

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum

“Democratically Elected Leaders Not Perpetuating Democracy”

November 14, 2006

The November Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum focused on the challenges and opportunities that arise when addressing the development of freedom and democracy in other countries. The discussion also addressed the difficult question of what should be done when a democratically elected leader is not perpetuating democracy, and who should take the lead in that process? The main themes covered by the panelist included the role of organizations, leaders, conflict resolvers and governments in supporting counties in their pursuit of democracy, the challenges faced when supporting the spread of democracy, and some of the reasons new democracies fail. The panelist were Paula Schriefer, Director of Advocacy, Freedom House; Dr. Andrei Piontkovsky, Visiting Scholar, Hudson institute; Patrick Merloe, Senior Associate and Director of Programs on Election Processes, National Democratic Institute; and Dr. Richard Rubenstein, Professor, Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University. Ozong Agborsangaya, Director of Policy and Development at Search for Common Ground facilitated the forum.

Paula Schriefer spoke about the experience Freedom House has gained in working to support freedom and democracy around the world over the last sixty-five years. The organization pursues their mission through a number of processes including: putting pressure on the US and other democracies to make the defense of freedom and democracy a top foreign policy priority; reaching out directly to governments of countries with a democracy deficit and making recommendations for change, and by working directly with local democracy advocates by providing information, training, and sometimes financial support.

Ms. Schriefer identified three critical points that should be addressed when working to support countries' pursuit of democracy. There must be an unfailing adherence to human rights – support for fledgling democracies must not only be given with strong rhetoric, but must be followed by committed action. It is imperative not to confuse the means with the ends; the approached used to support emerging democracy matters, i.e., the process of promoting democracy should include democratic principles in the approach. Finally, those working to support the development of democracy should not confuse a lack of experience and capacity on the part of those working for democracy within their own country with a lack of political will. Ms. Schreifer ended her presentation by iterating that while the United States has taken a leading role in speaking out against human rights abuses, no amount of money or force will bring democracy to a country that does not want it.

Dr. Andrei Piontkovsky represented a Russian perspective, analyzing the democratic governing system in his country. Dr. Piontkovsky expressed that democratic principals are missing in Russia and views President Putin as “strangulating democracy”. He believes that the betrayal of democracy occurs when there is a hunger for a strong state and when corporations, like the petrol industry, run the economy, as is the case in Russia. Dr. Piontkovsky pointed out that the perception of America as an enemy of Russia contributes to the process of discrediting democracy in his

country. But, Dr. Piontkovsky warned of the trap of the tradition of American self-criticism; he urged Americans not to be dissuaded from the promotion of democracy.

According to Mr. Patrick Merloe there are three main tenets of democracy, these include: human rights, the rule of law, and economic prosperity. Thus, democratic governing systems work to create and maintain internal stability, both political and economic. In contrast, autocratic governments tend to produce instability, which inevitably violates these tenets. Mr. Merloe offered some considerations when working to promote democracy: democracy is not a one size fits all solution - there is no archetype of democracy, leaders who are democratically elected are not all the same, and finally that the application of democracy requires a tailored approach.

Mr. Merloe identified several key factors for democratic reform. He began by highlighting the importance of promoting democracy by supporting those who are striving to promote democracy within their own borders, and that the promotion of democracy is a people to people process. He stressed that wide spread dissatisfaction with the status quo is essential and that the relational strength of the opposition must be considered (e.g., opposition to tyranny, dictatorship, autocracy, etc). Mr. Merloe also stated the importance of unity and cooperation within civil society and freedom of the press. On the other side, one also must consider the strength of the elites and the security forces. Mr. Merloe stressed that that the promotion of democracy must be done inside and outside the capitol, and that elections present a key opportunity to move towards reform. Finally, it is crucial that there is serious and committed interest from the international community. Mr. Merloe noted that the international community has several options when engaging in the promotion of democracy, from shining a bright light on leaders who are not perpetuating democracy, to encouraging citizen-to-citizen linkages.

Dr. Richard Rubenstein poised the question: what is the relationship between democracy, conflict and conflict resolution? He began his presentation by questioning whether or not the United States and other democratic countries should engage in promoting democracy by building opposition in countries other than their own; can this be seen as meddling with others affairs? Does the definition of democracy then come laden with the other countries' interest? Dr. Rubenstein cited theorist and historians whose work has proven that authentic democracy comes about because of self-generated consensus, through a covenant of society, and an accumulation of trust within the society. According to Dr. Rubenstein, the notion that countries can export democracy to other countries is a fallacy.

Dr. Rubenstein believes that it is not democracy that helps resolve conflict, but that parties in conflict must work through the conflict together with an impartial facilitator. He asked if there is a way to operate as independent conflict resolvers, based in the United States, when often the US is a party to the conflict? In conclusion, Dr. Rubenstein spoke about the need for criteria and safeguards when intervening in other countries' conflicts and in the promotion of democracy around the globe.

All of the panelists agreed on several points, including: democracy by force does not work, successful promotion and adaptation of democracy involves strong and cohesive civic coalitions and broad coalitions of local actors, and the international community should utilize a full range of tools and tactics, such as sanctions, incentives, foreign assistance, trade agreements, linkages and diplomacy to promote democracy. Finally the panelists agreed that it is imperative to support individuals fighting for democratic change and freedom from tyranny.