



# Congressional Testimony

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## Democracy and Human Rights: The Case for U.S. Leadership

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Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues

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Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Menendez, Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this timely and important hearing, and thank you for the opportunity to testify. By way of background, the International Republican Institute (IRI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working in more than 60 countries around the world. We trace our roots back to President Reagan and his unshakeable belief that, “Freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.”

### **Advancing Democracy is in Our Strategic Interest**

Mr. Chairman, based upon our three decades of experience, I believe that America should support democracy and liberty, not only because it is the right thing to do morally, but because it is very much in America’s economic and security interests. Generally speaking, democracies – citizen-centered, citizen-responsive governments – are more adaptable to change and are therefore more stable. They tend to be more prosperous, which makes them better trading partners and markets for U.S. goods. Because they tolerate diversity of opinion and allow for dissent, they are less likely to produce terrorists, proliferate weapons of mass destruction, or engage in armed aggression. That makes them better neighbors and makes their regions more secure.

By contrast, authoritarian regimes, over the long run, pose significant risks to peace and stability. They often give rise to refugee populations, burdening and potentially destabilizing their neighbors. In order to maintain their grip on power, such regimes repress their people and seek to isolate their citizens from outside ideas and influences. They attack – directly or indirectly, physically or digitally – those outside their borders that model or represent the freedom authoritarians fear. Finally, because authoritarians are often incapable of meeting the aspirations of their citizens, they are prone to sudden instability. Such regimes are stable, but only until they are not. Since tyrants tend to spend little time or capital on grooming other leaders or fostering responsive institutions, when they are removed by death or crisis, it often opens up a power vacuum that attracts dangerous elements.

### **Democracy is Never “Imposed”**

Mr. Chairman, it is a basic tenet of our work that we do not, and indeed cannot, “impose” our democracy or national values on the citizens of other countries. Democracy is, after all, government by consent of the governed. Our purpose is to walk with citizens and political leaders around the world as they set out on their own journey towards a more democratic future. As citizens work to strengthen their voice in government, we offer tools to help. As leaders explore ways to learn more about, and respond to, citizen priorities, we offer tools to help.

### **Democracy Work Has Changed Over the Years**

Just as the world has changed dramatically over the last several decades, so has the nature of our work. In the wake of communism’s collapse, our focus was largely on developing political parties and preparing candidates to stand for election. In former Warsaw Pact satellites and the Baltic States, for example, we supported pro-reform, pro-democratic political parties which, whether in power or in opposition, helped those countries meet the demands of integrating into NATO and the EU. We assisted them in developing responsive platforms, and taught them the basics of political communications and the marketplace of

ideas. Our goal was to help them become productive, contributing members of the transatlantic community.

Since those early days, acknowledging that democratic progress is much more than a single election, our work evolved to address all components of democratic systems. Following elections in those post-communist states, newly-elected leaders needed to continue delivering to citizens after reaching office. Our work evolved to assist governments in being more accessible, accountable, effective, inclusive, and responsive to citizens. As new foreign policy challenges and democratic opportunities arose across the globe – in Asia, Latin America, Africa – we replicated this important work, learning from each experience and sharing approaches across countries and regions.

But it's not just about what a government can supply, it's also about equipping citizens with the skills needed to hold their government accountable and to advocate for change. Vitaly important in this work is ensuring that all citizens – particularly traditionally marginalized people – have the skills needed to have a voice in the political process.

For example, we work with Afro-Colombians in Colombia, the deaf in Mongolia, and indigenous leaders in Guatemala and Mexico to help them each amplify their voice in civil society and the public arena.

Perhaps our strongest and best-known initiative in this regard is our groundbreaking Women's Democracy Network (WDN). While we are not a "women's organization" per se, it is our core belief that no democracy can be truly representative if it essentially fails to listen to half its people. No democracy can expect to succeed in meeting today's complex challenges unless it turns to *all* parts of its citizenry for the leadership it needs. WDN offers political training and mentorships, networking opportunities and workshops on leadership skills, all with an eye towards overcoming the biases and barriers women often face. WDN has 16 fully independent chapters around the world, touching over 17,000 women in more than 60 countries. Our latest initiative to empower marginalized communities is Generation Democracy – a youth-led, global movement of more than 400 member organizations. Generation Democracy aims to help young people move beyond broad idealism into active engagement in political life and policy advocacy.

So what does all of this look like in practical terms? Mr. Chairman, to help illustrate, I'd like to briefly describe the democratic journey of two important countries, Burma and Tunisia. In both cases, it seemed for many years as though democracy would never come. But thanks to the courageous advocacy of everyday citizens and, yes, the support of IRI, NDI and others, tremendous strides have been made.

### **Burma: From Military Dictatorship to Hopeful Democracy**

Burma is an ethnically diverse, culturally rich country with nearly unlimited economic potential. For the last five decades, however, its story has also been a tragic one as a brutal military dictatorship held absolute power. Dissidents were frequently interrogated, tortured and imprisoned for "transgressions" as simple as gathering in a group of more than five people. We began working there 25 years ago, during a period when government

crackdowns were commonplace. Despite the regime's brutality, it was still clear that citizens were holding onto their dreams of freedom and their quest for a voice in their own future.

In those difficult years, IRI, along with NDI and NED, worked from outside Burma's border in Thailand, supporting opposition political parties – including Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). We assisted pro-democracy activists with messaging, strategic communications, and operational capacity building so that their work could be more focused and effective. We also trained activists in the nuts-and-bolts of democratic politics through political party development, advocacy and legal awareness workshops, and technical skills-building to provide activists with the necessary tools to connect with the international community. It's fair to say that for two decades, we were quite literally a lifeline to the democracy movement.

In 2013, pressure from both courageous democratic voices inside the country and the international community led to conditions improving enough for IRI to open a formal office inside Burma itself. Since then, with the knowledge of the national government, IRI has provided direct assistance to support Burma's nascent democracy. We have engaged more than 200,000 people from 340 organizations, from political parties to local civil society organizations. Leading up to the 2015 elections, we trained political party leaders in all 14 states and regions. Civic and voter education activities carried out by our local partners helped prepare 164,000 citizens to vote in those elections. With the help of IRI and others, the 2015 elections were largely peaceful and, under the watchful eyes of domestic and international observers, carried out in a manner most described as "credible and competitive." IRI's work left a lasting impact. Twenty percent of all the elected national, state, and regional parliamentarians serving today and 10 percent of all of the women candidates who ran in 2015 were trained by IRI.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, one credible election does not make a vibrant democracy. While the country has made remarkable strides in recent years, the civilian-led government still faces serious challenges, from a decrepit infrastructure and failing education system to disturbing ethnic and religious violence. On the democracy front, we continue to implement United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded programs to support to political parties, civil society organizations, women leaders, and Members of Parliament through workshops, trainings, and targeted consultations. Democracy is still fragile and governing institutions are still underdeveloped. In short, the country's new democratic leaders need our continued help.

Several months ago, one of our staff members, who was born and raised in Burma and was a prominent activist in Burma's early democratic movement, returned to his home country 40 years after his first arrest for his pro-democracy activities. He had endured a month of interrogation, torture and solitary confinement. After his release, he told his interrogators, "You cannot destroy my heart – my mind is separate. You can beat me – any part of my body, but you cannot touch my heart." When he told us he wanted to go home after 16 years with us in the U.S., he said "I want to give my final days to my people."

## **Tunisia: Democracy in a “Difficult Neighborhood”**

Tunisia is one of the most promising democratic stories of recent times –an example of democracy taking root in a “difficult neighborhood.” Despite extremist pressures from outside forces, Tunisia has held successive credible elections, solved problems through compromise, and consistently demonstrated a strong desire to be an ally to the United States. While the country’s leaders would be the first to say that their democracy is still fragile, they also take great pride in the progress they’ve made on a journey along which many others in the region have stumbled. A stable, democratic and prosperous Tunisia could serve as an example to the rest of the region of how to build a society that is less vulnerable to extremism.

Prior to 2011, Tunisia was an unsettling place. Our staff traveled there several times in the early 2000s and were accustomed to being followed from meeting to meeting by government security. The Ben Ali regime, consisting of his Democratic Constitutional Rally party, the Ministry of Interior and its associated security organs, controlled nearly every facet of public life. Fear of persecution meant that discussions in cafes and restaurants occurred in hushed voices, if they occurred at all.

That all changed in 2011 with the youth-lead revolution that chased Ben Ali from power. Following the demise of Ben Ali’s tyrannical reign, IRI quickly responded by mobilizing an in-country presence and operation. Since then, we have conducted hundreds of training workshops to develop political parties. We have deployed international election observation missions for each national election. We have taught Tunisian civil society how to open and sustain channels of communication between government and citizens – particularly those historically marginalized groups, including youth, women and citizens in the interior. We have helped government officials develop policies and legislation that respond to citizen priorities. Finally, we have assisted Tunisia’s national government ministries develop improved internal coordination and communications mechanisms, working across multiple ministries to organize initiatives such as the National Youth Congress.

It’s hard not to be impressed by how Tunisians have put the tools and training we have provided to work. More than 20 Tunisian national ministries are now participating in the inter-ministerial working group mechanism established with IRI’s help. We are seeing signs of a multi-party political system that appreciates the importance of public opinion research. The National Youth Congress is well on its way to producing a citizen-developed comprehensive national strategy to support youth. We have strengthened Tunisian civil society by networking more than 60 organizations into a national initiative that promotes government accountability.

Make no mistake: much work remains to be done in Tunisia. Public trust in government institutions is low. While corruption has only recently become a policy priority, it has been a festering problem ever since the 2011 revolution. The country is wrestling with the challenges of decentralization and devolution of power, and still lacks a clear vision of what responsibilities local elected officials will or should have. As with Burma, it is crucial that the U.S. — and organizations like IRI and NDI — remain engaged. Their path towards a vibrant

democracy still has twists and bumps, and we should continue to walk side by side on that journey.

### **Looking Ahead**

In his famous Westminster address, President Reagan told us all that “democracy is not a fragile flower; still it needs cultivating.” Some of the most notable successes in recent years – Tunisia, The Gambia, Burma, Ukraine and others — offer proof of the difference that U.S.-supported “cultivating” can make.

For the reasons I stated earlier — both values-based and strategic — advancing democracy and liberty should be reinforced as a priority in American foreign policy. That means such issues should not be relegated to side meetings when the President sees world leaders, but instead should be a topic (if one of many) at the “main event.” Furthermore, as President Reagan often did, President Trump should reach out to civil society leaders to both learn about the challenges they face and to demonstrate solidarity.

Finally, within our country’s foreign assistance framework, I would encourage the Administration to ensure that our tools for supporting democracy and liberty remain strong. In the long run, our nation’s investments in global health, nutrition and infrastructure around the world are unlikely to succeed if the governments with whom we partner lack strong, citizen-centered institutions.

America’s most effective foreign policy is one that taps into *all* the sources of our strength and mobilizes *all* our tools of leadership. Military might is irreplaceable; economic vitality makes so much possible. But our core national values – democracy and human liberty – and our willingness to foster and encourage them in others, are a critical tool in shaping an often turbulent world. We need to ensure that this tool is as sharp as ever during the challenging times we all see.

