

Human Rights, Democracy and Development

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Since taking office nearly a year ago as Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs (“G”), I have worked to support the Administration’s effort to advance democracy and development, including strengthening institutions that encourage the type of civil society necessary for human rights and democracy to flourish. As the United States looks ahead to 2011, we will continue to build on a policy that supports democratic development of civil society and integrates development into our human rights and democracy agenda.

Support for Democratic Development

Our support for democratic development builds on the pathways outlined by President Obama in his 2009 Cairo speech and by Secretary Clinton at the Community of Democracies (CD) meeting in Krakow this summer. In Cairo, the President emphasized that democracy cannot be imposed from outside. However, the aspirations of a people for democracy can be supported, as can the institutions necessary for a democracy to flourish. In her speech in Krakow, Secretary Clinton pointed to one of the most important ways that we will do this in the coming year—through support for civil society. As the Secretary noted,

[M]ost countries do have a collection of activists, organizations, congregations, writers, and reporters that work through peaceful means to encourage governments to do better by their own people...[I]t doesn’t matter whether the[ir] goal is better laws or lower crime or cleaner air or social justice or consumer protection or entrepreneurship and innovation, societies move forward when the citizens that make up these groups are empowered to transform common interests into common actions that serve the common good.

The Obama administration considers a robust civil society, including the work of nongovernmental organizations, to be essential to an accountable, democratic government and to human rights. Unfortunately, authoritarian governments sometimes try to constrain, control or curtail the rise of independent civil society. Where repressive measures are undertaken, fundamental freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly—and democracy itself—are threatened.

Over the last six years, 50 governments have issued new restrictions against NGOs, and the list of countries where civil society faces resistance is growing. Too many governments see civic activists as opponents, rather than partners. As Secretary Clinton noted in Krakow, civil society can lift and support nations as they address development challenges and reach for higher standards of progress and prosperity. To reject the “steel vise” of legal restrictions and intimidation that some countries are using to restrict civil society, the Secretary announced that the Department of State plans to develop a comprehensive “alert

mechanism” to monitor regulatory threats to NGOs, as well as a new fund to support the work of embattled NGOs. This fund will be used to provide legal representation, replace communication technology, and offer other forms of quick support to NGOs that are under siege because of their work. The fund will also enable NGOs to raise international awareness when freedom of association and freedom of expression are under threat; initiate public advocacy campaigns within their countries to oppose repressive measures; and network regionally with other persecuted NGOs to exchange best practices and share legal expertise.

One area of civil society development where we want to concentrate our efforts in the coming year is Internet freedom. The Internet and other connection technologies are revolutionizing the ways people communicate, access information, and realize economic opportunity. However, some actors, including governments, are using the Internet as a tool of repression and to quell online speech. Writers and bloggers from China to the Middle East know all too well how the same technologies they use to spread information are also used by police for old-fashioned investigation and repression. The challenge we now face is how to balance legitimate security concerns on the one hand, and rights to free expression and the free flow of information on the other. Misguided attempts to ban BlackBerry devices are a new twist in this story, threatening open government initiatives and business bottom-lines alike. The Department of State will continue to monitor these developments and remain engaged diplomatically in support of a free, open, and secure Internet, in addition to advancing innovative programming that supports safe and unfettered access to the Internet in repressive countries.

In addition to our efforts on civil society and Internet freedom, we are also expanding our multilateral work on human rights and democracy in the coming year. The Secretary’s speech on civil society in Krakow helped give new energy to the Community of Democracies, and we look forward to further progress in this area as we head toward next year’s summit in Vilnius. The CD’s working group on enabling and protecting civil society is developing protocols for diplomatic responses when civil society organizations come under threat. We will continue to raise the importance of media freedom, freedom of assembly and human rights in this and other multilateral organizations. Finally, we will work to ensure that the United Nations’ Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations fulfills its mandate and gives a voice to civil society organizations within the UN system, regardless of their politics.

Development and Human Rights

One major challenge our government faces is the integration of development with our diplomacy on human rights. As I have personally transitioned from the NGO world to government, I have found that many of my experiences and lessons are transferable, particularly on synching our development and diplomatic goals.

First, we must work locally. Long-term success is only possible when we engender local ownership and pride in development projects. This is true whether one is building a school or digging a well. The school walls will crumble and the well will collapse if the

community does not count them as their own. As CEO of the microfinance leader, ACCION, I saw this with the banks that we helped to start in Latin America and Africa. We did not create our own model from scratch, with the ACCION brand and foreigners at the helm. Instead, we sought out competent and willing partners—locals who shared our priorities of helping the poor in a sustainable manner. We learned from their knowledge of the environment and market, and they learned from our understanding of banking principles. And when we left, the banks not only stayed standing—they grew. Such local capacity, coupled with motivation, is at the heart of sustainability in development. It also stimulates dignity, confidence, and self-worth—among both the local operators and their poor clients. So it becomes a multiplier of success.

Second, we must draw our solutions from all realms—governments, private companies, multilaterals, universities, nonprofits and so on. What we are finding today is that innovation occurs at the intersection of worlds that are newly connected. When you bring people together, tapping new expertise and resources from every corner, and think outside of your respective box, perspectives shift and challenges break down.

In this way, new terms have arisen by combining otherwise foreign concepts: Social+Entrepreneur, Micro+Insurance, Corporate+Responsibility, Financial+Inclusion. We've brought poor people into banks, put modems on the back of bikes and delivered agricultural advice through mobile phones. We can cross hundreds of thousands of miles at the click of the button and turn dirty river water into a clean drinking source with a packet of solution the size of your palm. At the State Department, we have an active Innovation Team and the Global Partnerships Initiative—giving new emphasis to such collaboration. For-profit business models are helping nonprofits reach sustainability, and social motives are improving the bottom-lines of multinational corporations. When we work together, our capacity for innovation is nearly limitless.

Third, we must focus on development that works and is capable of scale. The need is too great—the numbers too large—for us to dally on efforts that deliver negligible results. We should recognize what we do well, and expand on it. This is all the more important in a time of diminishing financial resources. We must support a culture of sustainability, always with an eye on the enormous demand we are called to meet. Though microfinance started as a small loan subsidized by a thoughtful donor, it has evolved into a sustainable banking practice that can serve millions. If we are thoughtful and innovative, I believe we will see similar evolutions in all aspects of development—from health and sanitation to education and business training.

Fourth, perhaps my most important lesson from 'micro' finance—there is nothing 'micro' about the human spirit. In other words, our greatest assets in development are often the people we are trying to help. They may face great difficulties, but I have witnessed the spirit of courage and entrepreneurship at work. Our pursuit of a better world through development and diplomacy must recognize the power and ability of people to help themselves, especially when we help create an environment in which they can do so.

We know that development does not happen overnight. It begins with the individual, rises up slowly through the family, onwards through the community, and upward throughout the nation. We are committed to bringing our best resources and expertise to bear on the challenges that face the world's vulnerable populations, especially through the support of vibrant civil societies that drive progress. The Obama administration is bringing renewed energy to this work with an understanding of the intricate connections between human rights, democracy, development, and diplomacy.