

Remarks at Global Electoral Organization Conference

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Remarks to Global Electoral Organization Conference Hosted by IFES

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Thank you, Richard, for that introduction. Richard is a good friend and a strong force for democracy around the world. When I was in the private sector, I served as a Board Member of IFES, and it has been a privilege to work with IFES during my tours in government. I want to thank Richard and his entire team for their efforts in organizing this timely and important conference.

I also thank the many partner organizations, from the UN Electoral Assistance Division and UNDP to national election agencies and NGOs, that have been leaders of the Global Electoral Organization. This Organization has a critical role to play in sharing experiences and building networks in the field of elections. And I want to thank each of you who take part in managing elections. You are instrumental in making democracy work.

Support for democracy is a central element of U.S. foreign policy. As our National Security Strategy states, we seek to "lead an international effort to . . . promote effective democracy." Both the human desire for liberty and the human right to it are universal. But as Secretary Rice has noted, progress does not unfold passively or inevitably. We are committed to standing with those who do not yet have a voice in the direction of their country, and to assisting the people of nations where democracy is not yet firmly rooted. And we are committed to working with partners around the world in those efforts.

Advancing and strengthening democracy are key to my portfolio and role. In fact, in 2005, Secretary Rice changed the title of my position from Under Secretary for Global Affairs to Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs. That change reflects the emphasis that we place on helping secure freedom for people around the world. It also reflects something that is becoming increasingly clear: that representative, accountable government is crucial to meeting global challenges. The evidence is overwhelming that effective democracies are better able than repressive or poorly governed states to deal with global issues such as infectious disease, management of environmental resources, and human trafficking and other forms of transnational crime. Helping to foster democratic states that respond to the needs of their people is an important means of addressing these global challenges over the long term.

Building democracy is not easy. You know that well; in organizing and administering elections, you face large-scale, high-stakes undertakings that generate intense public interest. Your efforts are impressive.

Our conviction is that promoting democracy does not consist of taking one model and simply transplanting it elsewhere. Democracy will and should reflect traditions and realities in each particular country. There are, however, basic democratic tenets that are universal.

Democracy does not consist of just an election or two. It comprises an interrelated set of freedoms, responsibilities, and institutions, such as the rule of law; accountability; participation; civil society; protection of minorities and women; and freedoms of speech and assembly. Yet, regular, free, and fair elections, in which participation by individuals and parties includes a commitment to the equality of all and the peaceful resolution of differences, lie at the heart of democracy. They are its essence.

That is one of the reasons why IFES, and this conference, are so important—the sharing of experiences and practices here can be invaluable in supporting democracies. And it is why we devote substantial resources and energy to electoral assistance around the world. Central to those efforts is the principle of partnership: with international organizations, other countries, and NGOs. I'd like to share with you a few examples of these projects—on virtually all of which we work with people in this room—and I'll also point to areas where I see potential for even greater collaboration.

Regional electoral assistance programs have had considerable success, and are an area that we focus on. Bringing neighbors together to help each other through observing elections and providing other forms of assistance generates multiplier effects, which can help nearby democracies become mutually reinforcing.

The Organization of American States plays a key role in advancing and deepening democracy in the Western Hemisphere through its observation missions and, at times, through its capacity to mediate disputes. The OAS -- which had a busy year last year, with a historic number of elections in the region—is an active and important partner

for countries that seek electoral assistance. Its Fund for Strengthening Democracy, which we strongly support, mobilizes hemispheric efforts in electoral observation and conflict resolution, and also helps to bolster OAS technical assistance and the strengthening of political parties. One new initiative, which will bring together the OAS and the African Union, is the OAS-AU trans-Atlantic "Democracy Bridge," a two-day event with the objective of exchanging experiences on regional initiatives to support and defend democracy. That OAS-AU event will take place later this year.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, particularly through its Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, or ODIHR, as it is known, effectively engages across a range of electoral support activities. Drawing on the principles that democracy should be universal, free, fair, equal, transparent, and accountable, ODIHR undertakes a variety of valuable technical assistance projects, and conducts election observation missions throughout OSCE member states, including the United States. Crucially, its post-election reports offer not just analysis, but constructive recommendations for moving forward. And it emphasizes that sustainable democracy is not just about election day. We are proud to be major contributors and active participants in ODIHR.

The OAS and OSCE are just two examples of the strong contribution that regional efforts can make in electoral assistance, and support for democracy generally. We look forward to working with you to expand and strengthen regional efforts, and also in generating additional collaborative projects between different regional organizations.

Providing resources and on-the-ground help for democracy in Africa-by strengthening voter registration and electoral processes, for example-is an important priority for this Administration. We coordinated closely with many European friends and the EU in helping to support the elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo last year, an example we hope to see replicated throughout the continent.

And, of course, we are working with partners to build and sustain democracy in the broader Middle East, which includes assistance for elections and the democratic process writ large. We have helped support a number of on-the-ground programs that aim to bring electoral systems to international standards, including through specific technical assistance and training. We have assisted the process of registering women to vote, an important step in ensuring that all citizens are able to shape their country's future. And in Afghanistan and Iraq we have dedicated substantial resources to help the citizens of those countries elect their governments after being ruled by tyrannies.

Around the world, NGOs are pivotal to ensuring that elections are regular, free, and fair, and that they take place within the broader context of the rule of law and protection of human rights. We value greatly the role that NGOs play in fostering democratic traditions and practices. NGOs are vital to the health of democracies. That is among the chief reasons why Secretary Rice has made protecting NGOs from restrictive or abusive regimes a key priority. In December, on the occasion of Human Rights Day, the Secretary announced a package of initiatives to support non-governmental organizations, including NGO Principles, which guide governments' relations with NGOs. We have signed on to these Principles and urge all governments and international bodies to do so as well.

I want to emphasize the important work done by the UN Electoral Assistance Division and the UN Development Programme in support of free and fair elections worldwide. The Electoral Assistance Division, which was founded only 15 years ago and has a small budget and staff, has worked in over 100 countries, and has had considerable success, including through cooperation with the AU, OAS, and OSCE. And the UNDP has played a significant role in strengthening democracy, through technical assistance, long-term capacity building of electoral bodies, and support for the Electoral Assistance Division.

We very much look forward to continuing our backing of these UN organizations. And we anticipate that new international structures will make a positive impact as well. One is the UN Democracy Fund. Supported by contributions from nearly 30 countries representing every region of the world, the Fund in its first year awarded grants to a number of projects to support the election process. Because the funding is directed at civil society organizations, it fills a gap in traditional UN institutional funding.

Another international democracy promotion effort is the Community of Democracies, or CD. The CD is a coalition of over 100 nations dedicated to strengthening democracy around the world. Mali, as the CD Chair, has established four working groups that will generate specific projects, and the CD is likely to gain a permanent secretariat soon. The CD can become a powerful means of advancing democracy, including through support for free and fair elections.

I hope that this snapshot of the initiatives we undertake with partners in the field of electoral assistance has given you an idea of the importance we give to those activities, and that there are many opportunities for further collaboration. Francis Bacon, the English statesman and philosopher, said that, "In this theater of man's life, it is reserved only for gods and angels to be lookers on." Through your efforts in overseeing elections, you are actively ensuring the strengthening of democracy across the globe. Thank you for undertaking that vital work, and for inviting me to speak today. I wish you the best for a successful conference.