

I am writing this message in the wake of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and have, therefore, the problem of political violence very much on my mind. I had originally thought to write about Pakistan in my message for 2007 as one of several important countries—the others being Venezuela and Serbia—where I could see an emerging possibility for a democratic opening. A breakthrough in at least one of these countries, I hoped, would not just be a victory in itself, but would also help reverse the backlash against democracy which made the last year such a difficult one for NED and its grantees.

Of course, even where I saw the possibility of a democratic opening, it was clear that the democrats in these countries would be facing a difficult uphill struggle against powerful, determined, and entrenched anti-democratic forces. Still, I thought there were reasons for cautious optimism. In Venezuela, for example, the emergence of a democratic student movement and the defeat of President Hugo Chavez's constitutional-amendment referendum were signs that the tide was beginning to turn against the growth of autocratic populism over the last decade. The inevitable "supervised independence" of Kosovo raised the specter of a nationalist backlash in Serbia, but there was also a good chance that the

long-awaited resolution of this emotional issue would finally allow Serbia to put the issue of Kosovo behind it and begin to focus on becoming part of modern Europe, a goal shared the majority in the country. A positive turn in Serbia would also tilt the balance against the revival of Russian-backed autocracy in the region.

And then there was Pakistan, where I saw a number of developments converging to make a democratic opening not just possible but also necessary from a security standpoint. There was the rise of a democratic protest movement of lawyers and civil society activists following the dismissal last March of Chief Justice Chaudhry; the steady weakening of Musharraf's support along with that of the Islamist coalition with which his party was allied; the return of Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif from exile and the prospect of their cooperation in implementing the Charter of Democracy that they had signed the previous year; and, not least, the worsening of the security situation in the North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan which might finally persuade the military that the time had come to withdraw from politics and focus on defeating the terrorists.

The assassination of Bhutto was a severe blow to these hopes as well as a reminder of how far the enemies of democracy will go to subdue their political and philosophical rivals. But of course, such a reminder should not have been needed—not after the murder last year of Anna Politkovskaya and of the Uzbek journalist Alisher Saipov (a NED grantee) in October, the brutal suppression of the nonviolent protest movement in Burma, the killing of journalists in Somalia and so many other countries, the assassination of political leaders in Lebanon, and the upsurge of suicide bombings in Afghanistan and now Pakistan, to give just some examples of the growing use of political violence today.

Such violence, distinctly repugnant as it is, is part of a much broader assault on democracy that has included the closing of NGOs and independent newspapers, the jailing of journalists and democracy activists, the restricting of international democracy assistance, and other forms of harassment and repression. The impact of this assault has been strengthened by a number of

international developments unfavorable to democracy, among them the way autocrats have used the war on terror to justify their crackdown on nonviolent dissidents; the inflated oil prices that have buttressed some unsavory regimes; and the failure of many democratic governments to reduce corruption and improve living standards, thereby discrediting democracy in the eyes of some and opening the door to populist demagogues.

Despite the many difficulties and dangers that democrats now face, though, the situation is actually more hopeful than it might appear. The stepped up attack on democracy groups is, after all, driven by the desire of many semi-authoritarian regimes to preempt the kind of “colored” revolution that took place in Georgia and Ukraine, a point the autocrats often openly concede when justifying measures to curtail democracy assistance. Their belligerence thus betrays a deep insecurity—an awareness that they can’t retain power without using force and other anti-democratic measures and thus lack democratic legitimacy.

In addition, while democracy has certainly lost momentum and is in many respects on the defensive today, it has not suffered truly major reversals and has made some significant gains. The most important has been the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country, and the restoration of democracy in neighboring Thailand, despite the continuing divisions there. Democracy has also advanced in smaller countries like Mauritania, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and it took a very tentative step forward in Morocco where an Islamist party participated in the recent parliamen-

tary elections, though the process left much to be desired since the parliament itself has very limited powers.

Such gains may not be enough to reverse the negative momentum, but they highlight the underlying strength of democracy even at a time when the conditions for democratic progress remain unfavorable. The dimensions of this strength can be gleaned from this Annual Report, which provides a vivid picture of a robust worldwide democracy movement consisting of thousands upon thousands of grassroots activists who are aided by a



growing international corps of specialists and trainers from new and established democracies. This effort, furthermore, is backed up by advocates and academics around the world who make the case for supporting democracy to the wider public, assess the challenges faced by democrats in different countries, explain the lessons that can be learned from particular struggles and experiences, and identify and analyze the broader forces at work affecting the prospects for democracy.

What explains the continuing strength of the democracy movement in the world? The reasons are many and complex, but I would like to highlight

three of them that are contained in articles published during the last year in the NED’s *Journal of Democracy*. Two articles on China, one by Henry S. Rowen and the other by Liu Junning, call attention to the impact of large historical forces—in particular, rapid economic growth and the cascading spread of Internet and cell phone use—which are raising living standards and empowering citizens with information and the ability to hold the authorities accountable for their actions and policies. One

illustration of the changes taking place is that many of the biggest news stories covered by official and unofficial Chinese media during the last year involved citizens defying arbitrary power, insisting on their right to know the truth, protesting grave injustices, and demanding that government be held accountable for its policies and actions. Examples include the furor over the subjection of children to slave labor in brick kilns; the mobilization through text-messaging of massive demonstrations in the coastal resort city of Xiamen against plans to build a chemical plant that citizens felt would cause leukemia and birth deformities; the riveting testimony of two survivors of a mining disaster about the scandalously unsafe conditions that cause thousands of mining deaths every year; and the famous “nail house” case where a shrewd, media-savvy homeowner successfully asserted her property rights against a land-grabbing developer. Such stories bespeak the inexorable erosion of a totalitarian system and the rise of a rights-based grass-roots movement and culture.

The second reason has to do with the resilience of the human spirit against brutal repression, and it is contained in an article on Iran by Ladan Boroumand. It tells the story of the campaign of terror launched after the Iran-Iraq war and the fall of the Soviet Union, when the regime thought it necessary “to write itself an insurance policy in blood.” Thousands were executed, including most of the leaders of the opposition inside and outside the country, one of whom was Ladan’s own father, Abdorrahman Boroumand. But instead of eliminating all opposition, this reign of terror stimulated the rise of a new form of dissent, not based on old ideologies but on the defense of basic human freedoms. Slowly, barely noticed by the outside world, dissidents and movements began to emerge representing different sectors of society but defending the rights of all—student unions, women’s rights advocates pressing the One Million Signatures Campaign, independent teachers’ and transport works’ unions, movements of ethnic minorities, journalists and bloggers, lawyers and human rights defenders, scholars and translators, and even Shi’ite ayatollahs rejecting the regime’s politicized and totalitarian version Islam. Despite the terror and bluster of the regime, these movements represent the future of Iran.

The third reason involves the irrepressible yearning of common people for a better life with dignity. It is appropriate that this message comes out of Africa, which has experienced such travail, and from a Muslim woman, who has been the victim of both religious and gender discrimination. The author is Zainab Bangura, a civic activist who is now Sierra Leone’s Foreign Minister. She writes not of Africa’s suffering over the last three decades but of its triumphs—the surprising number of countries that have held successful multi-party elections, including those where citizens have resisted efforts to hold onto power by amending the constitution (Zambia, Malawi, and Nigeria) or forced dictatorships to submit to popular will (most recently in Guinea and Togo). She writes as well of the rise in many countries of a vibrant civil society and a relatively free media, including community radio that gives the poorest and most illiterate citizens the ability to discuss issues of governance.

Zainab Bangura’s message, delivered at a ceremony marking the 25th anniversary of President Ronald Reagan’s Westminster Address, reflects the NED’s underlying belief, which is that democracy will continue to advance, even in the face of many obstacles and setbacks, because it embodies the basic aspirations of ordinary citizens. It is the NED’s mission to support these aspirations, even as we recognize that democracy is not a gift that we or anyone can bestow but is rather something that people must achieve for themselves. Still, they will need our help, and since the times ahead promise to be dangerous for many on the front lines of the struggle for democracy, our grant and technical aid will have to be supplemented by moral solidarity and all the political protection we can mobilize. That is the very stiff challenge we face in the current difficult period.



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