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# A Call for Democratic Renewal

## Statement of the Steering Committee of the

### WORLD MOVEMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

**November 2015**

Democracy is being challenged today as never before since the end of the Cold War. The challenge is not the result of a particular crisis or democratic breakdown but has multiple sources.

It is reflected in the conclusion of the most recent Freedom House global survey that human rights and civil liberties have declined for the ninth consecutive year.

It can be seen in setbacks to democracy in countries as diverse as Thailand, Egypt, Venezuela, Hungary Turkey, Kenya, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan.

It is evident in the increasingly harsh conditions faced by civil-society organizations working to defend democratic freedoms and advance human rights and free media in scores of countries.

It is also evident in the crisis of governance in the long-established democracies in Europe and the United States, the international impact of which is heightened by the rise of China, whose system of autocratic capitalism is seen by many people today as a more efficient path than democracy to modernity and development.

And it is evident, not least, in the failure of the leading democracies to mount a meaningful response to the resurgence of aggressive anti-democratic forces, such as Putin's Russia and the Islamic State, which pose a lethal threat to democracy and world peace.

On issue after issue, the opponents of democracy are acting with brazen belligerence, while those who should be its main defenders seem beset by doubt, paralysis of will, and a lack of democratic conviction.

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While the World Movement for Democracy is deeply concerned about the democratic prospect, we reject an attitude of pessimism and resignation. This is not the first time that democracy has faced grave threats and setbacks. In the 1970s, democracy also seemed to be in irreversible decline. Elections and civil liberties were suspended in India in 1975, which until then was the world's largest democracy. Military dictators seized power in many Latin American countries; violent tyrants like Uganda's Idi Amin ruled in a number of African countries; and the communist victory in Vietnam and the genocide in Cambodia were followed by the triumph of Islamic extremists in Iran and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Everywhere democracy seemed to be in retreat, leading prominent intellectuals to conclude, as one of them famously said, that democracy "is where the world was, not where it is going."

Yet it was precisely at that very dark moment that "the third wave of democratization," as it was later called, began with the democratic transitions in Portugal and Spain. Over the next fifteen years, the number of democracies in the world more than doubled, and with the collapse of communism in Central Europe and the Soviet Union, democracy came to be seen as the only legitimate form of government. Suddenly pessimism had turned into optimism, and the forward progress of democracy, which had spread to every region of the world but the Middle East, seemed to be unstoppable.

This new optimism, like the old pessimism, was also excessive. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, many people hoped that Russia, China, and other authoritarian countries would modernize and liberalize as they became integrated into the world economy and experienced economic growth. Instead, many authoritarian governments have shown resilience and used their new national wealth to fuel more sophisticated authoritarian systems at home while projecting their illiberal values and preferences beyond their borders. These regimes have adopted a policy of democratic containment, using legal mechanisms such as the "foreign agents" law in Russia and the

counter-terrorism laws in Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia to criminalize and otherwise obstruct political dissent, freedom of expression and assembly, and independent activity by civil society. They have also used their dominance over both traditional and new media to marginalize alternative voices and maintain effective control of over-arching political narratives.

The goal of the newly assertive authoritarian states is not just regime protection and the containment of democracy. Increasingly, they are also developing strategies to challenge and disrupt democracy beyond their borders. One target has been the human-rights and democracy components of international rules-based bodies, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), that are critical for safeguarding democratic standards. These regimes are also building a web of authoritarian clubs such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) that seek to institutionalize authoritarian norms of sovereignty and non-interference. Because they understand the importance of ideas, these regimes have also built formidable media outlets such as Russia's RT (formerly known as Russia Today) and China's CCTV that enable them to project globally messages about their own achievements and the ostensible failures and decadence of Western societies.

The growing assertiveness of authoritarian states does not mean that the future of democracy is bleak or that the opponents of democracy have gained the upper hand. They haven't. Public opinion surveys in all the major regions of the world show that popular sentiment still overwhelmingly favors democracy over authoritarianism, even in countries where people do not trust democratically-elected politicians and feel that democracy is not performing very well. The repeated warnings by rulers in China, Iran and other authoritarian countries about the dangers of "colored revolutions" betray their fear of popular movements demanding accountable government and political rights.

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The perception of democratic retreat is not, therefore, the result of the inherent strength or appeal of democracy's opponents. The problem is that the world's democratic governments and their leaders have not shown the will to defend democratic values or to support the brave and beleaguered political activists fighting for democratic change. The enemies of democracy assault democratic norms with impunity, while democratic leaders are so preoccupied with their own troubles that they seem unable to uphold or defend the principles contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international charters. Thus, when those fighting for democratic progress meet stiff resistance, the response of the democracies is not to show solidarity and increase support for such activists

**to the defense of civil society against resurgent authoritarianism.**

Over the past quarter of a century, governments and multi-lateral organizations have developed programs to provide financial and technical assistance to civil-society groups working to defend human rights and strengthen independent media, the rule of law, and the accountability of political authority. Yet a Survey on Democracy Assistance conducted by the World Movement for Democracy found that this assistance has not been accompanied by sufficient political support to civil society in response to the growing crackdown by governments resisting democratization. Such support is needed in the form of greater pressure on offending

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**A program to reinvigorate democracy should have four core dimensions: The first is a renewed commitment by democratic governments and international organizations to the defense of civil society against resurgent authoritarianism.**

and dissidents, but to question whether staying the course in support of democracy is realistic and worth the effort.

It has been said many times before that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. Democracy cannot be taken for granted, and its progress is not inevitable. Democratic progress requires hard and persistent work, coherent strategic thinking, strong democratic convictions, the courage to stand up against hostile forces and repressive regimes, and international solidarity with those on the front lines of democratic struggle. What is needed today is nothing less than a revival of democratic will that will bring about a new period of democratic progress.

A program to reinvigorate democracy should have four core dimensions:

**The first is a renewed commitment by democratic governments and international organizations**

governments to respect the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association, and expression. In addition, democratic governments should recommit themselves to the established rules-based institutions that have set global democratic norms and served as the glue for the post-cold war liberal order. The goal should be to reverse the progress autocrats have made in hollowing out organizations such as the OSCE, the OAS, and the Council of Europe, which has created gaping holes in part of the global democratic infrastructure. A strengthened Community of Democracies should be used to energize and coordinate this new effort.

It is also necessary to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations to respond to the new repression. Civil society groups have been put on the defensive and disoriented by the offensive waged against them by resurgent authoritarians. They need to adapt to a new and more hostile environment, build multiple associations on global, regional and sub-regional levels

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for the exchange of practical know-how and solidarity, and develop effective new ways of coping and turning the tide. The role of youth movements and organizations is especially important in developing innovative ways of meeting the new challenges and tapping the enormous potential of social media as a tool for mobilizing and educating citizens and monitoring the performance of governments and other centers of power.

Another priority is strengthening international democratic unity within and across regions and to work in concert to uphold and defend democratic standards and values. It is especially important to reinvigorate transatlantic bonds in combatting Russian efforts to divide European societies and to split Europe from the United States; to build support for democracy in Latin America from within the region; and to strengthen bonds between Western democracies and the rising democracies of South and East Asia.

Finally, it is necessary to mount a response to the information war that is being waged against democracy by resurgent authoritarians. Democratic activists and intellectuals, with the support of democratic governments, must work to revitalize the arguments for the central ideas of democracy and to make these arguments relevant for the 21st century context. It is also important to respond more effectively to the propaganda offensive that is being carried out by authoritarian governments. Such a response should include increasing support to democratic media and expanding the international broadcasting carried out by BBC, Deutsche Welle, RFE/RL and other public outlets; and also building up the capacity of local journalists and investigative reporters in autocratic countries and to help disseminate their reports through regional and global networks of traditional and social media.

**The second is the need to protect cyberspace as a medium for free expression and the advancement of human rights and open societies.**

Popular sentiment long held that authoritarian

regimes were technologically-challenged dinosaurs that could not keep up with online activity and would inevitably be weeded out by the information age. But these regimes are proving much more adaptable than expected. They have prioritized control of cyberspace, and they have also developed methods to exert that control and martialled the resources needed to back their initiatives in this space. National-level Internet controls are now deeply entrenched, and authoritarian states are becoming more assertive internationally and regionally, spreading norms and looking to shape cyberspace in ways that guard their power and legitimize their international goals. They have access to the most sophisticated tools to conduct digital attacks and espionage, ranging from commonplace and widely circulated remote-access Trojan horses, to sophisticated intrusion software packages supplied and serviced by private companies, to “cyber militias” and pro-regime bloggers who seek to shape social media and discredit independent and critical voices.

The digital threats are exacerbated by the quandary in which society now finds itself: Nearly all parts of society are wired in some form, but only a privileged few have digital connections that are adequately secured. Rarely do the privileged include civil-society actors such as NGOs and citizen journalists, despite their heavy reliance on digital tools for mobilization and communication. Such imbalance gives authoritarian regimes a golden opportunity to exert digital control over their own populations and to combat dissent originating beyond their borders. Authoritarian regimes have complemented digital crackdowns by promoting cybersecurity policies that emphasize concepts of state security at the expense of human rights. They are actively seeking to reshape cyber norms both regionally and internationally.

To counter these threats, it is necessary to build a strong coalition among governments, civil society, and the private sectors in support of common principles concerning an open and secure Internet governance regime at global and regional levels that is consistent with internationally recognized human-rights norms.

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States that support Internet freedom must be proactive about their levels of international engagement, countering norms that discount human rights in cyberspace and taking a firm position that civil society should be off-limits to digital espionage and attack. States must also confront the extra-territorial nature of digital targeting, and the ability of illiberal states to buy on the open market sophisticated surveillance equipment that is used to undermine human rights.

In order for such a coalition to be effective, the democratic countries must “get their own houses in order.” This entails ensuring that proper oversight,

**The third dimension is the need for civil society to be better prepared to help protect fragile new democracies against the danger of backsliding, to contribute to successful democratic transitions from authoritarianism, and to guard against extremist movements and intolerant majorities.**

Democracy is challenged today by more than resurgent authoritarianism. In scores of countries where democracy has only sunk very shallow roots, democratic development and the rule of law are being threatened by a witches brew of rampant corruption, bad governance, electoral fraud, illiberal populism, ethnic and religious

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review, and accountability mechanisms are in place to guard against the potential abuse of wholesale and indiscriminate data collection. Moreover, since most of the data that is collected by governments comes from private-sector companies that are frontline “sensors,” oversight by judicial or other authorities should extend to that sector’s stewardship over customer data. The sharing of data without proper oversight would create precedents for bad practices abroad and would weaken the capacity of democratic countries to defend liberal norms and an open Internet.

In addition to defending an open and secure Internet system, it is important to strengthen the capacity of civil society worldwide to use advanced communication tools to promote basic freedoms and accountable government. It is also especially important to provide civil-society activists with education and training on best practices of cyber security.

intolerance, political violence and intimidation, and the abuse of power by executives intent on hollowing out institutions of accountability and accumulating power and wealth for themselves and their cronies. There is no simple solution to problems of such magnitude and breadth. Democratic governments, donor agencies, and multilateral institutions should condition their assistance and cooperation on a much higher standard of governance and democratic performance than what is now considered acceptable. But the core of a meaningful response has to come from an empowered, educated, and organized civil society.

Popular movements such as the EuroMaidan in Ukraine, Y’en y Marre in Senegal, and the New Citizens Movement in China have elevated the idea of democratic citizenship, showing a readiness to take moral responsibility for the future of their societies and to act as agents of democratic change. Popular movements in other countries and regions should build

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upon these examples of active citizenship and insist on political accountability and an end to impunity for leaders who steal from and persecute their own people. They should also try to build bridges of tolerance and cooperation across gender lines and ethnic cleavages and among people of different economic strata, social backgrounds, and generations.

In building a new citizens movement, the organizations of civil society need to prioritize civic education, using all the tools at their disposal, including Internet platforms, to inform, motivate and organize people at the grassroots. They need to develop a fresh defense of democracy, making the case that democratic processes are the only way fight corruption and achieve accountable government; and explaining how democracy can “deliver” and address the economic needs of average citizens. In addition, civic organizations must connect with political society, work more closely with political parties, and be ready not just to hold government accountable in the aftermath of a democratic breakthrough, but take responsibility for governance during the process of transition and political consolidation.

Making the shift from civil society activism to politics is not easy in countries where parties have been associated with corruption, self-seeking, and the abuse of power. There is also an inherent reluctance of activists who have worked courageously for many years against repressive systems to make the transition from protest to politics. Too often activists who are ready to make great sacrifices in the struggle against dictatorship are less willing to cross over into government once a breakthrough has been achieved. Young activists would benefit from more political-science training as part of civic education programs to help them better understand the requirements of democratic politics in addition to the dynamics of popular movements. Connecting them to the many civic activists and journalists in Ukraine and other countries who have made the transition to politics and governing would be one way to help prepare young activists for the challenges of the future.

An even more difficult challenge will be responding to violent ideological movements that use religion to mobilize followers, such as the 969 movement in Burma and the much more widespread movements of Islamist radicalism such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. Until now, religious and political establishments have failed to credibly challenge and discredit these dogmas of violence and nihilism. The solution must emerge from religious thinkers, research centers, and private educational institutions and NGOs within these communities that are able to offer an alternative vision of modernity, universal values, and the role of religion in public life. At present there are hundreds – even thousands - of independent and innovative educational and cultural initiatives of this kind scattered all over the globe. There is a clear need to create stronger networks among these groups and help them challenge extremism by laying out an alternative democratic vision of tolerance, pluralism, civility, and modernity. Such networks will enhance the impact of ongoing educational and cultural projects and enable educational reformers to engage collectively in shaping and offering alternative narratives, amplifying the impact of existing efforts, and creating a critical mass of literature and educational products.

**The fourth priority is the need for the advanced democracies of the West to improve their economic and political performance, regain their confidence and sense of democratic purpose, and recommit themselves to strengthening the liberal world order and to countering the efforts by authoritarians and extremists to undermine it.**

While the United States and Europe remain stable and affluent democracies, they have entered a period of malaise that could harm the prospects for democracy worldwide. One reason for the malaise has been an extended period of economic stagnation that was magnified by the global financial crisis of 2008 but is rooted in systemic problems, among them increasing indebtedness and large budget deficits, uncontrolled entitlement spending, growing inequality, and the failure to invest in the development of human capital

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and social infrastructure. There is also a crisis of political dysfunction, exemplified in the United States by political polarization and declining trust in government, and in Europe by the rise of populist fringe parties. The preoccupation with these problems has contributed to the declining geopolitical influence of the West, a trend that has emboldened the opponents of liberal democracy, who are rushing to fill the vacuums created by the Western paralysis and retreat.

The scope and depth of these problems do not mean that the democratic West cannot find a way to

concerted effort by the militaristic old guard to roll back democratic political change. In Tunisia, deeply divided political forces and social movements have been able to unite around a new democratic constitution, choose a new leadership in peaceful elections, and establish the Arab world's first democracy. In Nigeria, the mobilization of civil society of civil society and citizens journalists using social media transformed what could have been a violent and fraudulent election into a step forward for democracy in Africa's largest country. Even in Sri Lanka, a divided country that is still recovering from decades of civil war, a new leadership

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## What is noteworthy about democracy over the last troubled decade is not its fragility, but its often unappreciated resilience.

overcome its current travails. Democracy's greatest strength is its capacity for self-correction, and the dangers it faces today should concentrate the minds of political, economic, and civic leaders and move them to face up to the hard realities. They will need to think beyond the short-term and propose new and creative ways to address many challenges – how to achieve higher levels of economic growth and productivity that will benefit average citizens and not just the very wealthy; how to build greater political unity on core issues of national interest; how to adopt policies that will contain and deter democracy's enemies; and how to restore confidence in the future and universal appeal of democracy. What is needed is nothing less than a new democratic resolve by the leaders and citizens of the world's advanced democracies.

This can be done. With all the troubles today, there are many reasons to remain hopeful. In key countries of the global south, democracy has made important and often surprising gains. In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, a broad democratic civic movement has enabled a reform leadership to beat back a

promising to restore good governance and the rule of law and to address difficult issues of accountability for past war crimes came to power in a remarkably smooth transition following a relatively peaceful election. The stability for almost 70 years of democracy in India, which is soon to become the world's largest country and is certainly its most diverse in language and religion, is nothing short of phenomenal.

Democracy may indeed be in the throes of what some have called a democratic recession, but there has been nothing close to the kind of "reverse-wave" rollback of democracy that followed earlier waves of democratic expansion. According to Freedom House, the number of electoral democracies now stands at 125, two more than the previous high-water mark of 123 that was reached in 2005 and seven more than in 2012. To be sure, in some of the countries newly ranked as electoral democracies – Nepal, for example, or Kenya or Pakistan – democracy is deeply troubled. Yet it is significant that authoritarianism has not been restored in any of them, and it has been reversed in Honduras and Mali, which experienced coups in 2009 and 2012,

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respectively. What is noteworthy about democracy over the last troubled decade is not its fragility, but its often unappreciated resilience.

Authoritarianism has also shown resilience. But key autocracies today are facing unprecedented crises. Russia is now reaping the harvest of its aggression in the form of a weakening currency, rising inflation, massive capital flight, and shrinking foreign reserves, in addition to significant casualties from the war in Ukraine that the government – fearing a public backlash – has tried to conceal. These problems have now been compounded by the sharp drop in the price of oil and could threaten the survival of Putin’s regime. Other oil-based autocracies also are in trouble, notably the increasingly repressive populist regime in Venezuela, where the economy began to implode even before the catastrophic fall in oil prices; and the Islamic dictatorship in Iran. Economic troubles in dictatorships are not necessarily a good thing, since the regimes could react by escalating international tensions and increasing repression. But they expose the vulnerability of such regimes, and they can sometimes lead to unexpected political openings.

The final reason for hope is the sustained struggle of democratic movements in countries throughout the world for political and economic accountability, civic renewal, and democratic rights. The victory last February of the Euromaidan movement in Ukraine produced a harsh Russian reaction. But instead of retreating, the movement continued to push forward. If it succeeds in fighting corruption, reforming the economy, and building a new country based on the rule of law, it will help the prospects for democracy not just in Ukraine but also in Russia and other countries in the region.

Even in some of the bleakest situations, such movements have shown relentless determination and persistence. The police cleared the streets after the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, but movement leaders unfurled banners reading, “We will be back,” and their persistence is certainly an inspiration to activists on the mainland, where repression has also failed to defeat a resilient civil society. New civic forces are also beginning to assert themselves in Cuba, where activists in the Civil Society Open Forum are pressing for a real political opening and offering the Cuban people “a new narrative, tactics and strategy, and a new language” after more than five decades of totalitarianism.

Such movements will be heard from in the years ahead since they consist of activists who represent a new force in international politics: realistic in their goals and strategies, tech-savvy and informed, and committed to staying the course in the fight for human rights, freedom of expression, and the rule of law. Such activists know that they face a long and dangerous struggle and that, even if they succeed in removing a dictatorship, an even more difficult challenge will follow: building new institutions, subjecting powerful and corrupt interests to the rule of law, and getting democracy to work and produce real progress for all the people, not just for the elites. The fact that such activists persist in their work, without the benefit of any illusions, is the main reason we can be hopeful about the future. Their example also has the potential to ignite a new flame of democratic conviction in the established democracies.

There is therefore reason to believe that, while democracy faces formidable obstacles, the prospect for its renewal should not be underestimated. For the brave activists fighting for dignity and freedom, democracy remains a source of inspiration and of hope. ●

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## **The World Movement for Democracy**

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