

Remarks of Larry Diamond

To the National Endowment for Democracy Panel

“The Legacy of Westminster:

Democracy Assistance since the Founding of NED and the Challenges Ahead”

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When President Ronald Reagan gave his visionary speech to the British parliament 25 years ago the third wave of global democratization had yet to be named and was still only a faint trend. The Americas were still only partly democratic, and the biggest, most important Latin American countries were still dictatorships. Japan was the only democracy in East Asia. Africa was still almost entirely authoritarian and Nigeria’s Second Republic would collapse the following year. But with a clarity of vision that no political scientist possessed, Reagan grasped the deepening crisis and impending demise of Soviet communism. And he understood the possibilities—the moral imperative—for the United States to lead the way in promoting freedom.

Since Reagan spoke at Westminster, the proportion of democracies in the world has climbed from slightly over a third to sixty percent. In areas where it was absent or scarcely present thirty years ago—Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe—it is now the predominant form of government. In the poorest region of the world, Africa, half of the states are classified by Freedom House as democracies, and people are demanding political accountability as never before.

Globally, democracy is the only broadly legitimate form of government, preferred by popular majorities in every region of the world that has been surveyed—even the Arab world.

Facilitating this extraordinary transformation of regimes and values has been a quarter-century of increasingly dense and sophisticated efforts to promote democracy and to support democrats in politics and civil society. These efforts have had a concrete impact in bringing about transitions to democracy in countries as diverse as the Philippines, Poland, Chile, South Africa, Serbia and Ukraine. They have helped bring about more democratic and transparent elections and stronger, more vigilant civil societies. Without international assistance of the kind that NED and other donors provide, many democratic NGOs, think tanks, and independent networks and media could not survive.

There is much to celebrate. But heeding the spirit of Reagan's Westminster message requires a new resolve and redoubled effort. For, we stand at a fragile and dangerous juncture in the world—a moment of democratic recession. The number of democracies in the world has remained essentially flat for a decade. Since the 1999 military coup in Pakistan, democracy has been overthrown or quietly suffocated in such critical countries as Russia, Venezuela, Nigeria, and Thailand. Other large and important democracies are either functioning very badly, as in the Philippines, or are in a state of suspension, as in Bangladesh. Perhaps as many as half of Africa's "democracies" are better described as competitive authoritarian regimes.

In the recent public opinion data lie important clues to what ails the new and fragile democracies. Trust in political and governmental institutions is low and declining. People are disillusioned by corruption, mismanagement, and the abuse of power. Electoral alternation refreshes hope in democracy, but when all parties turn out to be the same once in power, people lose faith in all parties, and ultimately in democracy.

There is a specter haunting democracy in the world today. It is bad governance—governance that serves only the interests of a narrow ruling elite. Governance that is drenched in

corruption, patronage, favoritism, and abuse of power. Governance that is not responding to the massive and long-deferred social agenda of reducing inequality, unemployment, and dehumanizing poverty. Governance that is not delivering broad improvement in people's lives because it is stealing, squandering, or skewing the resources. The Philippines, Bangladesh, and Nigeria lie at different points along the path of democratic decay, but they reflect a common problem. Where power confers virtually unchecked opportunities for personal, factional, and party enrichment, it is difficult if not impossible to sustain democratic rules of the game. The democratic spirit of elections drowns in vote-buying, rigging, violence, or all three.

It is natural to view these problems as pathologies that can be cured with more medicine—that is, democracy assistance. But the performance of many new democracies reveals a more troubling truth. Endemic corruption is not some flaw that can be corrected with a technical fix or a political push. It is the way the system works, and it is deeply imbedded in the norms and expectations of political and social life. Reducing it to less destructive levels—and keeping it there—requires revolutionary change in institutions. The kinds of civic and political organizations that NED supports can help to bring about this revolution for better, more accountable and transparent governance. Aid directly to counter-corruption and rule of law institutions can also make a difference. But none of this can work without the political will inside these countries to govern with a different logic—one that puts the generation of public goods like education, roads, and public health over the enrichment of private interests.

This is a revolution that democracy assistance can support but not one it can drive. That is going to require much bolder changes in diplomacy, in foreign aid, and in global institutions, so that we stop condoning and subsidizing with our principal transnational flows of money and

power the bad governance that we are trying meekly to combat with our democracy assistance efforts.

This is a titanic struggle—every bit as profound and fateful as the battle between communism and freedom. There is no way we are going to confine corruption to what Reagan called “the ash heap of history,” the way we succeeded in defeating communism. But if we do not roll it back significantly, then democracy’s remarkable gains since the Westminster speech will themselves be rolled back, and an epochal opportunity to consolidate the advance of freedom in the world will be lost.