

# Emerging Democracies Forum Managing the Twin Transitions

July, 1999  
Sana'a Yemen

*Emerging Democracies Forum: A public-private partnership allowed NDI to bring together political leaders from emerging democracies around the world for a three-day summit in July 1999. Leaders from 16 emerging democracies gathered in Sana'a, Yemen to share experiences and develop action plans to further their democratic progress. The principles to which the participants committed themselves are set forth in the Sana'a Declaration. NDI President Ken Wollack's remarks at the opening and closing plenaries follow.*

## OPENING PLENARY

**Ken Wollack:** President Saleh, Prime Minister Eryani, Prime Minister Geingob, distinguished participants, guests, and observers, this conference was first conceived over a year ago by Yemeni political leaders and NDI is proud to have played a supporting role in helping to bring this idea to fruition. Yemen, like the other countries represented in this room, has begun a democratic transition. Demonstrating first and foremost, the universal appeal of democracy. This means understanding the cultural, social, and economic barriers to the development of democracy, but not accepting that these barriers are insurmountable.

The sheer diversity of the 16 countries represented at the forum is a rebuttal to those who have claimed that democracy is somehow alien to the inheritors of Spanish patriarchy, or Confucian thought, or tribalism, or Muslim belief, or any other tradition. Rather the tradition of democracy has been enriched by contributions of many cultures. These democratic transitions have also demonstrated, as the President has noticed, the growing linkages between economic and political development. Deforestation, rural dislocation, environmental degradation, and agricultural policies that lead to famine, all trace to political systems in which victims have no voice, in which government institutions feel no obligation to answer to the people, and which special interests feel free to exploit the resources, land, and people, without fear of oversight or the need to account. This conference is a demonstration that in many seemingly unlikely places the democratic experiment has begun. However, the transition is not easy, nor is it complete, or is the outcome assured. The transition is not—cannot—be simple. By definition, democracies live in a state of creative crisis. They are constantly reinventing themselves, testing their ability to meet new challenges. In contrast, dictatorships seem to possess stability. But that is just the point. A government with all the answers must ultimately fail, or suppress those who expose its failures.

For the countries represented here, we recognize that the transition is made even harder because difficult economic and political reforms are being carried out in relative isolation with international attention and resources often focused elsewhere—either on so-called strategically important countries, or on crisis situations.

The concept of this Emerging Democracies forum was to bring these types of countries together. From the Middle East, from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Eurasia, and Europe to share what they know, what they have experienced, and what they have learned. It is our hope that

the participants at this forum, all political practitioners, will analyze and address the common challenges faced in difficult democratic transitions, discussing in very practical terms both the significant achievements and daunting problems in building representative legislature, transparent and accountable government, politically active civil groups, and women's political participation, at all levels of government and politics.

The diversity of the democratic experience here by government officials, opposition leaders, parliamentarians, civic activists, and representatives of labor and business, is more than a symbol. It also has practical value. There is no one model for democracy, but rather many models and many experiences. And as the community of democracies has grown, democratic practice has become inseparable from democratic cooperation. The shared experiences of democrats, their ability to help each other become more democratic, and stay democratic, is our secret weapon. Autocrats have not such a support network. Because we rejoice in our common commitment to freedom and human rights, we are fully committed to the expansion of these goals to all humanity. That is the cause that brings us together.

In case you haven't noticed, this is a very unusual conference and has been organized in a way that we believe can produce good conversation and practical discussion. But the forum itself is a democratic experiment. We will be limiting speech making. We have promoted informal dialogue, chose a location that is not easy to get to and where there is not an abundance of luxuries to distract us. We have brought important politicians together in the same room with grassroots civic activists demonstrating that in this communication age and growing inter-dependent world, politics is now more horizontal and contacts just between governments no longer dominate international relations. We recognize that in organizing the forum in this way we may run the risk of offending some who are more accustomed to protocol and podiums. If we do, I apologize. But in the end I do believe that we will have participated in something unique. And our work will not end with this conference. NDI plans to maintain this network through follow-up regional consultations, exchange visits by individual experts, an interactive Web site, and other mechanisms that will facilitate ongoing and even accelerated transfers of ideas and experiences. Our challenge is to build upon the relationships that are established here.

In closing I wanted to acknowledge those who truly have made this conference possible. First, Prime Minister Eryani, whose vision inspired the forum itself. NDI's Middle East director, Les Campbell, who managed to pull this together against all odds. Rarely did any of us believe this could really happen. The NDI staff who have that rare quality of being both competent and friendly—and probably is the only group of people who is operating under less sleep than those who arrived last night from London. The supporters of this conference who are listed on the banner behind me and in your folders. Without their contributions—financial and otherwise—this event simply would not have happened. The thousands of Yemenis who have watched a very unique collection of people descend on their country and who have worked very hard to make us feel welcome. And finally, Dr. Abdul Aziz Al-Saqqaf, a Yemeni patriot who is a champion of democracy, freedom of the press and human rights. Dr. Abdul Aziz was tragically killed in an automobile accident earlier this month following a planning meeting for this forum. He truly personified the cause that brings us all together here.

I spoke earlier about the generous international support for the forum from many individuals, corporations, organizations, and governments. But I would now like to introduce two senior officials representing the government of Japan and the United Nations Development Program. Both the Japanese government and the UNDP played singularly important roles in backing this effort.

## CLOSING PLENARY

**Ken Wollack:** Thank you. I'm the unelected president sitting at the table. President Saleh, President Konare, Prime Minister Eryani, Prime Minister Geingob, our distinguished co-chairs. Discussion over the past three days has shown that democracy building isn't just a hobby or a sideshow. It must be central to the daily lives of our own citizens and elected officials. But we need to make this case because curiously the task of democracy of democracy building is more difficult not less. As Charles Darwin might have said, revolution is simple, evolution is hard. However, this work is made easier by relationships. And we are proud to associate ourselves with so many democrats who are striving to create better lives for their citizens.

Liberal democracy has prevailed, yet it has not yet prevailed everywhere. This will be the work of a generation or two. It brings to mind the words of Winston Churchill who said about the battle of Aemagne when the armies of General Montgomery had defeated the forces of General Rommel in the first allied victory in the Second World War. "This I not the end," he said, "it is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps the end of the beginning." So too can it be said today, as we contemplate the past triumphs and the continuing challenges that confront the movement toward democracy to which all of you are so deeply committed.

Some of us are still in disbelief that this forum actually happened. It was truly a cooperative effort by staff, donors, hosts and participants. Prime Minister Eryani, President Saleh, Les Campbell and others have been duly recognized. But if there was one individual who was there when this idea was conceived who criss-crossed more continents, made more telephone calls, cajoled and bludgeoned more perspective donors, and did what was necessary to produce results, it was Labor Minister Mohammed Al-Tayeb. And I want to recognize him.

By his sheer tenacity and hard work, he persevered day in and day out on every detail of this conference. With his cell phone almost surgically implanted on this ear and with the full backing of the president and prime minister, he simply helped make this happen. And Yemen probably will never be the same again. He was a true partner and we learned a great deal from his good humor and willingness to roll up his sleeves and get things done. He gave us the confidence that we needed.

We recognize also that the challenges for the conference in the future is built upon the relationships established here. And NDI will be seeking your guidance and advice in the days, weeks and months ahead. And since NDI rarely gives much notice, we will be asking each and everyone one of you to keep your bags packed. So thank you very much.