

IN A 2006 REPORT TO THE SENATE FOREIGN Relations Committee, NED highlighted the growing efforts of governments to block international assistance to nongovernmental organizations operating inside their countries. Alarmed by the “color revolutions” that took place in parts of Eastern Europe, regimes of varying stripes, including so-called “electoral democracies,” were beginning to crack down on individuals and groups exercising their right to associate freely.

Since that time, the crackdown has broadened. Civil society has been under attack in countries as varied as Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cambodia, Uganda, Venezuela and Vietnam, where laws have either been enacted or are under consideration to silence individuals involved in the civic activities that we take for granted: providing assistance to people in need, speaking out against corruption, advocating political reform, and campaigning to improve the lives of fellow citizens.

Three years ago, the Steering Committee of the World Movement for Democracy, whose secretariat is housed at NED, commissioned a study to identify and promote a set of international principles that should inform the relations between government and civil society. Working with the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), the Movement issued a report that articulated well-defined principles protecting civil society already embedded in international law, including norms and conventions that regulate and protect civil society from government intrusion. The report, “Defending Civil Society,” has been translated into six languages, endorsed by a group of eminent international figures, including Czech dissident-turned-president Vaclav Havel and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and has formed the basis for an international campaign to defend NGOs that has won political support from leading democracies, and generous financial assistance from the governments of Canada and Sweden. The campaign entails educating opinion-leaders and decision makers, exposing abuses and malpractices, and directly advising and engaging with governments

contemplating restrictive regulations by proposing alternative measures that would not unnecessarily impede NGO activities.

The struggle against the crackdown on NGOs was given a significant boost last summer, when U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressed the Community of Democracies in Krakow, Poland. She spoke out against “the steel vise in which many governments around the world are slowly crushing civil society and the human spirit,” invoking the Solidarity Trade Union’s courageously effective activism in the 1980s that brought democracy to the host country. Secretary Clinton endorsed a rapid response mechanism to counter threats to freedom of association. “When NGOs come under threat,” she declared, “we should provide protection where we can.”



The rapid response mechanism is the brainchild of the Community of Democracies’ Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society, in which the World Movement is playing a key role. Let me take this opportunity to salute the government of Canada, whose foreign ministry has provided vital financial support enabling the World Movement to carry forward the work it began with the “Defending Civil Society” report, for convening and chairing the working group.

Let me also pay tribute to the government of Lithuania, which has provided effective leadership to the Community during its Presidency, which will culminate in the democracy coalition’s biennial ministerial meeting this summer in Vilnius. One major initiative the Community has taken during the past year has been to establish the Parliamentary Forum for Democracy, an association of like-minded parliamentarians determined, as its founding charter points out, “to work together to strengthen democracy where it is weak and invigorate it even where it is longstanding.”

Last September 15th, on the International Day of Democracy, the Forum convened on Capitol Hill an impressive group of

Members of Congress committed to democracy and human rights who were joined through teleconference with their counterparts in the European Parliament to discuss how the Forum can become an effective voice on behalf of grassroots democrats facing repression throughout the world.

Parliamentarians are natural advocates for such democratic activists through their investigative powers and their role as an intermediary between governments and citizens. The Forum will provide the impetus for a more robust advocacy on the part of parliamentarians on behalf of democracy-building activities, including an increased allocation of resources to bolster civil society. By standing in solidarity with those struggling for freedom and by advancing international norms that support the right of people to work peacefully for democratic objectives, the Parliamentary Forum for Democracy can be an effective center of both advocacy and action to counter the repressive actions that many governments are taking against civil society.

In her Krakow address, Secretary Clinton noted that “along with well-functioning markets and responsible, accountable government, progress in the 21st century depends on the ability of individuals to coalesce around shared goals, and harness the power of their convictions.”

While democracy is regressing in too many parts of the world and the curbs on NGOs remain a real threat, this has been a year in which civil society and democracy activists have demonstrated impressive levels of vitality and adaptability, and even made progress against authoritarian forces in forbidding circumstances. To cite just a handful of examples:

- In Russia, a new wave of civic activism was evident in major popular mobilizations in support of the right to peaceful assembly, in citizens using the internet to generate “flash mob” protests, and in the dissemination of cell-phone images of officials’ civil-rights violations;
- Across sub-Saharan Africa, NED grantees and other civil society groups have been vital actors in educating voters

and promoting reconciliation in the run-up to southern Sudan’s referendum, in promoting local governance and police reform in Nigeria, and — as the brutal murder of the courageous NED grantee Floribert Chebeya reminds us — in monitoring and exposing egregious human rights abuses in the Democratic Republic of Congo;

- in Venezuela, a vibrant student movement played a vital role in educating and mobilizing voters to turn out in parliamentary elections that saw major gains for the democratic opposition;

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- Burmese democrats’ use of an interactive, online platform to monitor and expose the junta’s flawed elections confirmed that even nascent and repressed civil society movements remain resilient and innovative;

- Finally, as this message goes to print, nonviolent protests in Tunisia and Egypt led by young democratic activists have brought down entrenched dictatorships in a region that was once thought to be immune to the forces of democracy. These revolutions have reverberated throughout the Middle East, where ordinary citizens are fighting back against repressive regimes that have denied them the most basic human rights.

Initiatives such as the World Movement’s Defending Civil Society project, the Community of Democracies’ Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society, and the Parliamentary Forum will help insure that the rights of these and other brave people to associate to improve their everyday lives will be respected.

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