

COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACIES JULY 12, 2005

On July 12, 2005 the Americas Program at CSIS hosted a roundtable discussion entitled: "The Community of Democracies: Past Accomplishments, Future Challenges" in which a panel of speakers reviewed the accomplishments of the Third Ministerial Conference of the Community held in Santiago, Chile from April 28 to April 30 and identified future challenges related to the promotion of democracy around the world. The panel included Paula J. Dobriansky, Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs, Carlos Portales, Director of Foreign Policy of the Chilean Foreign Ministry and outgoing chairman of the Convening Group of the Community of Democracies, Mamounou Toure, First Counselor of the Embassy of Mali, Marin Palous, Ambassador of the Czech Republic to the United States, and Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy. Senior Vice President and Director of Studies at CSIS Patrick Cronin moderated the discussion.

Dr. Cronin highlighted the achievements of the Community of Democracies, underscoring the important role the group plays in furthering democratization around the world. Under Secretary Dobriansky opened discussion by highlighting the most significant accomplishments of the Community, including the recent mission to East Timor. Working in concert with the UNDP and other NGO's, the Community helped to organize and send a multinational delegation to East Timor to aid in elections, police training, and national reconciliation. She pointed to other issues, including expansion of the convening group, the engagement of NGO's, and the new and successful organization of sessions in Santiago according to both theme and regional association. The Under Secretary identified two main challenges facing the Community: the issue of addressing and evaluation participation within the Community more objectively and more actively approaching areas that may be in need of assistance, such as states eager to hold elections and engage in the early steps of democratization.

Outgoing Chairman Carlos Portales outlined five main agenda issues discussed at the Santiago conference. First, the promotion and protection of democratic governance and civil society by fostering citizen participation, upholding human rights and civil liberties, and encouraging an environment of tolerance and stability. Second, reaffirming the crucial link between economic growth and democratic governance, stressing the responsibility of each state to promote economic growth with the aim of reducing poverty. Third, the important role of regional as well as inter-regional cooperation in terms of maintaining and encouraging effective democratic governance. Ambassador Portales cited the various regional roundtables held at the ministerial conference as evidence of the coalition's new focus in this area. Fourth, the commitment to coordinating efforts with the United Nations and other multilateral organizations on democracy-related issues. Fifth, a determination to protect and promote democracy in the face of national and transnational threats. Such efforts include strengthening institution-building programs to allow member states to counter the threat of terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, and other security threats. Ambassador Portales argued that only through increased participation and continued collaboration and cooperation will the Community achieve these five main goals.

First Counselor Toure, speaking for Ambassador Diop who was unable to attend the meeting, thanked Chile for its successful chairmanship of the community and expressed the strong resolve of the Malian government to further strengthen the Community as it assumes chairmanship. He underscored that, as a less developed state,

Mali will serve as a bridge between issues of economic development and democratic governance. Counselor Toure argued that ordinary citizens must see the fruits of democracy at work if support for democratic governance is to grow; hence the Community must work to provide tangible benefits to less-developed nations, especially those in Africa. Toure cited Chile as a model of democratic transformation, exemplifying the economic and social benefits of democratic governance.

Ambassador Palous identified two key challenges facing the Community of Democracies in the current globalized world: participation and democratic transitions. He argued that there is often conflict between the language of diplomacy and the language of democracy, citing debate within the Community over Taiwan and the Russian Federation as examples of this discrepancy. Ambassador Palous noted the importance of communication between state and non-state actors in order to effectively ensure legitimate participation. He also stressed that the coalition must continue to aid in the effective transition of nations on the verge of democracy, while also reevaluating standards used to judge democratic practices of those states already within the Community. Like First Counselor Toure, Ambassador Palous emphasized the significance of the passing of the Chair of the Convening Group to Africa and the need to focus on poverty alleviation, given the recent G-8 summit's emphasis on aid and humanitarian action in the region.

The final speaker, Mr. Gershman, echoed Ambassador Palous' concerns regarding the issue of participation within the Community of Democracies. He argued that if governments that participate in the Community are violating democratic principles, then not only will democracy be undermined, but the Community itself will be weakened. Mr. Gershman specifically noted the case of Venezuela, where government judicial action in accusing a leading civil society NGO of treason for the "crime" of receiving democracy assistance from the National Endowment for Democracy calls into question Venezuela's membership in the Community, as does the prosecution of Carlos Ayala, one of Latin America's leading human rights jurists. Stricter standards for participation in the Community of Democracies must be applied, he stressed, or the legitimacy of the entire organization will be called into question. While elections are one important criterion, the Community must also consider the treatment of political opponents, respect for a free media, and the independence of the judiciary as factors in determining eligibility for participation. Mr. Gershman joined others in highlighting the new challenges and opportunities facing the Community as the Chair shifts to Africa, a development he welcomed. As a global association with its focus on advancing democracy, and with the Chair now in Africa, the Community offers an ideal forum where the need for effective and transparent governance can be linked to calls for more development assistance. In the absence of accountable institutions of governance that can control corruption, he said, development assistance could end up enriching elites and not helping the poor. This could happen not only in post-conflict countries such as the Congo but also in countries that participate in the Community. Therefore, it is important to involve in the Community non-state actors such as democracy NGOs and even political opposition parties.