

Democracy Promotion for the Long Haul

Remarks by Larry Diamond to the AID Partners Conference

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There is some cause to celebrate a decade and more of U.S. efforts to promote democracy. There are more democracies in the world than ever before. The right of every people to democratic governance is more deeply embedded in international laws and institutions than ever before. And within this important Agency, as well as much more broadly throughout the U.S. government and its NGO partners, democracy promotion is becoming institutionalized as a field of technical expertise, a career choice, and a central mission of American foreign policy and development assistance.

Let's be clear about the centrality of this mission. The right to democracy—to political choice, accountability, freedom, and self-determination—is a basic human right. But it is not just for these political reasons that democracy is vital. Precious few countries in the developing world will tread the path of Singapore. For most, the only path out of poverty lies through democracy, not around it or in spite of it. Vigorous, sustainable economic development is not possible unless corruption is brought under control, unless there is some halt to the reckless theft and abuse of public resources that has drained public treasuries and squandered public hopes. Government must be accountable to the people if it is going to be successful in collecting taxes and mobilizing public resources for public ends. The state must be restrained by a rule of law, and economic life must have

the security of commercial law and property rights, and the transparency of a free and open society, if people are going to risk capital to create new wealth.

For the poorest countries of the world, there is a path to development. But all the economic assistance in the world will not uncover it. Only if countries get their institutions of governance right will they have a chance to find it, to make effective use of the economic assistance we can offer. Here is one priority for the future: We need to invest more heavily in developing these capacities for effective governance— independent and effective judiciaries, corruption control and public audit agencies, ombudsmen’s offices and central banks, representative institutions at all levels that can not only scrutinize executive power but also reach out to the public and invite their participation in the policy-making process. Of course, building political institutions is not enough. Unless there is the demand in civil society for these institutions to take their missions seriously, to function with independence and integrity, and unless NGOs, social movements, and the mass media become active in scrutinizing and engaging democratic institutions, governance will not improve enough.

We must fight for larger aid budgets, but if we must choose in allocating scarce aid dollars, we must allocate more to political assistance. For if states do not get governance right, if they do not deliver responsive, accountable, open, and effective government, all our other investments in health and education and other sectors are liable to erode in bad governance or implode amidst ethnic violence or state collapse.

There is another thing we must be clear about—the other side of the coin, if you will. We cannot rest content with having engineered some breakthrough to competitive elections. The electoral form of democracy is not enough. Without the institutions of accountable governance, it is like a computer without the proper software. It will not run.

In much of the world—from Africa to the Andes, from Moscow to Manila—there is a growing malaise and disenchantment with democracy. Politicians are corrupt and self-serving. Presidents are arrogant and abusive. Parties are in disrepute. The media have run amok, or else been run into the ground. We are very, very fortunate that there have not been more blatant democratic reversals like the 1999 military coup in Pakistan, because in much of the world democracy is not functioning very well. This is true not only where it has recently emerged but even where, as in Sri Lanka, Fiji, and Colombia, it has been operating for decades. And we all know that our own election controversy in the United States is hardly restoring the prestige of democracy worldwide.

The answer to this malaise is not to give up on democracy. If we want to see economic development, social justice, human rights, tolerance and ethnic peace, there is no alternative to democracy. But there is also no guarantee in democracy.

We have a hard, jolting road ahead of us. But we know what needs to be done. The answer is not to abandon democracy but to deepen it and make it real for the millions of people—disproportionately women—who have been left on the margins, without political voice or power. We need to help the powerless develop the tools to govern their

own lives and to bring the powerful to heel. We need to help countries bring democracy down to the grassroots, with far-reaching efforts at political and administrative decentralization. We need to help struggling democratic governments reform their economies, streamline their bureaucracies, and open up their processes so that they can deliver the goods. We need to strengthen both civil society *and* the state. And we need to reaffirm the value, the dignity, the necessity of democratic politics. Countries—including the United States—must find ways of financing parties and election campaigns that do not mortgage public policy to corrupt special interests.

It will not do to promote free and fair elections if we do not effectively promote the other elements of democracy as well. And this is not a short-term agenda. A great danger in political assistance is the temptation to seek a big bang, a breakthrough election, and then phase out and walk away. If we want to be effective in promoting democracy, we have to be prepared to be engaged in countries for a long period of time, in a variety of sectors, and at multiple levels of governance. We have to stick with countries—at least with embattled civil societies—when things get grim, and we to sustain our efforts when a crisis subsides and democrats settle into the protracted, prosaic work of gradually building and reforming democratic institutions.

We are swimming against long histories and huge odds. We cannot expect to be able to reverse decades of institutional deformity and decay and to transform deeply entrenched cultures and social structures in a few years. We need a strategic view of democracy

promotion for the long term. Ten years on, in most of the countries where we work, we are still in the early stages of the struggle for liberal, accountable, legitimate, and sustainable democracy, in other words, for democratic consolidation. If we do not lose our nerve, our energy, our conviction, and our vision, we can help to build new patterns of governance that do truly transform the world.