

# Remarks at the 5th Community of Democracies Ministerial

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It is fitting that we gather here in Lisbon to discuss how we can together advance our common democratic goals. For it was in Portugal 35 years ago that we saw the first steps toward one of the greatest global political transformations in modern history.

In 1974, less than a third of the world lived under democracy. But that year, Portugal's military-dominated government fell and gave way to a democratic one, and Greece traded its military junta for a democratic constitution.

The next year, Spain's transition to democracy began. From there, the trend spread like brush fire, as entire regions – Latin America, Africa, East Asia, eventually Eastern Europe – embraced a democratic future. Twenty years ago the Berlin wall fell, opening the door to the possibility of a Europe whole, democratic and free.

This was what Samuel Huntington famously called “the third wave” of democratization. By the turn of the twenty-first century, democracy was no longer an ideal benefiting only an exceptional few; it had become a global norm.

In recent weeks, from South Africa to El Salvador, to Lebanon, India and Indonesia, we have seen the vibrancy of that norm.

Nonetheless, we all recognize that democracy has not been achieved everywhere. Some countries still have not yet taken the first steps toward democracy. In others, the achievement is only partial, while in parts of the world democratic achievements are being rolled back, or threatened by corruption, poor leadership, or weak institutions. That is why our gathering today is so important – as a symbol of what is possible, as a goal for those who have not yet set out on our path, and as a source of support for those trying to perfect their democracies.

I want to pay tribute to those who had the vision to see the value of this community particularly my friend and colleague, Madeleine Albright, who had the wisdom to see the necessity of this unique forum.

Yesterday, President Obama had the privilege of addressing the Ghanaian parliament, a shining example of the universal possibility of democratic achievement. He talked about what he saw as essential to the future of Africa, and to the entire developing world. At the head of his list, he placed democracy -- a clear reflection of the central premise of our own national experience and that of so many other nations.

He observed “history offers a clear verdict: Governments that respect the will of their own people, that govern by consent and not coercion, are more prosperous, they are more stable, and more successful than those who do not.”

In his speech, President Obama recalled a basic insight that is so well known to this audience – that democracy is a complex, multifaceted process. It is, as he noted, “about more than holding elections – it’s also about what happens between elections.”

It is about embedding democratic values into durable, capable, reliable and transparent institutions – like “strong parliaments, honest police forces, independent judges, independent press, a vibrant private sector and civil society.” The mere presence or absence of one of these elements does not by itself determine whether a polity is democratic – it is a holistic phenomenon – as the President remarked, “each nation gives life to democracy in its own, way, and in line with its own traditions.” But at its core, democracy is about government’s accountability to its own people.

Ultimately democracy is a choice that must be made by each country shaping its own future. As President Obama said yesterday, “America will not seek to impose any system of government on any other nation.” But that does not mean that we, or any of us here, are indifferent to those who are working to establish democracy where it does not exist, or to those who strive to perfect it where it is only just emerging.

As President Obama noted in his speech last month in Cairo, the notion of supporting democracy abroad – “democracy promotion” – has come under controversy.

So we must be clear what we mean when we talk about supporting democracy. It is not a codeword for any other agenda; it means enabling and protecting those already working to build their own democratic societies. Our commitment is clear: the United States will “increase assistance for responsible individuals and responsible institutions, with a focus on supporting good governance – on parliaments which check abuses of power and assure that opposition voices are heard; on the rule of law, on civic participation so that young people can get involved and on concrete solutions to corruption.”

And under the leadership of Secretary Clinton, we have placed particular emphasis on the fundamental importance of the dignity of all people, by protecting women’s rights, defending the interests of children and supporting the fight against trafficking in people. It is also why we are so committed to supporting education around the world, which is the bedrock for sustaining democratic values and advancing economic opportunity.

These efforts will be at the heart of America’s foreign policy. And we recognize that our effectiveness and credibility abroad depends on what we do at home. That is why one of President Obama’s first actions was to pledge to close the facility at Guantanamo, to renounce unequivocally the use of torture, and to reject the argument that we must sacrifice our precious civil liberties to assure our security.

We have also learned that we are most effective not when we are acting alone, but when we work together in this vital cause.

Our common efforts reinforce the universality of the democratic values and serve as a powerful response to those who would argue that democracy belongs only to one region, or history or tradition.

As we gather here today, we recognize that in some countries democracy is under strain. And the economic crisis that is affecting us all so deeply poses a special challenge – the tsunami of declining incomes can overwhelm fragile governments. That is why the United States has placed such emphasis on assuring that our response to the global economic crisis pays particular attention to the needs of vulnerable states.

It is why we are so gratified by the strong commitment of the G-8 to enhancing food security. At the same time, our support for democracy is especially crucial now – because we recognize that in the long run, democratic, accountable governments are best able to weather economic challenges and restore opportunity to their people. And democratic governments are best able to assure that economic stress will not lead to civil strife.

Despite so much progress, we still see interruptions of the democratic process. At the 2002 CD meeting in Seoul, we agreed to stand up against such threats.

Now is the time to make sure our deeds live up to our words.

Many of the regional organizations those of us here belong to – the AU, the OAS, the EU, the OSCE and ASEAN – have mechanisms to respond to democratic backtracking. We are seeing these mechanisms at work today in dealing with events in Honduras, and in efforts to restore constitutional government in response to coups and political repression in Africa and Southeast Asia. The Community of Democracies process has a unique role to play beside these formal organizations.

The publication of the "Diplomat's Handbook," which is now being used to train diplomats in a number of countries, is a model of how democracies can share best practices. The unique place within the CD process that NGOs have at the table with governments underscores the fact that the rights and responsibilities of democracy rest not with governments alone. And the recent establishment of the CD's Permanent Secretariat in Warsaw shows that many here are committed to a vibrant, action-oriented CD.

Much has been accomplished since Secretary Albright and her colleagues launched this effort nearly ten years ago. We look forward to the leadership of Lithuania to build on these achievements in the coming two years. The Obama Administration intends to remain fully committed to this vital cause.