

FINAL PAPER

CSID Sixth Annual Conference

Washington, DC - April 22 - 23, 2005

“Democracy and Development: Challenges for the Islamic World”

Banquet Keynote Address - Friday, April 22, 2005

“Democracy in the Muslim World: Achievements and the Road Ahead”

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I want to start by saying thank you to Radwan and to the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), and to let you all know that it has always been a pleasure to be associated with you and your very fine work. I very much appreciate the opportunity to speak again this evening.

I say again because two years ago, when I was assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, I had the pleasure of addressing this conference. I then had the honor of being on the same platform as Saad Edin Ibrahim. Tonight, I am on the same platform as Anwar Ibrahim. The best part of being in my line of work is the people you get to meet, the heroes of our time. Anwar Ibrahim is a hero of our time.

I also have the pleasure this evening of following Gretchen Birkle. Gretchen and I have had the opportunity now to work together twice, first at the International Republican Institute (IRI) and then at the State Department. You will not find a more intelligent or passionate advocate for democracy than Gretchen. And if you doubt that change is possible, speak to Gretchen, who labored for many years to bring democracy to Ukraine. I would follow Gretchen anywhere.

When I spoke before you two years ago, it was a very different time. In early 2003, those of us who believed freedom and democracy could come to the Muslim world were regarded as an oddity, and we were still trying to justify our point of view. There was a ferocious debate, from Washington to the Middle East, about the compatibility of Islam and democracy. There was little reason to be optimistic about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many people said our invasion of Iraq had so damaged America's reputation that Washington's talk of human rights actually hurt the cause. Even aside from Iraq, skepticism about the U.S. commitment to promoting democracy and human rights in the Muslim world was widespread.

In my May 2003 speech, I said that Washington's policy change favoring human rights and democracy in the region was not a passing fad, that we would remain committed. To those who doubted the compatibility of Islam and democracy, I recalled how, in Latin America and Central Europe and Asia and elsewhere, we who believed in democracy faced

great skepticism from “regional experts” who told us, “it [democracy] can’t happen here.”

Well, anyone who still believes democracy can’t happen in the Middle East has been asleep these past two years. Tonight, I want to note briefly some of important events, achievements, since my last speech before you. I’m not going to talk as a triumphalist, because we have a long way to go. So I also want to talk about what I think needs to be emphasized on the road ahead. But we are definitely on the road. Last October, Afghan men – and women – went to the polls to elect their first president in the country’s history. Despite having little prior experience with democracy, despite decades of civil war that eroded the country’s social fabric and basic institutions, and despite a security situation that still remains precarious, voters turned out in overwhelming numbers – more than 80 percent according to some accounts – often walking for miles in an unprecedented show of support for democracy.

In January, the Middle East witnessed the most free and competitive leadership election ever held in the region, to elect a new Palestinian Authority president. Voters turned out despite the challenges posed to movement in the West Bank and Gaza, and an opposition candidate garnered more than 20 percent of the vote.

In Iraq, the skeptics said people would never participate in an election organized by the U.S. military. The skeptics said the security situation was too dangerous for people to leave their homes. And the skeptics said that insurgents would have a field day attacking polling stations and voters. But the world watched in January as some eight million Iraqi voters turned out to participate in the country’s first democratic election in more than 30 years.

Images of Iraqis walking to the polls were visible on satellite television from Morocco to Malaysia. And though the election was not without flaws, the impact this historic event had in the Arab world seems to be reverberating across the region, most notably in Lebanon, where we are witnessing events that seemed impossible just months ago. Even in Egypt, an opposition rallying around the banner of Kafiya – or “enough” – has been more vocal in its demands for reform than at any point during the last decade; President Mubarak’s recent announcement to allow for competitive presidential elections serves as a very small step in the right direction. Likewise, Saudi Arabia has also made its first move, allowing elections for municipal councils this year.

Nations which two years ago had already made their first democratic advances continue to show the way forward. Qatar is expected soon to hold elections for a National Assembly by universal suffrage. Morocco is considering a new political party law that is being widely and openly debated and enjoys input from the political parties. Jordan is enacting changes to the way municipal government works to make local councils fully elected bodies. Outside the Middle East, Indonesia continued down the path of democratic transition started in the late 1990s. Even the tsunami which gripped the world at the end of last year and resulted in an unprecedented loss of life and devastation has not prevented democratic advances. Women’s political participation as candidates and as

voters is on the rise in Indonesia and civil society is becoming ever more dynamic, demanding greater accountability.

Most recently, in Kyrgyzstan, events which continue to unfold have resulted in the removal of a leader who had clung to power through various undemocratic means for far too long. It is too early to count Kyrgyzstan among the democratic victories in the Muslim world. But one cannot help but notice that much of what is driving events – primarily public dissatisfaction with corruption and nepotism – is not too different from what mobilized citizens in places like Ukraine and Georgia.

Clearly, ordinary citizens – the people – in the Middle East and elsewhere have demonstrated, since I spoke before you two years ago, that the democratic change that earlier swept through Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia is welcome in their lands. At this point, those experts who continue to argue that Islam and democracy are incompatible, or that ordinary people in the Muslim world aren't ready for democracy, bear the burden of the argument.

It is the people who deserve the credit. President Bush has encouraged reformers and discouraged those who would put them in jail. But as he would be the first to say, we have not exported democracy. We don't need to. People will always choose to be free of time in jail, to be free of a secret police, to read what they want, to say what they wish, and to have a vote in how they are ruled. Those desires are universally held; we do not need to export them. For all of these reasons -- the people, the President, universal values -- in the last two years the prospect of democracy in Islamic countries has gone from an abstract theoretical debate to reality. Democratic advances are occurring. Muslims are participating in democratic processes. And it's all happening swiftly.

Now, I said in 2003 that the experience of watching democracy take hold around the world led me to believe it could also happen in Muslim countries. As we move forward in the Muslim world, I also want to spend a few minutes on the lessons we have learned elsewhere in helping to build and cement democracy.

In Latin America and East Asia we learned first and foremost that elections do not a democracy make. Rather, to keep democracy moving forward, an event like a successful election must be supported by other pillars of democracy. Among the most important is a vibrant civil society which effectively represents the opinions and interests of citizen groups and holds elected officials to account on promises and policies. Political parties are important elements of a vibrant civil society, but the absence of parties – presently the case in many countries in the Middle East -- cannot be an excuse for inaction in the realm of advocacy and opinion-shaping on the part of local nongovernmental organizations, associations and citizen groups.

We have also learned from experience that the rule of law is extremely important in helping to consolidate democratic advances. Making sure the various branches of government have clearly defined roles and mandates, working to protect judiciaries from the vagaries of political institutions, and helping to instill a political culture of freedom

from arbitrary prosecution and illegal seizure are all critical to supporting democracy's underpinnings.

To ensure that citizens are full participants in political reform, knowledgeable about what goes on in their societies and able to express displeasure with government institutions without fear of being persecuted, we have learned that democratic improvements initiated from above cannot be a substitute for a free press – which informs the public and helps to hold leaders to account from below.

In East Asia and Latin America we have also learned that democracy cannot reach its potential unless all members of society are full participants. Women cannot be ignored in the public space and, in the Middle East, must be able to participate as full members in their countries' political life. The fact is that already, in many countries of the Middle East, women are themselves serving as catalysts for democracy's advance. They should be encouraged and supported in their endeavors. Likewise youth. People under 30 constitute more than half the population in most countries of the Middle East. As in Latin America and East Asia two decades ago and as in many places around the world today, including the United States to some extent, young people often feel marginalized from political processes and not capable of controlling their future. In the Middle East attitudes of apathy and frustration make young people prime targets for extremists. A special effort must be made to bring young people in the region into the democratic fold. For democracy to continue to make strides in the region in the future, the next generation of leaders cannot be ignored.

Perhaps most important, in looking at the road ahead for democracy in the Muslim world, is the need to keep current achievements moving forward by demonstrating that democracy has a real and meaningful impact on the lives of the citizens it represents. In Afghanistan, a country ravaged by decades of civil war and with little left in the way of infrastructure, we are beginning to see progress on national reconstruction. Roads are being built, the economy is growing, repairs are being made to schools and investment in human capital is on the rise. It is these dividends of democracy that will help build genuine conviction in its ideals among Muslim populations. If democracy is to flourish and be applied across the wider Muslim world, concepts of good governance and accountability must be demonstrated in practice through improvements in basic service delivery and through officials being held accountable for their behavior.

In the Muslim world, there are significant challenges to democracy's continued advance in the next few years. Many countries of the region are characterized by ethnic and religious fissures where decades of authoritarian rule and manipulation have left little trust between communities and threaten to derail constructive dialogue. Government institutions led by unelected or unaccountable rulers are weak, lacking the mandate and capacity to effectively respond to citizen needs in a democratic environment. And of course there is the threat of extremism, where those with regressive world views and violent tendencies threaten to take advantage of a more open political environment to destabilize governments and terrorize citizens.

So I think we have a long way to go. When I think about the Muslim world with respect to Central and Eastern Europe, I don't think we are at 1989 when democratic transition was poised to sweep the region. I think we are more at 1982, when people in the region really started calling for change – and started organizing themselves in a way to make it happen. But given the Muslim world's lack of democracy to date, after two years, I don't think that's a bad place to be.

The challenge now is how to sustain initial advances and apply them across the Muslim world. The key is determining how to get from democracy rhetoric and historic events to democracy working for people, in a democratic culture. And that's why organizations like CSID are important. You have unique insights about what can work, and how to get democracy working for people. Democratic models compatible with cultures and traditions in the Muslim world are possible. The road ahead will have many bumps and ruts. But we have seen, over the last few years, the initial achievements. What we need now is to stay the course and push for more. We must keep U.S. policymakers focused on democracy in the Muslim world. We must listen to what you and publics in the Muslim world are telling us about democracy and human rights.

And – perhaps most important – we must support morally and through other means Muslims committed to democratic reform where reforms are taking hold.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you again for the privilege of addressing you this evening.