

**Testimony to Senate Appropriations Committee,
Subcommittee on Foreign Operations Appropriations**

**The Honorable Vin Weber
Co-Vice Chairman, The National Endowment for Democracy
Democracy Assistance
May 9, 2017**

I want to begin by thanking you, Senator Graham, and Ranking Member Leahy for holding this important hearing today. Speaking on behalf of the National Endowment for Democracy and its new board chair, Judy Shelton, I also want to thank the Subcommittee for its unwavering support of NED and its mission. We're proud that the Subcommittee has recognized that NED is "uniquely positioned to lead a strategic response" to the grave threats facing democracy in today's world. With funds provided by the Subcommittee for this purpose, NED has begun to implement the response to these threats, among them the subversion of the information space by Russia and other autocracies, the repression of civil society, the rise of violent extremist movements, the growing influence of kleptocratic regimes, and the failure of democratic transitions in the Middle East and other regions.

In its enumeration of NED's unparalleled institutional assets, the Subcommittee has rightly noted NED's decades of experience in tackling the toughest political challenges, its core institutes, and its global grants program and activist networks.

I want to call attention to an additional asset that accounts for NED's success, and that is its nongovernmental character. NED's independence has enabled it to respond quickly and effectively to rapidly changing problems. It also makes it possible for NED to connect directly to the brave people who are at the cutting edge of the democracy struggles in the world.

While NED is of course subject to congressional oversight, its mission is not to advance a particular U.S. policy or an agenda made in Washington. It is to help build the institutions of a free society that will make it possible for people “to choose their own way, to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means.”

Those words, Mr. Chairman, were spoken by President Ronald Reagan’s in his famed address to the British Parliament that launched the National Endowment for Democracy. June 8 will mark the 35th anniversary of that seminal speech, when President Reagan declared that “We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.” NED embodies that core American belief.

Since NED was founded more than three decades ago, aiding democracy has become a bedrock foundational principle of America’s approach to the world. Such work enjoys that standing because it advances America’s most important interests and also affirms our highest ideals.

There are some people who believe that we have to choose between defending our interests and affirming our values. They pose a false and dangerous dichotomy, since our interests and values are mutually reinforcing, as is maintaining both our military strength and our moral vision.

President Reagan spoke to this issue in the Westminster Address with great eloquence and force. “Our military strength,” he said, “is a prerequisite to peace, but let it be clear we maintain this strength in the hope it will never be used. For the ultimate determinant in the struggle now going on for the world will not be bombs and rockets, but a test of wills and ideas, a trial of spiritual resolve: the values we hold, the beliefs we cherish, the ideals to which we are dedicated.”

These words continue to resonate today, especially among the people on the front lines of the struggle for democracy who benefit from NED's support.

Here's what a few of them have said in messages prompted by this hearing:

- The leader of the Al-Tahreer Association for Development, a key Iraqi NGO working to rebuild trust and governance in Mosul after the horrors of ISIS, wrote that they could not have carried out their successful projects without NED's "financial and emotional support."
- Leila Yunus, the human rights defender in Azerbaijan and a recipient of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize, has urged Congress to "not only sustain but expand the work of NED" as repression has increased and other foreign donors have pulled out.
- The Rev. Benjamin Yoon in South Korea has written that "Without the material and institutional support of NED, the North Korea human rights movement as we know it today," of which he is considered to be the founder, "would not have existed." He emphasizes that such support remains essential to "bringing justice to the North Korean victims."
- Khalil Parsa, the Afghan anti-corruption activist who survived an assassination attempt last October and who will receive NED's Democracy Award on June 7, has written that NED's assistance "is a lifeline for civil society groups that raise awareness on good governance and on a daily basis fight the rampant corruption that is a lethal threat to Afghanistan's security and political stability."
- And the Dalai Lama has written that NED's "work on the promotion of freedom is vitally important given the current volatile situation in many parts of the world and the threat these pose to peace and freedom."

Mr. Chairman, if we cease supporting such brave people, our country will lose contact with its roots and values, and the result will be devastating for our national interests and moral identity. So with your help, let us carry on with this worthy and absolutely essential work.