

# Advancing Democracy Throughout the World

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**W**e can all point to extraordinary people and stories that inspire us. For me, it is the story of how the first Helsinki monitoring group was formed in 1976. A small circle of human rights activists held a press conference in the

Moscow apartment of Nobel Laureate Andrei Sakharov to announce that they had formed a citizen's group to promote the Soviet Union's implementation of the 1975 Helsinki accord—an agreement linking security among states to respect for human rights within states. The group's leader, physicist Yuri Orlov, asked all those present to join him in the traditional toast of Soviet dissidents. He then raised a glass of vodka, smiled, and said: "To the success of our hopeless cause!" Hopeless? It seemed so at the time. Yet thanks in great measure to the courage, perseverance, and sacrifice of the Moscow Helsinki Group and other groups like them, and to the moral support they received from the United States and other free nations, we have seen hopeless causes transformed into historic changes. Today, like four decades ago, we face great challenges and hear many who say it can't be done. And today, as in decades past, the United States is leading the international community in advancing democracy throughout the world and in defending those who are courageous enough to press for their own rights.

## Policy

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) was created by Congress in 1977. From its inception,

DRL has been a leader within the U.S. government in advancing freedom. We promote democracy and defend human rights as a matter of principle and as a foundational component of U.S. national security. Our political system and national identity are grounded in the belief that all people share fundamental rights that are best protected by capable, democratic governance. At the same time, as outlined in President Bush's Freedom Agenda and National Security Strategy, good governance and democracy promotion are central to our national security and war on terror. Failed and authoritarian states that do not respond to the needs of their people or respect international human rights and democratic norms pose a long-term threat to the security of the United States and other democracies.



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U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) John Maisto speaks to reporters during a news conference in Montevideo, Uruguay, in May 2006. The OAS is one of many international organizations through which the United States works to promote democratic reforms and offer technical assistance to other countries.

## Principles

Every day, my bureau helps to fashion and carry out policies to advance fundamental freedoms and democratic principles. In so doing, we are guided by a number of realities:

- That democracy cannot be imposed, but that it can be nurtured. It is incumbent, especially upon democratic



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Cuban men read luminescent messages displayed along the fifth floor of the U.S. mission building in Havana, Cuba, in January 2006. The American mission in Cuba began publishing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights along an electronic news “zipper” on its seafront building.

nations, to offer our support to men and women across the globe who are pressing for human rights and democratic freedoms.

- That there is no “one size fits all” model for every region and country. As President Bush has said: “Our goal instead is to help others find their own voice, attain their own freedom, and make their own way.”
- That elections alone do not a democracy make. Elections are a key component, but respect for human rights and a robust civil society, and accountable, transparent, effective institutions of government, are also essential.

- That there is no perfect democracy and that democracy promotion is about working hard to get the trajectory right. Some countries may remain fragile for quite some time. Others may backslide.
- That democracy promotion is a multigenerational effort, requiring long-term commitments of support. But, as Secretary Rice says, it is urgent work that must not be delayed.

## Tools

In our efforts to promote respect for human rights and advance democratic principles, we employ three main tools: diplomacy, programs, and reports.

Our diplomatic efforts include direct bilateral dialogues to encourage countries to move forward on human rights. We also work with like-minded partners in the United Nations and regional organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organization of American States (OAS) to promote democratic reforms; offer technical assistance; and—when necessary—to call governments to account.

Our programs consist of competitive grants to U.S.-based NGOs, which implement focused, short-term, high-impact projects with in-country NGO partners to help government and civil society develop the capacity to create and sustain their own democratic processes and institutions.

Our reports bring international attention to government abuses, highlight advances and improvements, and inform publics about what we are doing to advance the cause of freedom. DRL publishes annual country reports on human rights practices, on how the United States is supporting human rights and democracy across the globe, and on the state of international religious freedom.

We focus our activities on core areas:

**Rule of Law and Human Rights:** Advancing and protecting human rights as embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and promoting societies in which the state and its citizens are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced, and independently adjudicated.

**Good Governance:** Promoting democratic institutions that are effective, responsive, sustainable, and accountable to the people.

**Political Competition and Consensus Building:** Supporting the development of transparent and inclusive electoral processes; democratic and responsive political



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The 15th Annual Session of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly at the building of the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium, in July 2006. The OSCE is one of several international organizations with which the United States works to promote democracy.

parties; and consensus building among government, political parties, and civil society in order to advance a common democratic agenda.

**Civil Society:** Empowering individuals to peacefully exercise their rights of expression, association, and assembly, including through participation in nongovernmental organizations and unions. We also seek to protect and promote a free, open, and independent media, including the Internet.

### Challenges Ahead

Defending human rights and promoting democracy requires a long-term commitment and often multigenerational effort, not just by governments, but also by publics. Success cannot be assured, nor is progress likely to be linear.

We must be able to respond rapidly and effectively to unforeseen events to help consolidate democratic openings

and prevent backsliding on human rights. Such efforts include standing in solidarity with nongovernmental organizations and other human rights defenders under siege by governments; supporting reform; responding to restrictions on media and Internet freedom; and helping faltering democracies better deliver democracy's blessings to their people by strengthening their institutions of government and the rule of law.

In all of these efforts on behalf of human rights and democracy, we welcome the partnership of other governments and the ideas and expertise of NGOs who do the hard work of defending human rights and building democracy citizen by citizen, institution by institution, and country by country each and every day. ■

*<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/>*