

**Promotion of Democracy by Nongovernmental Organizations
An Action Agenda
Testimony by Ambassador Mark Palmer
Senate Foreign Relations Committee – June 8, 2006**

Achieving a 100% democratic world is possible over the next quarter century -- but only with radical strengthening of our primary frontline fighters for freedom.

We can build upon our nongovernmental organizations' strong base of experience and success. From Freedom House rallying the democratic world against fascism beginning in 1940, to the League of Women's Voters building democracy in post World War II Europe and Japan, through the German political party stiftungen's contributions to Portugal and Spain's breakthroughs to democracy in the 1970s, to America's own new democracy promotion institutions' contributions beginning in the early 1980s, NGOs have assisted a massive expansion in freedom. Over the 33 years of its annual Freedom in the World survey, Freedom House finds that the percentage of Not Free countries has been cut in half.

Our NGOs have been essential players in many but by no means all of these breakthroughs. I can attest firsthand to the critical role which the AFL-CIO played in building and bolstering Solidarity in Poland and the National Democratic Institute played in training fellow democrats in the living room of the ambassador's residence in a still communist Hungary. From my days marching in the civil rights movement here, to a Foreign Service career focused on and in dictatorships, to many years on the boards of the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the Council for a Community of Democracies, to work with innumerable Chinese, Saudi, Libyan and other democracy groups, to researching and writing a book about how to achieve universal democracy, and over a decade as an investor in emerging markets, what have I learned about NGOs in the promotion of democracy.

NGOs operate in two different universes – where the dictator is still in power, and where he has been ousted. Different strategies and tactics should flow from this fact.

Let us focus on the stage of dictatorship as it is in my view by far the most important and challenging, but paradoxically has had and has less NGO resources, imagination and boldness. And to the extent NGOs are active on dictatorships the vocabulary is often wrong.

We have an immense body of knowledge now about how dictators leave power and durable democracy ensues. A recent Freedom House study, "How Freedom Is Won" covers 67 transitions and finds that "far more often than is generally understood, the change agent is broad-based, non-violent civic resistance – which employs tactics such as boycotts, mass protests, blockades, strikes, and civil disobedience to delegitimize authoritarian rulers and erode their sources of support, including the loyalty

of their armed defenders.” Top down reform by dictators is the infrequent exception; there are virtually no cases of a dictator becoming a democrat and remaining in power. Generally dictators have been and need to be forced out. As the study also finds, there is a clear relationship between the type of force used and durable democracy emerging. Violence engenders successor governments based on violent repression of their people. Broad-based coalitions committed to the strategic use of non-violent force have been the best avenue for freedom’s march.

Facilitating the creation of such national movements should be the primary objective of our NGOs. Unfortunately our NGOs, and their governmental and private funders, have not made a priority of funding groups that are focused on nonviolent resistance or on activist youth groups that have provided much of the courage and dynamism of successful struggles.

In general the priority for funding of our NGOs has been for countries which already have ousted the dictator. While there has been some progress in recent years, the disparities remain striking. Programs for China, with over 60% of the world’s people still living under a dictator, are the most striking with around 1% of USG democracy funding, and a hunk of that agreed to with the Chinese authorities as has also been the case with Egypt, Pakistan and some other key dictatorships. The cause of promoting real political progress in Saudi Arabia gets virtually no funding. North Korea was getting virtually none until Congress pushed through a specific act, which has been true of other Not Free countries as well. Our foundations, corporations and other private donors are even more reluctant to fund democracy programs for dictatorships. Yet the most fundamental challenges to American national interests all emanate from the world’s remaining dictatorships – from weapons of mass destruction, to regional instability, to energy dependence, to harboring and funding terrorists.

At least 50% of democracy funding should be directed to the world’s remaining 45 dictatorships. Some have long argued that the repressive conditions inside dictatorships make more programs and spending impossible. This stems from a congenital and breathtaking lack of imagination and boldness. Our NGOs did over \$30 million of programming in Serbia helping a broad-based coalition of particularly younger Serbs to oust Milosevic peacefully. We should have programs and funding of similar or larger scale for each of the remaining dictatorships. As conditions in each of them vary, we will need to consult with local democrats to tailor make each national program. But here are some of the tools which will help.

Communications. The key to building the will for non-cooperation and the organization of a coalition is for those inside a dictatorship to realize they are not alone, to facilitate communications among them and with their allies outside. In China for example if those who conducted some 87,000 major protests last year, those who want to organize independent trade unions, farmers organizations, and leading democratic lawyers, intellectuals and students could be linked together, they could synchronize their actions on a national basis.

- The Internet provides an extraordinary new means for such just such communication. Dictators have recognized that fact and are repressing its use -- individually and increasingly collectively, for example Chinese Communist Hu Jintao is now helping Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei. The Saudi's Abdullah has long allowed just one Internet pipe into that country. Fortunately American NGOs, particularly Chinese-Americans PhDs in computer sciences, have developed ways and are having success in defeating the Great Firewall of China. The BBG recently recognized their success on China and has started working with them on Iran. But a much larger, global program is required. These same Chinese-Americans have proposed a Global Internet Freedom project which is scaleable and can be applied to any dictatorship. To defeat the massive efforts on the other side, including in the case of China over 50,000 censors, we should fund this US NGO Global Internet Freedom Consortium project with \$50 million per annum.
- The US Government-run radios and television make important contributions in this struggle, but there is a huge unmet opportunity in independent radio and television. Our NGO funding for media is overwhelmingly for training. Imagine the credibility and influence if Iran's national student movement had its own radio and therefore voice. Similarly, an open radio broadcasting platform for North Korea, produced by Koreans for Koreans, could have a huge impact. The "Washington Post" this week quoted a Radio Farda representative saying that "should the mullahs be overthrown" would be an unacceptable topic for Farda. But a non-violent overthrow is precisely the main topic on the minds of a majority of Iranians. I propose an Independent TV and Radio Fund be established, with its own board to ensure that stations receiving support adhere to international broadcasting standards and promote non-violent transitions to democracy. Such a fund could easily and wisely spend \$100 million per year.
- Telephones, including cell phones, are another major and largely under-explored and supported means for communications and organization within dictatorships and with the outside world. For example, one American NGO has proposed a massive program of calling the personal and official phones of those persecuting people in China to explain that what they are doing is morally wrong and that they will be held accountable when the rule of law and democracy arrives. This group states that it has over 500,000 such phone numbers and success with its limited resources in talking with some people. I believe a Democracy Technology Fund devoted to uses and programs for existing technologies like cell phones and developing new technologies (mass text messaging devices to call people to and manage demonstrations) for communications among democrats could wisely spend another \$50

million per annum. Immense excitement and “voter” participation in American Idol clones on Middle Eastern television show that popular referenda can be done via cell phones and text messaging. The digital world can disintermediate the dictators by organizing direct referenda, even elections.

Students. From Indonesia to Hungary, and more recently from Serbia, to Ukraine and Nepal, students and young people have been at the forefront of a majority of peaceful ousters of dictators over the past four decades. Those who founded Students for Global Democracy at Indiana University recognized that students outside dictatorships can help. For students from democratic countries to show solidarity by visiting their colleagues inside dictatorships, and where they are willing to take the risks to join in demonstrations, sit-ins and other non-violent actions, could make a massive difference – just as northern students like me gave encouragement to those on the front line in the South during our own civil rights struggle merely by our presence. Training by young people experienced in non-violent conflict for those inside is increasingly taking place but is still under-funded. And funding, direct or indirect, of student and youth groups committed to action is even more grossly under-funded. We need a special Students for Global Democracy Fund which would be run by student and youth leaders from democratic universities and groups across the democratic world – who would give direct financial assistance to their colleagues inside the Not Free countries. The middle aged both inside our existing NGOs and within governments somehow are not comfortable aiding students and youth. Another \$50 million per year would be money very well spent.

ADVANCE Democracy Act. As a Chinese dissident said last month to President Bush, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing should be more welcoming to Chinese democrats. The Act would require the State Department and our embassies to meet and work with local democrats and NGOs to develop long-term strategies for harnessing U.S. Government resources to promote democracies in each Not Free country. Inside all 45 dictatorships there are upwards of 100 embassies of democratic countries. Beginning with American embassies, they should be key partners for local and foreign NGOs. The ADVANCE Democracy Act, which was passed by the House last year with broad bipartisan support and is now before the Senate, would transform our embassies into freedom houses and our ambassadors and other diplomats into active, trained supporters of non-violent campaigns for democracy. Unfortunately, in too many cases, embassies – and the larger U.S. foreign policy apparatus -- are not playing the role they should. In the case of Uzbekistan for instance, while the U.S. Government should be praised for calling for an international inquiry into the events in Andijian, they have been strangely silent on following through with targeted sanctions aimed at key supporters of the regime. Most of the NGOs active in the country have been kicked out, and the U.S. Government has yet to authorize a continuation of efforts of Freedom House, ABA, Internews and others to provide a lifeline to human rights defenders and other activists within the country. Indeed, the latest

USAID strategy for the entire Central Asia region makes no mention of a need to provide support to frontline human rights defenders in any country in Central Asia at all in the future. On the other hand, our Interest Section in Cuba and Embassy in Zimbabwe are showing some of the creative methods that can be applied. The Act also provides the Community of Democracies the ability to become an alliance of democratic actors, not just talkers, and provides funding for its affiliated NGO – the International Center for Democratic Transition, which was established to transfer the experience of successful transitions to those still under repression.

Time and Space. Dictators are far more vulnerable than most recognize. Their ouster is virtually never predicted by the world's cognoscenti and sometimes happens with breathtaking speed. But often building the individual will and national coalition to oust one takes time and experiences setbacks. Once they are ousted the most dramatic improvements in freedom tend to come quickly in the successful transitions, but time is often required for real consolidation. NGOs and their supporters therefore need programs which persevere, sometimes over a decade and more on either side of the ouster. Similarly they need space, to be as present inside as possible. We should establish and maintain a diplomatic presence inside every dictatorship, including Tehran and Pyongyang, to assist local and our own NGOs. Our goal should be to open, not further close off these repressed societies and to do so through every form of exchange. By not dealing with them in this brief testimony, I do not mean to underestimate the critical importance of many traditional NGO programs designed to open these countries and build civil society. Over time and with expanding space, we should move from general assistance to civil society forces, to targeted assistance focused on education and training in civic non-violent resistance, to assistance for cohesive civic coalitions through which such resistance is expressed. And when the ouster occurs, we should not abandon our democracy programs too soon, as we are on the verge of doing in Serbia.

Sullivan Principles for Democracy. We do not think of our corporations as NGOs but they are often the most powerful nongovernmental presence of the democracies inside dictatorships. I propose that key human rights and democracy NGOs and key democratic governments meet with leading businessmen to formulate a code of conduct for businesses inside dictatorships, and establish a Business Community for Democracy to work with the Community of Democracy and its NGO partners to enforce the code. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides a good basis for such a code. For example, the Declaration provides workers the right to organize independent unions and our companies could and should allow labor organizing within their factories and other enterprises inside dictatorships. Organized workers, with students, have been the most powerful agents of change in numerous successful non-violent campaigns. Trade unions are critical NGOs. It would be appropriate for all S&P listed companies to contribute \$250,000 each to a Global Democracy Fund to ensure the BDC has real clout, with companies contributing to

copyright and other problems like Google, CISCO, Microsoft contributing substantially more. There would be “safety in numbers” for each of these companies vis-a-vis their Chinese and other dictator hosts.

It has been precisely twenty five years since a small group met here in Washington to conceive and push through major new democracy promotion organizations: NED, CIPE, IRI, NDI as well as the AFL-CIO’s already existing programs. As one of those present at that moment of creation and active in this field since then, I think the time has come for another moment of creation and another push. Immense progress has been made and with another quarter century’s effort we could finish the job. The House and Senate sponsors of the ADVANCE Democracy Act propose that a Democracy Promotion and Human Rights Advisory Board be established to review and make recommendations regarding the overall United States strategy for promoting democracy and human rights. We need an independent, in-depth, zero-based look at what works and what our priorities should be for the future.

The Administration states that we are now spending \$1.4 billion on democracy promotion. While that is certainly a substantial increase over previous years, why are the sorts of initiatives I have outlined not receiving serious or any funding? Why do NGO programs focused on dictatorships get well under 50% of the money? Is \$1.4 billion insufficient? Do our priorities need fixing? Do we need to support new NGOs and should some of the existing ones lose their funding? Painful as some of these choices may be, the task is of such fundamental strategic importance to the United States and the entire world that we should not shrink from basic questions.

At the same time, we should not allow the complexities of Afghanistan and Iraq to obscure the successes of non-violent democracy promotion or to sap our will to persevere. Making dictators an extinct species has been and can be done without firing a shot in almost all situations. A world without dictators would be peaceful, prosperous and just. Surely that goal is worth sustained commitment and substantial funding by the American people for their NGOs – the heirs of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Lech Walesa in this noble struggle.