

With strong bipartisan support from both the Administration and the Congress, NED's program has grown substantially in recent years. The Endowment is now active in over 90 countries around the world, providing assistance to grassroots democrats organizing political parties, promoting economic reform, defending the rights of workers, documenting human rights abuses, encouraging the participation of women, and strengthening independent media, just to highlight some of the hundreds of programs that are described in this annual report.

It is truly a challenging time for those who seek to advance the causes of freedom and democracy. On the one hand, democracy—both in concept and practice, as documented in a number of different studies—has grown to unprecedented levels. Freedom House puts the combined number of liberal and electoral democracies at over 120, an all time high.

This development should not surprise us, given the universal appeal of the democratic idea. The argument that democracy requires certain economic, social, or cultural pre-conditions to take root was discredited throughout the 1990's, when it began to spread beyond its traditional confines. Such is the power of that idea today that even the most authoritarian rulers see the need to appropriate for their regimes the language, if not the substance, of democracy. Another important aspect of the spread of democracy is the steady increase in the number of governments, nongovernmental foundations, and multilateral bod-



ies engaged in the practice of providing democracy assistance, undermining the contention that democracy promotion is solely an American practice.

Nonetheless, democracy is always a work in progress, one that is often difficult to sustain, particularly for new democracies that face a multitude of challenges. Where institutions are poorly developed and mechanisms of accountability are weak or non-existent, rampant corruption frequently is the result. And where emerging democracies fail to deliver economic benefits, their people will often seek out and welcome what they assume are better alternatives. In recent years, these developments have helped spawn a new kind of autocrat, who uses the language of populism to make demagogic appeals to the masses in an effort to exploit popular disenchantment with ineffective regimes.

In addition to the challenges faced by democratic reformers in emerging democracies, political space

has begun to close in such backsliding countries as Russia, Egypt, and Venezuela, among others, where officials have targeted civic organizations, many of which NED has been supporting for years, through limiting their activities, harassing their leaders, and restricting their access to international assistance. In a report commissioned last year by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the Endowment documented systematic efforts to crack down on civil society by restricting the freedom to form NGOs, blocking their ability to register, denying their legal status, interfering in their internal affairs, prosecuting their leaders, preventing them from receiving funds from abroad, and establishing parallel and competing organizations.

The arbitrary use of state power to silence potential critics has always been characteristic of repressive regimes. Nonetheless, many of the recent attacks on civil society in these more “hybrid” regimes can be attributed to the successes of democratic forces since 2000 in countries such as Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. The World Movement for Democracy, the international network of democrats that NED initiated nearly a decade ago, will be developing strategies during the coming year to defend civil society against regimes that seek to cripple it.

One key element of any true democracy is a free press, since it is not only the only means of challenging the state’s monopoly of information in many countries, but also an indispensable catalyst for political development in others. The Center for International Media Assistance, a new NED initiative taken with the encouragement of Congress and funded with a grant from the State Department, will seek ways to strengthen ongoing efforts to provide effective assistance in support of independent media in emerging democracies and to encourage greater involvement in this work by the U.S. private sector.

As I write these words, our Board of Directors is developing a strategy to help our partners in the field meet the challenges they face and will continue to confront in the years ahead. I know that these grassroots democrats are gratified by the robust support NED continues to receive from both sides of the aisle that enables them to carry out this work. These decision makers are mindful of the fact that our mission cannot be achieved without the persistent, and sometimes dangerous, work carried out by our hundreds of grantees around the world. NED’s supporters also realize that serious democracy work is a long-term process, empowering individuals who share our values and helping them fashion institutions that enable free people to resolve their differences peacefully and govern effectively.

In accepting NED’s 2006 Democracy Award, which she received along with three other courageous African democrats, Zainab Bangura, the West African activist who now directs the United Nation’s Civil Society program in Liberia, made it clear why our work is as critical as ever:

“I want you all to know that democracy is not a monopoly of the West or a privilege to be enjoyed only by citizens of the western world, but a right to be enjoyed by every human being and an entitlement created by God that therefore cannot be taken by man.”

Helping Zainab and her fellow democrats succeed is an undertaking that we at NED look forward to carrying out in the years ahead.



Vin Weber  
Chairman