

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman Richard G. Lugar
Opening Statement for Hearing on the
Role of Nongovernmental Organizations in the Promotion of Democracy
June 8, 2006

Today, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee meets to examine the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the promotion of democracy. Support for democratic, grassroots organizations in many countries around the world has become a centerpiece of America's international outreach.

The American people see this most clearly in the U.S. Government's efforts to set the foundation for democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan. Less well-known is our nation's broader push for democracy all around the globe. Within the past three years, the so-called Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan have opened new space for democracy in those nations, thanks primarily to the efforts of civil society members and organizations.

Unfortunately, the success of these generally peaceful "color revolutions" has prompted a counteroffensive by some authoritarian regimes against pro-democracy groups. A report I commissioned from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) notes: "Representatives of democracy assistance NGOs have been harassed, offices closed, and staff expelled. Even more vulnerable are local grantees and project partners who have been threatened, assaulted, prosecuted, imprisoned, and even killed." The report, entitled "The Backlash against Democracy Assistance," is being made public today.

A number of governments are tightening the legal constraints against democracy assistance. In January, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a controversial new law imposing heightened controls on local and foreign NGOs operating in that country. Governments in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Belarus have followed Russia's lead in cracking down on NGO activity.

Outside the former Soviet states, China has tightened its controls against foreign NGOs and, according to the NED report, Egypt and Zimbabwe have done so, as well.

This issue was brought to my personal attention last October when I met with Maria Corina Machado, the founder and executive director of Sumate, an independent democratic civil society group in Venezuela, which monitors the performance of Venezuela's electoral institutions. She has been charged with treason simply for receiving a grant from our own NED.

Unfortunately, authorities in Russia, Venezuela, and other nations have been able to persuade many of their citizens that the work of these NGOs is a form of American interventionism and that opposition to the groups is a reaffirmation of sovereignty. As the NED report states, NGOs today, compared to the situation immediately following 1989, "face a new reality, one that is dramatically different." Groups that promote democracy must come to grips with the fact that they are being vilified for allegedly promoting regime change.

American-funded democracy promoters should underscore that democracy is not a singularly American endeavor. The European Union; the U.N. Democracy Fund; and NED-like initiatives sponsored by Germany, Taiwan, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and others are part of the

democracy-promotion community. American democracy groups should stress that they often work with such organizations, and they should cultivate these relationships.

In this environment, where democracy promoters are regularly being accused of crossing the line into domestic partisan politics, they must redouble their efforts to be open and transparent with the host regimes to assure them of their non-partisan intent. At the same time, when these NGOs come under assault in the pursuit of legitimate activities that are often protected by international agreements, they should be flexible and resourceful in finding ways to continue their work and in marshalling support for expanding the democratic space.

This morning, we are joined by two distinguished panels. First, we welcome Barry Lowenkron, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

On the second panel, we will hear from Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy; Ambassador Mark Palmer, the current Vice Chairman of Freedom House; Morton Halperin, Director of U.S. Advocacy at the Open Society Institute; and Thomas Carothers, Senior Associate and Director of the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

We thank our witnesses and look forward to our discussion.

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