

Remarks – The Hon. Madeleine K. Albright
NDI 30th Anniversary Democracy Award Dinner
As prepared for delivery

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Thank you Katty, and good evening to you all. We have assembled tonight to celebrate NDI's thirtieth anniversary which is -- by a happy and entirely appropriate coincidence -- also Human Rights day.

I am delighted to see so many friends and to join with you in applauding President Ilves, Jack Dorsey and our entire list of honored guests.

Tonight, we are placing the spotlight on an extraordinary group of innovators who personify the intersection between new technology and democratic progress.

And as we celebrate leaders who have dedicated their lives to furthering democracy, it is only fitting that we take a moment to reflect on the life and legacy of President Nelson Mandela.

The passing of Nelson Mandela is deeply saddening; my thoughts and prayers are with his family and with the people of South Africa whom he loved and served so well.

We often say of famous figures that their words and works will survive them; in this case it is true. President Mandela was an activist, a prisoner of conscience, a political leader, and a venerated statesman but he was, above all, a teacher.

He taught us that the power of forgiveness is greater than the power of hate, and that differences of race and nationality matter less than our shared humanity. These lessons are simple to articulate but require immense wisdom and courage to implement; Mandela's strength as a teacher is that he not only advised us what to do, he showed us how.

Personally, I will treasure the memory of our meetings, the directness of his talk, the warmth of his smile, and the depth of his commitment to the economic and social well-being of his people.

President Mandela leaves behind a globe in which the mere mention of his name inspires faith that injustice can be ended and conflicts resolved through respect for the dignity of every human being. That is why the best way to honor President Mandela is not merely to mourn him, but to follow his example.

And while we mourn his passing, we can take comfort in the fact that his lessons and legacy will live on through the work of organizations such as NDI.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge our Board of Directors and express my appreciation to them. Their experience and judgment are a constant resource to this organization.

I am also pleased to recognize my predecessors as Chairmen of NDI: the late Charles Manatt, Vice President Walter Mondale, and Sen. Paul Kirk, who is here this evening. All of us at NDI strive to carry forward their vision and achievements.

There is one person who is sadly missing tonight. Gene Eidenberg passed away last week after a long illness. He served on NDI's Board of Directors for 23 years, and during his tenure Gene brought to the Institute his great intellect, passion for politics, and a deep and abiding commitment to the democratic cause and to NDI. Gene had many friends in this room from his time at the White House, MCI and the Democratic Party. We will miss him dearly. Our thoughts and prayers are with Gene's wife, Anna, and his entire family.

Three decades of life for NDI means almost three decades at NDI for Ken Wollack, our fearless and unflappable leader who has seen it all and still greets each new day with the question: what can NDI do to help democracy succeed?

As the years go by, the answer to that question has constantly evolved.

When NDI began, the Berlin Wall still stood and people still died trying to cross it. Single party systems were common and sham elections were the norm. In the West, there was only nascent recognition of democracy as a component of foreign policy.

Since then, the fall of Communism, the outbreak of ethnic violence, the rise of terrorist threats, and the turbulence of financial markets have all drastically altered the global landscape.

Some suggest that democratic forces have lost ground, but the truth is that we concern ourselves more and more with helping democracy to succeed in places where -- until recently -- it did not exist.

That is progress but also a challenge to do more.

It has been my privilege to be a part of the leadership of NDI for most of the past three decades. And I am proud that, since its founding, the Institute has met many challenges, and remained a consistent, leading international force for democracy.

Going forward, we are determined to profit from what we have learned and to continue adapting to changed circumstances and events.

Being in the democracy business, we are aware that technology is key to that change, affecting how officials and activists count votes, organize political movements, develop policy ideas, and debate the issues that shape our lives.

Accordingly, in partnership with donors and tech companies, NDI has itself become an innovator. Literally millions of trained election monitors can now use new technologies that allow their SMS messages to be transmitted accurately and securely.

Parliaments can open their data in a way that helps citizens access and analyze information about legislation and the work of their representatives.

Social media can monitor political trends and track hate speech to assess the potential for violence.

And in closed societies, technology tools allow human rights and democracy activists to communicate on-line -- safely and securely.

And that is part of our focus tonight.

Social media has empowered citizens and democratic activists in the Arab world and elsewhere to connect, organize and disseminate information. The connection between technology and democracy has become embedded in our language, evidenced by the fact that we now refer to democratic uprisings from Moldova to Iran to Tunisia to Egypt as “Twitter Revolutions.”

Yet, we know that it is often easier to spark a revolution than to sustain it. And, as I have often said, the road from Tahir Square to governance is neither straight nor short.

These days, citizens are demanding to have a say in their self-government more often than every two or four years at election time. They expect their local and national governments to listen and respond to them at the speed of the internet.

Part of the problem is due simply to information overload. Governments and citizens alike are now faced with a daily avalanche of information. The challenge is the so-called “Signal-to-Noise ratio”: How do we sort the meaningful information from everything else?

But the challenge runs deeper than that. As we all seek to filter massive amounts of information available to us, there is a risk that we filter out information that does not reconfirm our existing viewpoints – running the risk of further polarizing political discourse.

And, despite the impact of technology on political organizing, many democratic institutions—which by their nature are often slow to change—are still in the process of adapting to the digital age. It has been said that citizens are speaking to their governments using 21st century technology, while governments listen with 20th century technology and respond with 19th century ideas.

Which is why it is so important that we recognize individuals who are using technology to help governments and citizens engage in new ways to solve problems, and why the theme of *Technology and Civic Innovation* is especially appropriate for this evening.

In the past, NDI normally recognized at gatherings like this an individual democratic leader from abroad. These reflected the times, when democratic leadership was fighting to emerge from under the weight of autocracy or from sectarian conflict.

Now, the times demand that we also acknowledge *new forces for empowerment*, individuals and organizations that are using technologies that simply did not exist a generation ago, a decade ago, or even last year.

Every day there are new examples of how technology can help improve citizens' ability to engage with their representatives, make government more transparent and accountable, and empower citizens and government to collaborate to solve problems.

The innovators we are honoring this evening are pioneers in these areas, connecting people in places ranging from Afghanistan and Tanzania to Mexico and the United States.

They are innovators who have thought hard about how to use technology to help citizens communicate better with their governments and with each other, and to enable individuals with good ideas to share those insights quickly and globally.

Tonight, you will be able to hear a few of their stories. NDI is proud to be working with many of our honorees as they help democratic institutions take advantage of technology to enable new forms of interaction between governments and citizens.

Their work reaffirms NDI's core mission of helping to spread democratic learning – across borders, regions and continent.

Democracy faces a range of challenges today—from sectarian violence, to terrorism, to the turbulence of financial markets.

Yet, when I look at the depth and breadth of civic innovation around the world— and at the passion and dedication of our honorees this evening— I am confident in the future of democracy and that NDI's work and mission remains very much on the right side of history.

This is because they reflect the hopes and aspirations of people everywhere.

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