

Remarks of Madeleine K. Albright
Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies
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(As prepared for delivery)

Thank you. I am pleased to be here and honored to participate in this, the fifth ministerial meeting of the Community of Democracies.

The setting for this gathering could not be more appropriate.

More than two centuries ago, before the United States had fully secured its freedom, Portugal was the first neutral nation to recognize America's status as a free and independent nation.

Thirty five years ago, when military dictators still held power in many lands, the Carnation Revolution led the way toward democratic change.

And ten years ago, Portugal rallied the world in support of East Timor's right to determine its own destiny.

So it's no surprise that, in recent weeks, Portugal has done an outstanding job in preparing for this timely conference.

Foreign Minister Amado and his team should be as proud as we are grateful for their hard work and hospitality.

When, in the year 2000, the Community of Democracies first met in Warsaw, there were many who predicted that our initial conference would also be our last.

But the principle of democratic solidarity is powerful, as we have seen since in Santiago and Seoul, Bamako and now here in Lisbon.

Around the world, governments band together for reasons of geography, economy, history and religious faith -- but there can be no better grounds for supporting one another than a shared commitment to freedom.

The Community of Democracies deserves the enduring and high level commitment of our leaders -- not just at periodic meetings, but in our everyday policies and actions.

The premise underlying our community is that democracy has proven its value to people of all cultures and in every corner of the globe.

And our purpose in convening is to help one another by sharing knowledge, providing assistance, and preparing to meet common dangers.

When Foreign Minister Geremek first welcomed us to Warsaw, he emphasized both the value of freedom and its fragility.

"The emergence of democracy," he said, "was the most important development of our century."

But he also reminded us of another twentieth century lesson, which is that the tides of freedom will always be opposed.

And today, it is this warning that should be on our minds.

Because democracy in our era is undergoing a new and rigorous series of tests.

These tests have been made more complicated by the global financial crisis, by worries about security, and by concerns about how democracy has sometimes been promoted.

As a result, the opponents of democracy have gone on the offensive.

Some rulers say that their people are too poor and too uneducated to be entrusted with freedom; others that democracy is not possible until a fully stable political order is established; still others that democracy is a trick used by the West to impose its own interests.

Each of these arguments is nonsense, and we must not accept them.

It's true that the democratic cause can, on occasion, be undermined by its own advocates--when we assume too much or select the wrong means or claim absolute title to the truth.

Let us acknowledge that overselling democracy can be a mistake.

But let us also insist that selling democracy short would be an unforgivable historic error.

Critics may suggest that democracy leads to disorder, but history tells us that the opposite is true.

As the legacy of totalitarianism attests, it is the denial of freedom that points the way most often to civil conflict and war.

At its best, democracy will produce the kind of stability that lasts, a stability built on the firm ground of mutual commitments and consent.

This differs from the illusion of order that can be maintained only as long as dissent is silenced; the kind of order that may last for decades and yet still disappear overnight.

Democracy is also an aid to economic growth, because growth depends on productivity which can only flourish when minds are encouraged to explore, experiment, and invent.

We all know that the economic crisis has caused some to lose faith in our financial systems and markets.

The perception has grown that globalization is harmful to the poor – and that rules for investment and trade have been manipulated to the benefit of a few.

It is only natural for people to grow frustrated when elections come and go but poverty, joblessness and corruption remain.

The temptation is strong to revert to the failed policies of the past – to protectionism, paternalism, and the idea that economic progress is a zero sum game.

The obvious flaw in democracy is that it does not offer instant solutions to chronic problems, nor can it ensure that only qualified candidates come to power.

But the great virtue of democracy is that it allows us to correct our mistakes over time by electing new leaders, adopting new policies, strengthening our institutions, and lending real meaning to the rule of law.

That's why economic solidarity is such an important part of the Community of Democracies.

And why we must do all we can to see that democratic governments are able to live up to public expectations.

The bottom line is that democracy MUST deliver, because nothing else will.

This principle is valid economically; it is true politically as well.

Just this past January, provincial elections in Iraq helped to bring that country closer together, creating hope that a stable and relatively peaceful society might one day emerge from the terrible chaos of recent years.

A month ago, voters in Lebanon turned out in huge numbers to affirm their support for national independence and sovereignty.

The people of that land know full well that the alternative to their troubled democracy is not some tranquil replacement – but the terrifying destruction of civil war.

And in early June, the people of Iran went to the polls.

The outcome, as the entire world is aware, remains a matter of vigorous dispute.

The incumbent has claimed victory; while the leading opposition candidate insists that the election has been stolen.

Protestors are calling for a new round of balloting, while the authorities have been increasingly brutal in cracking down.

Some may conclude from this that democracy is not working.

But I would argue that real democracy has not been tried.

The solution in Iran is not despair, but determination; not to give up on democracy but to broaden democracy – so that those elected hold real power; and those who are allowed to run for office include the true champions of reform.

The lesson in all this is that, in any society, building democracy is never easy and never fully accomplished; it is something to be worked toward, step by step, country by country, day by day.

That is the philosophy that guides my own approach as chair of the National Democratic Institute.

And it is in recognition of this same process that our hosts this weekend have chosen to honor an individual who has made a unique contribution to democracy.

Of course, in recent decades, we have been inspired by the heroes of liberty and human rights on every continent.

There are many who have raised their voices against repression and who have paid a high price for remaining true to their principles.

There are many who have earned our admiration, but there is only one Nelson Mandela.

Mandela taught us a lesson we can never forget even if few of us will ever learn it well enough.

He taught us not only what to fight for, but also the spirit with which to carry on the battle.

No one opposed apartheid more fervently, but Nelson Mandela understood that what mattered most was not what he was against, but what he was for.

And what he was for was a democratic system that had room not just for his political allies, but for everyone -- including those who had confined him to Robben Island for nearly three decades of his life.

Mandela showed us by his own example that there is no better response to insult than dignity; no better remedy to conflict than forgiveness; no better answer to injustice than fairness; and no better means for social progress than democracy.

We know that democracy, like all human inventions, is far from perfect.

But it remains the single most important generator of economic prosperity and political stability in the world today.

In closing, I hope you will join with me in pledging continued support for the Community of Democracies and, in the spirit of Nelson Mandela – continued backing for the growth and nurturing of democratic values in countries across the globe.

Thank you very much.