



# Puente Democrático

## Documents

Year XIII Number 56 - December 9, 2015

## **A Democracy Assembly to Face the New Authoritarian Challenges<sup>1</sup>**

**Sixteen years after the first World Movement Assembly, the situation has dramatically changed. We no longer have the strong wind of triumphant democracy in our sails. Instead, we are facing a reinvigorated wind of authoritarianism that defies us not only in practice but also ideologically and tests our understanding of our own values, our consistency, and our commitment. During the last wave of democratization, civil society emerged as a recognized and legitimate actor on the international stage. If as civil society actors we are being silenced and made irrelevant in our countries, with the help of democratic governments and the global human-rights community we can use the virtual and international stage to reemerge as strong, relevant actors and impose ourselves as our governments' interlocutors.**

*By Ladan Boroumand*

<sup>1</sup> Author's presentation at the opening of the 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Movement for Democracy in Seoul from 1 to 4 of November, 2015.

**W**hen the World Movement for Democracy held its inaugural Assembly in New Delhi in 1999, its aim was to build a worldwide movement that would benefit from 25 years of the “dramatic expansion of democracy” and create a network of organizations from all over the world that were united “by shared universal democratic values and a commitment to mutual support and solidarity.” In the mind of its founders, the most important role such a network of activists and civil society organizations could play was “to consolidate recent democratic gains.” The founders of the World Movement knew only too well that creating an enduring democratic culture is a difficult long-term endeavor that requires sustained efforts at all levels of social life. They also foresaw the dangers looming, in the uncertain situation of Russia, China’s repressive attitude after Tiananmen, and the rise and spread of a totalitarian Islamist ideology that was diversifying and expanding well beyond Iran, the first country it had conquered.

But in 1999, Islamism was not yet considered a serious challenge to the triumphant democratic worldview, and communism’s collapse in many parts of the world, including in its cradle of Russia, had discredited antidemocratic arguments carried by communist ideology. In short, in the realm of ideology, democracy was still unchallenged. Authoritarian regimes were not defying it ideologically, but only violating it in practice. Even in a country such as Iran, with its Islamist regime, the political language of the leadership had changed after the demise of communism and taboo words such as democracy, freedom, civil society, and individual rights had burst into official political discourse.

Sixteen years after that first World Movement Assembly, the situation has dramatically changed. We no longer have the strong wind of triumphant democracy in our sails. Instead, we are facing a reinvigorated wind of authoritarianism that defies us not only in practice but also ideologically and tests our understanding of our own values, our consistency, and our commitment.

Chaos in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, plus the lingering economic crisis and need for lucrative new economic ties with rich authoritarian regimes, have prompted democratic governments to de-emphasize democracy promotion and favor a traditional diplomacy based on selfish and shortsighted notions of “national interest.” But reality keeps getting in the way. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; the tragic war of Boko Haram in West Africa; the annexation of Crimea and Putin’s “hybrid war” in Ukraine; China’s territorial disputes with its neighbors; the assassinations of Jewish kids and journalists in the heart of old Western democracies; the hundreds of thousands of refugees at the doors of these same societies; the financing of propaganda outlets and extreme rightist parties in their midst by foreign authoritarian regimes—these continue to demonstrate that what authoritarians do is not easily contained within national borders. Thus China’s detention of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiabo and assault on pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong; the extrajudicial killings of Russian opposition figures; the arrests of Venezuelan dissidents; Iran’s executions of political and religious dissidents; and Syria’s bombing of its own people are not the internal business of China, Russia, Iran, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Syria anymore. On the contrary, they are the business of the whole world.

Democratic regimes urgently need to rethink and rearticulate their foreign policies and their alliances based on their democratic values rather than on the legacy of the Treaty of Westphalia or the pressure of irresponsible commercial lobbies.

Inaction, ladies and gentlemen, is as much founded on principles and values as action is. It is time for democratic polities to name the principles that preside over their inaction and disunity, and to ask if they are consistent with their democratic values. For at this point what is at stake is not only the expansion of democratic values in the world, but also and more urgently the preservation of these values within established democracies.

We need no elaborate political theories to prove that there is a tie binding the fight for democracy within nondemocratic countries to the strengthening of democracy within societies that already enjoy democracy's blessings. French citizens today understand that Tunisians who fight for human rights in Tunisia are defending the democratic institutions of France as well. In 2009, when millions of Iranians stood up to claim their right to free and fair elections, they were also defending the democratic rights of Iraqis. The Islamic Republic of Iran's violent suppression of its own people—hundreds were arrested, tortured, and killed—was a setback not only for Iran's democrats, but also for pro-democracy forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Today, human-rights activists from France, Germany, Sweden, the United States, or Britain know very well that when they support Iranian, Chinese, or Russian dissidents they are not only defending the rights of distant fellow humans, but are shielding and strengthening their own rights as well. This is not idealism—it is pragmatism and realism.

Let me speak as an Iranian activist in exile. At this very moment, most of the human-rights advocates who were active in my country in 2005 are either in exile, behind bars, or living in a state of enforced silence. This includes Iran's Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, who is in exile while three of her fellow human-rights lawyers—Abdolfattah Soltani, Narges Mohammadi, and Mohammad Seifzadeh—are in prison. Similarly, reformist members of the ruling elite have been jailed or subjected to house arrest.

In the confrontation between Iran's pro-democracy activists and its Islamist state, the government's arsenal is made of violence and lies. Violence seeks to spread fear and silence dissent through detention, torture, and executions. In 2004, Iran reportedly executed 94 people. In 2010, it executed 818, while in 2014 the number reportedly climbed to 983. This year so far, as I speak to you, 917 people have been executed without due process of law. Once society is

silenced, then the way is clear for the government's lies to prevail through its lobbies outside the country, through its monopoly control over traditional media within the country, and through its vast efforts to restrict citizens' access to cyberspace.

Our enemies' arsenal is terrifying, and we, at first glance, seem powerless in comparison. But in reality we are stronger, for we have the truth. Faced with force and fraud, activists for human rights and democracy insist on "living in truth," as Václav Havel put it. They rely on the truth, with its subversive might, to annihilate lies and leave tyrants speechless. We also have our faith in and commitment to universal human rights which is the guarantee of our steadfastness. Our enemies don't have any faith since they know they are lying. Take Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, for example: He claims to be a true Muslim, yet for the most cynical of reasons he lauds publicly the communist and atheist regime of North Korea. He is not even true to himself, let alone his religion.

We have the truth and our commitment to it, but we also have cyberspace—something that previous generations of activists did not have. We have cyberspace, and with it the world as our audience. We can spread the truth and let it subvert tyrannies. But to do so we need the support of the brilliant minds who are contributing to the development of the cyberspace. We need them to protect us in our fight for democracy. We need them to block the intrusion of tyrants' cyber spies.

We have the truth, we have our courage and imagination, we have cyberspace, and we have still more. We have potential natural long-term allies in democratic countries. The alliance of authoritarian states is a matter of mere temporary convenience—their interests and ideologies are divergent, and only their common hostility to democracy brings them together. We, by contrast, have as potential allies each other and all the world's democratic governments, which we can meet on the lasting ground of shared principle: Government by consent of the governed,

the rule of law not arbitrary power, and respect for human rights will always be our cause.

By creating the Community of Democracies, democratic governments have confirmed the need for this potential alliance to become an actual and strong one. Reinventing and strategically strengthening the natural alliance, solidarity, and collaboration between democratic governments and international organizations on the one hand and pro-democracy forces in authoritarian and closed societies on the other—this is a theme on which our Assembly will focus. Such collaboration is not a utopia, it is an urgent necessity. Moreover, it is within reach: We can make it happen. The work will require faith, experience, lucidity, and imagination. During the last wave of democratization, civil

society emerged as a recognized and legitimate actor on the international stage. If as civil society actors we are being silenced and made irrelevant in our countries, with the help of democratic governments and the global human-rights community we can use the virtual and international stage to reemerge as strong, relevant actors and impose ourselves as our governments' interlocutors. Such an alliance should aim at creating real and virtual space where dissidence from authoritarian states can survive, thrive, launch challenges to unfree governments, and spread democratic culture within authoritarian societies.

This alliance, I am confident, can be the source from which the next wave of democratization in the world will spring.

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