic aspirations are shaped by the perceptions of the liberties and freedom that democracy can produce, and that are seen as lacking in other political systems."

In Afghanistan, for example, people yearn for democracy. More than a dozen opinion surveys conducted across the country since 2004 have revealed an unambiguous and strong commitment among ordinary Afghans for democratic governance, the rule of law and the rights of women to work outside the home and run for political office. Afghans are also aware that their abandonment by the world's democracies, seeking an exit strategy "peace deal" with the Taliban would result in a betrayal of their embryonic democracy.

Awkward truths

How often have those struggling for the rule of law and freedom been abandoned by democratic governments in other countries because it might have cost something to help? Remember Poland in 1939. One-party regimes are too often praised or courted. Democracy support can get in the way of trade, investments and perceived demands of security. What price are we willing to pay for self-government and for those who strive for it despite high personal cost? We admire Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, and many others, who have given up everything for the democratic ideals we claim as our own.

Consider Iran whose regime uses stoning, amputation and other forms of execution against children, women and men. The mullahs seek to export their ways around the region. One example is the threat to Camp Ashraf in Iraq, which is home to 1100 women and more than 2000 men, refugees from Iran under the Fourth Geneva Convention. They are supporters or members of the PMOI/MEK (People's Mujahedeen of Iran), which all EU members removed from their terrorist lists last year, following seven European court decisions saying it cannot be considered a terrorist organization. It is unfortunately still on the terrorist lists for Canada and the US.

The US government announced that on July 1st its military presence at Ashraf would end when its base there is transferred to Iraqi forces, which have previously attacked Ashraf under the influence of Tehran. Claiming the US will continue to monitor the situation closely to ensure that the government of Iraq abides by its obligations to protect the residents, it admits that the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, known as UNAMI, will relocate its observing mission from Ashraf to Baghdad following the base closure. If UNAMI considers its situation unsafe once American soldiers leave, one can imagine how grave the risk is for Ashraf residents. Over 3,000 parliamentarians from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and North America have signed declarations in support of Camp Ashraf.

This matter is time urgent; I'd request you to watch the situation carefully until the next Iraqi government, hopefully a stable and independent one, takes office so that UNAMI's monitoring team is not forced to leave Ashraf prematurely. It would be preferable to have an international force replace American soldiers at Ashraf, but soldiers are necessary for UNAMI to stay at Ashraf.

Two Proposals

Here are two suggestions to help reverse the headwinds that democratic governance is currently facing in parts of the world:

1. Penetrate the cyber walls of tyranny. The walls created by 21st century dictators to isolate their citizens are no longer made of brick, steel, and barbed wire. They are mostly Internet firewalls, which we have the capacity to tear down with modest financial support. Think of Iranian democrats in Europe communicating freely over the Internet with students across Iran, or Burmese able to speak freely through the generals' firewalls. This is achievable without hacking any computer system.
2. Democrats should not support "anything goes" economics, including unregulated financial capitalism. For example, the party-state of China uses its economic clout on emerging democracies abroad. At home, it combines political Leninism with unethical business practices, while opposing democratic governance and good environmental and work safety practices.

The universal desire for representative government, guaranteed human rights, and the rule of law continues to have momentum. Focusing on the empowerment of civil society is essential, but is not enough. Political actors must become engaged in improving democratic governance both at home and abroad (where invited). The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), for example, does this by combining support to party development on a non-partisan basis with a role as facilitator of inter-party dialogue. NIMD is receiving international recognition for its capacity to convene political parties and commit politicians to dialogue.

Conclusion

We should be neither complacent nor over confident. There are still autocrats in the world doing serious harm to peoples, peace and the natural environment.

Let us resolve here today to apply the many lessons of post-totalitarian central/eastern Europe. Human dignity is ultimately indivisible across our shrunken world. Poland's and Lithuania's current leadership of the Community of Democracies is strengthening our capacity to address the vital issues of our time.

Thank you.

Note: The Diplomats Handbook for Democracy Development Support circulated at the event can be accessed at: www.diplomatshandbook.org -----

*(R.J. Russell, D.C. Shin & W. Jou. Popular Conceptions of the Meaning of Democracy: Democratic Understanding in Unlikely Places. University of California Irvine, Center for the Study of Democracy. (2007) <<http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/2j74b860>>)

