



# Congressional Testimony

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## United States Democracy Assistance

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U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs  
Subcommittee

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## Introduction

Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Leahy, Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this timely and important hearing today, and thank you for the opportunity to testify. Mr. Chairman, it is no exaggeration and certainly not a gratuitous compliment to note that your leadership and the work of this committee has been crucial to advancing America's foreign policy priorities, particularly in keeping the deeply ingrained values of democracy and freedom on the forefront of our foreign policy agenda.

I'm here today as a member of the board of the International Republican Institute (IRI), a nonprofit, nonpartisan, democracy assistance organization that is active in more than 80 countries around the world. Along with the other organizations represented here today, we trace our roots back to President Reagan and his unshakeable belief that, "Liberty is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable right of all mankind."

I've been asked to address some of the challenges and opportunities facing the field of democracy assistance. While we all acknowledge there are significant challenges to our ability to support democracy worldwide, we at IRI see opportunities to invest in a governance-centered approach to international development that fosters greater stability worldwide and yields a greater return for the investment of American taxpayers.

## Challenges

Let me begin by addressing the challenges, which are diverse and, in some cases, quite daunting. In the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the spread of democracy seemed almost inevitable. We saw dramatic gains on the democracy front not only in the former Eastern bloc, but across the world and believed this was somehow the inevitable upward trend for all countries. It didn't turn out to be that way, however. For the past decade there has been a steady and disturbing increase in backsliding by transitioning countries, and a consolidation of power by authoritarian regimes worldwide.

The reasons for this development are complex, but the recent trend towards U.S. disengagement and "leading from behind" has been at best, unhelpful. At worst, it has encouraged the boldness with which despots like Vladimir Putin have cracked down on dissent at home and pursued aggressive and destabilizing policies abroad.

The fact is, undemocratic and authoritarian regimes almost always undermine peace and stability over time. Self-interested, aggressive or reckless policies often provoke mass migration and tragic conditions for refugees. This has a destabilizing effect on regions and threatens economic stability. We are currently seeing the consequences of such actions unfold in the Middle East, where the Assad regime—aided and abetted by the Kremlin—has precipitated a global refugee crisis on a scale not seen since World War II. We see different challenges in Asia as the world grapples with the totalitarian regime in North Korea. In fact, when you consider

the most troubled spots around the world, the root of the problem almost always lies with, or is exacerbated by, authoritarian government.

Recent years have also brought increased pressure on U.S. resources and budgets. American taxpayers have every right to demand a return on investment of their tax dollars—and it's entirely understandable that some would question why their hard-earned money should be spent solving problems in other countries.

## **Opportunities**

Mr. Chairman, as a former appropriator and chairman of this same subcommittee in the House of Representatives, I sympathize with the tough choices you face on this committee—balancing competing interests, setting funding priorities, and at the same time assuring that taxpayer dollars are wisely spent. We live in a dynamic world that presents an evolving array of threats, challenges, and opportunities. In the current funding environment, these pressures are particularly intense, and I commend the balance you have been able to achieve on this committee.

The development sector needs to be able to demonstrate the value of taxpayer investment in their programs. While disaster relief is a crucial aspect of our international aid, we must also invest in programs that enable other governments to solve and prevent crises like famine, natural disaster, or acts of aggression on their own. A governance-focused strategy, which supports the development of citizen-centered government and the core institutions of democracy, is the embodiment of the adage that “if you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day; but if you teach a man to fish, he will never go hungry.”

The previous Administration took the approach of integrating democracy and governance programs into all development programs. While I applaud the support of a governance-focused strategy, I think a different approach is needed. Democracy assistance and governance programs require a specialized skillset – and more importantly – commitment to mission, that organizations like NED, IRI and NDI have. More than these organizations being in the business of advancing democracy and democratic institutions, it's the reason for existence.

History shows us a clear link between democratic government and stability. Democracies are more adaptable to change, more stable, and tend to be more prosperous. They make better allies and are more dependable trading partners. Because they tolerate diversity of opinion and allow for dissent, they are, generally speaking, less likely to produce terrorists, proliferate weapons of mass destruction, or engage in armed aggression.

As President Reagan recognized during the Cold War, our ability to support the spread of truly citizen-centered governments is one of the most powerful tools we possess to advance American interests. It wasn't just guns and butter that defeated communism—the inability of the communist dictatorships to understand and respond to the needs of their people made those systems fundamentally unstable.

It is because these fundamental beliefs and core values are part and parcel of who I am and what I believe, that I respectfully submit to the Secretary of State that promotion of democracy and freedom must remain central components of our foreign policy. They must be an integral part of our objectives and of our foreign assistance programs.

### **IRI: A governance-centered approach to democracy assistance**

For more than 30 years, IRI has been helping to lay the foundations for democratic governance, creating the conditions for governments to become more citizen-centered and thus more stable; to become more reliable international partners in trade and diplomacy; and ultimately, to reduce the need for costly U.S. interventions.

Although IRI's global reach is significant, we of course are not able to work in every country that is in need of assistance—but our successful programs in each continent provide powerful examples of best practices to their neighbors and the wider region.

IRI's program in Tunisia is helping strengthen the transparency and communications capacity of the government to increase citizen input and improve government responsiveness to citizens' concerns. Today, Tunisia is proving that, although difficult, democracy may just be possible in a historically troubled region. In Mongolia, IRI partnered with local governments to combat corruption and consolidate democratic gains. Today, Mongolia (which became a democracy just 25 years ago) is being held up as an exemplar of how to avoid backsliding into undemocratic practices. And in Central America, IRI's programs enhancing citizen security by bridging the gap between citizens and their local and national governments is helping to build safer and more resilient communities, and helping to mitigate uncontrolled migration to North America.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee— when President Reagan articulated his vision of democracy assistance in a speech to Westminster Palace 35 years ago, he argued that “democracy is not a fragile flower; still it needs cultivating.” As events in recent years have shown, much ground can be lost without determined “cultivating.” The threat to democracy is on the rise around the world, and support for those who are seeking to protect and advance it is needed now more than ever. If the United States retreats from fighting for these objectives, the world will become even more unstable.

At IRI we see some avenues to strengthen and improve our approach to this mission:

- Incorporating democracy and governance as a central component of our assistance packages and tying foreign aid to progress on those criteria would be a step in the right direction. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) has demonstrated the effectiveness of this type of governance-centered approach in maximizing the impact of international development investment. MCC includes a “hard hurdle” of basic political

and civil rights into the front end when they evaluate potential compact countries. Through the life of a development compact, democracy and governance remain as a mandatory measurement for continuation of the compact. This approach acknowledges and builds into the process—in a formal and transparent way—the importance of governance to the success and sustainability of development aid.

- Our approaches to funding the implementation of democracy and governance programs can be more consistent. All-too-often, elections are seen as the driving force of democracy and governance work—but in reality, it’s what happens *between* elections that matters most. That’s when campaigns end and the hard work of governing begins.
- Lastly, I want to comment on the instrument we choose to implement democracy and governance programs. There are instances when an acquisition mechanism is appropriate for these programs—for example, procuring goods or services for government-to-government support. However, unlike projects aimed at building physical infrastructure or the distribution of goods, acquisition mechanisms are inherently unsuited for projects aimed at building *human* capital—teaching skills and building best practices. Human development and human systems are complex and you need the flexibility and tailored approach of an assistance mechanism to have a sustainable impact. I urge you to provide oversight into how democracy and governance programs are being procured to ensure that tax payer dollars are being spent in the most efficient and results-oriented way.

America’s most effective foreign policy is one that taps into all our strengths. When General Mattis was asked whether the international development budget is helpful to national defense, he said “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately. So I think it’s a cost benefit ratio.” Investing in democratic governance isn’t about patting ourselves on the back or feeling good—it’s a clear matter of delivering results that best serve U.S. interests and maximize the return on taxpayer investment. It is my hope that this marriage of principle and pragmatism will endure in our foreign policy going forward, and that this will be reflected in our approach to international development.

