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Civil Society Leaders Urge Greater Support for Democracy Worldwide

VILNIUS, June 29 – More than 120 democracy activists and nongovernmental leaders from around the world gathered today in Vilnius, Lithuania and called on democratic governments to cooperate in support of democracy worldwide. The Civil Society Forum, organized by the nongovernmental International Steering Committee of the Community of Democracies (ISC/CD), met in advance of the Sixth Ministerial Meeting of the Community of Democracies, where representatives of democratic governments will be meeting with civil society leaders on July 1 to discuss strategies for strengthening democracy support around the world.

Much of the discussion at the Forum focused on events in the Middle East and North Africa, with democracy activists from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria among the participants. Radwan Masmoudi, a Tunisian activist who heads the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, cautioned against complacency in the region, stressing that even in Tunisia, where much optimism remains, the situation is sensitive and requires vigilance from activists in the country and the international community. Ben Rowswell, a Canadian diplomat currently on leave and serving as a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at Stanford University, described initiatives in Egypt that are harnessing the power of social media to foster an inclusive, democratic process in the development of Egypt's new constitution. If successful, he noted that countries like Egypt and Tunisia have the potential to teach Western countries how to improve their own democratic processes.

While the events in Tunisia and Egypt were seen as promising, participants stressed the need to maintain a consistent message for countries throughout the region. In Libya, Syria and Bahrain, continued violence has threatened to reverse the Arab spring, and democratic countries were urged not to deviate from support for democracy and human rights in the name of economic or other national interests. Another participant also warned against falling into the trap of the news cycle, noting that the Lisbon Ministerial of the Community of Democracies in 2009 focused on the Green Revolution in Iran, and civil society must be able to sustain attention and pressure on this and other situations.

While much of the international community has focused its attention on the Middle East and North Africa, the struggle for democracy remains a global struggle, and participants in the Civil Society Forum discussed a number of other countries and regions that require attention and support:

A Burmese democracy activist warned that the international community must not interpret recent rigged elections in Burma as a genuine step toward democracy and human rights. Political persecution remains high, with about 2,000 democracy and human rights activists still imprisoned with long sentences and subjected to torture and other mistreatment. Gross human rights violations have occurred in the context of conflicts between the Burmese army and ethnic resistance armies, including executions of prisoners of war, forced labor, the use of human minesweepers and rape. The Community of Democracies has previously expressed its support for Aung San Suu Kyi, who has reached out to the Community directly; continued pressure should be applied on the military regime in Burma to honor the will of the people, denied since the 1990 elections, and civil society around the world stands in solidarity with the thousands of activists working for democracy in Burma.

Democracy activist Vo Van Ai, who heads Que Me: Action for Democracy in Vietnam, expressed concern about the situation in Vietnam, where economic liberalization under Communist Party control has led to massive violations of political and social rights. He stressed the key role of religious movements in the movement for democracy, and he urged the international community to support the legalization of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and release its leader Thich Quang Do. He also urged the international community to make a public gesture in support of thousands of young people who recently staged unprecedented demonstrations to protest China's violations of Vietnamese sovereignty and demand democracy and freedom for Vietnam.

Participants also highlighted the failure to consolidate democratic transitions in many Latin American countries, including Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Bolivia, where inequality, poorly-developed institutions and bad economic policies have transformed promising democracies into elected authoritarian regimes. Other countries in the region are also showing a tendency for more authoritarian behavior, with a rise in repression of civil society, independent media, and democracy and human rights defenders. The Community of Democracies was urged to coordinate efforts to protect civil society and to share experiences and best practices to help democracy deliver the political, economic and social benefits needed to prevent democratic backsliding in Latin America and elsewhere.

Attention was given to countries in the European neighborhood where the struggle for democracy continues. Participants expressed their solidarity with democracy activists in Belarus who continue to suffer under dictatorship and called for sustained efforts to reach out to civil society and maintain pressure on the Lukashenko government. Concerns were raised over recent developments in Ukraine, Hungary and Georgia, and it was recognized that everywhere, democratic countries must also be held accountable for actions that threaten to undermine democratic principles in their own countries.

The Forum was encouraged by efforts led by Lithuania and Sweden to reform the Community of Democracies to make it a more active and effective body, but they stressed that once the reforms are approved, the Community must turn its focus to making a real impact on democratic transition, consolidation and the quality of democracy among its members. The partnership between governments and civil society was recognized by both governmental and nongovernmental representatives as the most important and unique element of the Community of Democracies, and participants called for greater inclusion of civil society and cooperation under the upcoming Mongolian Presidency of the Community.

The nongovernmental International Steering Committee of the Community of Democracies is a global network of civil society leaders committed to advancing democracy and human rights through the Community of Democracies. It is the voice of civil society in the framework of the Community of Democracies, advising governments on the actions needed to enable civil society to work freely to strengthen democracy, rule of law, and protection for the fundamental rights described in the Warsaw Declaration.

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