



**OPENING REMARKS OF THE EXECUTIVE HEAD
UNITED NATIONS DEMOCRACY FUND**

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**EXPERTS MEETING
DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS
LESSONS LEARNED FOR DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE
Budapest, 23-24 April 2007**

I am delighted at this opportunity to address the group of experts, practitioners and authorities convened by a partnership initiative between the International Centre for Democratic Transition and the UN Democracy Fund, under the auspices of the Hungarian Government. It feels especially appropriate to hold this meeting in Hungary, a nation that symbolizes one of the greatest and most successful mass movements for freedom in recent history. It is indeed befitting to address this topic representing the United Nations, insofar we can, as citizens of the world, say with pride that we have witnessed in the past three decades an unprecedented rise in the tide of democratization and as a result, more achievements in terms of sustainable human development than ever seen before. There is no room for complacency, but at least, let us not lose the historical perspective of how much has been achieved.

Talking democratic transitions is talking about millions of people, dozens of nations, thousands of political parties, intellectuals' movements, workers' trade unions, students and grass roots organisations, progressive businesspeople associations, who have changed their lives by taking their destiny in their own hands, hopefully for ever. Transitions have achieved more or less success – sometimes very little success except for having dislodged the tyrant from power; sometimes an enormous success, having built from the ashes a new, free and prosperous society.

In my country, Spain, the transition was presided over by an after all sterile but then highly heated discussion over whether we had to take a path of reforms or break away from the dictatorship. “Ruptura o Reforma” was, over the critical years of the transition, the most frequently asked question to any politician, trade-unionist, student leader or man on the street. The answer ended up being neither, or being both. We broke up with a military controlled and Opus Dei inspired regime, but we kept the Monarchy as had been envisaged by the Dictator's succession plans. We created a federal state but maintained the unity of the nation. Nobody seriously pursued a purge of the army cadres or of the police chiefs that had so diligently discharged their duties during periods of gross repression. One of the key actors of the transition was the Minister-Secretary General of the Fascist Party (the Movement), the most trusted man by the regime hardliners, the politician without whom the political change would not have happened.

Of course, friends from all places outside the country were supporting the efforts of different national actors – usually their sister organisations - who pushed for

democratization. None was determining; all were important. My submission to you today is that transitions need more often than not to be negotiated. If the consequences for numerous people are so extreme that they would rather kill or die than letting the transition happen, we will face a gridlock. Transitions to negotiate the future have replaced revolutions to destroy the past, because you do not need to guillotine the nobility anymore to ensure the advent of the Marseillaise.

My second point is that you need champions within and you need to offer a vision of the future that does not contain revenge. In this sense, successful transitions are animals of a dual nature: they contain on one hand a pragmatic political exit strategy and on the other the promise and vision of a new society. Maybe cathartic reconciliation and truth without punishment, as in South Africa and Timor Leste; maybe Gacaca like in Rwanda and Burundi, maybe temporary laws of the “punto final” like in the South Cone are the solution. You need to make the transition *with* those who have been in charge and benefited from the regime you want to replace. You need to come to terms with that past if you are to build a different future. One of the lessons of the end-of-the-20th Century transitions is that you need to frontload a very difficult discourse of reconciliation, even if a decade later, conditions arise to revisit initial impunities and have justice served in a less heated environment – and one where the heirs of the old regime are less powerful. This is true for gross human rights violations (compensation to victims can precede punishment of perpetrators) and for illegitimate asset recovery (initial inaction can be followed by posterior exercise of international claims).

Transition is a historical period that has been described as sensitive, volatile, explosive and fragile. Transitions can be easily derailed and postponed. They will be fought because the outcomes depend on how the actors position themselves during the transition. This is where external support may change the correlation of forces in presence. Let me ask you then: when we are not the national actors of a given transition but the spectators who would like to be helpful, what is it that we can do, that we ought to do, if we want to be meaningful and legitimate?

In the words recently addressed by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to the 4th meeting of the Democracy Fund’s Advisory Board, “threats to democracy, especially in transitional settings are real. Insecurity, violence and corruption can not only undermine the credibility and legitimacy of a nation’s leaders and its institutions, it can call into question the entire democratic set up. The UN has a special responsibility to address these challenges and to promote democracy.” Keeping both the challenges and our responsibilities in mind, UNDEF has developed in its first year of existence a model of democracy assistance that has provided support to efforts in 110 Member States and territories, with a few cautious but firm principles.

I would like to lay out a few ideas on this democracy assistance model that may provide elements for our deliberations over the next two days.

- One general principle is that it is legitimate to support democracy, democratic transitions and democrats beyond borders, beyond the concept of no-interference in domestic affairs.
- A second idea is that democratization efforts can and should be a condition for aid. We cannot be treating equally those governments who take the risks inherent to transitions and those who buckle up.
- A third is that the support that is deemed legitimate has to be one that recognized democratic countries accept in their own legislation. For instance, if generally recognized democracies do not accept foreign financing of national political parties, we should ask ourselves whether financing from abroad parties in complex environments is consistent with our own practice.
- Fourth, democracy assistance by the United Nations should not need host-country approval or endorsement, but be aware of eventual resistance. This democracy assistance should not aim at regime change, no matter how much we believe that change is urgently needed, and cannot support but peaceful means to intervene in society.
- Fifth, freedom of movement should be universally granted for development of capacities and exchange of ideas, be it in the form of training, in-country visits, study tours or regional and international meetings to discuss and promote democracy. Support to participate in such activities should be generally considered legitimate.

These five points may sound bland or minimal, but I can assure you that it would bring us a long way to have them enshrined as universally acceptable.

Dear friends,

As the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen used to say, “Countries need not to be fit *for* Democracy: they need to become fit *through* democracy”. No time is too soon for freedom and for development, for development is the freedom to live intelligent, healthy and meaningful lives, free from ignorance, oppression and violence. There cannot be development without empowerment, in particular of the poor. Here is where building democratic institutions and eradicating poverty go hand in hand. This is perhaps the challenge of our century, the challenge that our generation will have to take on and result victorious of.

I thank you all for your involvement and support. Please accept my best wishes for a successful meeting.