



## **The ‘Century of the Citizen’**

**Remarks by the Secretary-General of International IDEA, Mr. Vidar Helgesen**

**International Day of Democracy, Mexico, 15 September 2011**

Mr. President,

Mr. Speakers,

Madame UNDP Administrator,

Excellencies, distinguished guests,

International IDEA is honoured to have been invited to join in this distinguished event at the kind invitation of President Calderón.

I want to congratulate the President on taking the initiative to host such a high-level event to celebrate this year’s International Day of Democracy.

And what a year it has been.

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I think that if we cast our minds back to this day in September 2010, we can safely say that none of us predicted that the year would be one of such profound change in the global democracy landscape.

We have seen the women and men of many countries in the Arab world rise and demand their rights to self-expression and participation in decision-making. They have reaffirmed that democracy is a universally-held and powerful human aspiration. They have also reaffirmed that democratic change is essentially about the *people* of

a particular country. Change in many Arab countries has come from within and from the grassroots, and it is from within that democracy will have to be built.

The developments in the Arab world over the past year have been good news for democracy and have been rightly celebrated. At the same time, those emerging from autocracy face many challenges in terms of how to consolidate their people-led uprisings into sustainable, legitimate and effective democratic change. Egypt struggles with the need for a credible electoral process, a new constitution and a transition from the interim military government to a civilian one. In Libya, people have never been involved in an electoral process of any kind and need to start building democratic institutions and political parties almost from scratch. In other countries, such as Syria, those who demand more participation in decision-making are met with brutality and the government remains unresponsive to their calls for change.

The so-called 'Arab Spring' has also set in motion chains of events way beyond the region. Autocrats and semi-autocrats in sub-Saharan Africa have faced challenges as their people watch closely the peaceful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. In China, authorities watch carefully for signs that the 'butterfly' flapping its wings in Cairo might lead to a 'hurricane' in Beijing. For the international community, lessons have been learned which will hopefully change how governments have relied on autocrats in the past to provide stability and security. The international community has also had to rethink how it supports democracy and face up to the mutually reinforcing roles played by democracy and development. Political, economic, gender and social exclusion in the Arab world was the spark which ignited the revolutions throughout the region. Democracy must therefore build *inclusiveness* if it is to be sustainable.

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This century is sometimes referred to as the 'Asia-Pacific century', not least due to the rise of China, thereby giving credence to the notion that development may often take place without democracy. However, when we look at the confluence of events and shifts which have been taking place for over a decade, it is just as much the case that we are living in the *century of the citizen*. Nothing exemplifies this more than the events of the past nine months in the Arab region.

Over the past decade, we have witnessed a shift of power from the state to the people in an unprecedented way. Globalisation has led to the breaking down of national boundaries and the communications revolution has led to the flattening of information hierarchies in societies. People now have access to information as never before, and they are using that information to influence decision-making processes at political level. 'Back-room politics' no longer holds as citizens can more easily hold their political leaders to account.

Economic inequality, access to opportunity, and the search for basic freedom and human dignity are huge mobilising forces in many countries. Particularly among young women and men who feel excluded or marginalised by political and economic elites. It was these issues which triggered a vegetable-seller in Tunisia to protest and thereby set in motion the events in the wider Arab world.

We have also seen this shift in older democracies in Europe and India where unequal access to opportunity has been the cause of citizen-led movements. In Latin America, citizens have expressed freely the need for democracy to deliver for them in their own lives and have demanded that their governments are accountable to their needs. Citizens have become empowered, not only in democracies, but also in autocracies. In China, the rising middle classes are protesting against corruption and demanding equal access to economic opportunity.

So what are the implications of the century of the citizen for democracy?

Recent events reaffirm that the citizen is at the heart of democracy, and that democracy has proven itself central to citizens' aspirations. Citizens are the driving force for democratic change and international actors should respect their leadership in building their democracies.

The shift of power to the citizen also brings many challenges, not least of which is the need to bridge the gap between popular mobilization and traditional political institutions. While political parties and traditional actors of democracy have been weakened, informal processes of expression and political mobilisation are becoming stronger. At the same time, democracy cannot deliver without institutions. This means that we need to seek creative new approaches to allow democracy to be strengthened, and not weakened, by the ongoing power shift to the citizen.

International actors working with democracy need to reach out to new social groups and to be a source of knowledge for the people, rather than just the elites in society. And most of all, international actors working with democracy need to respect the people and to support their integrity in their own democracy building efforts.

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Under President Calderón, Mexico has taken the lead in putting the global spotlight on one of the major challenges which democracy faces today: the risk that transnational criminal networks pose to democratic political processes. Mexico has also worked hard on national reforms aimed to safeguard the legitimacy of democratic politics and to protect its capture by organized crime. The challenge is daunting.

As many of you are aware, transnational organized crime has risen to become a major threat to both emerging and established democracies. These networks exist in countries with a long tradition of institutional development, such as Colombia, as well as in countries which are fragile, such as Guatemala or Haiti. They exist in post-communist countries, now members of the EU, such as Estonia, Latvia and Romania. They exist in relatively new democracies such as Ghana and Liberia, and in well-established democracies, such as Italy. This global persistence of transnational criminal networks poses not only a great threat for security and public order, but also a great threat to democracy.

The illicit financing of political campaigns is a major concern. However, it is only the tip of the iceberg of more complex, systemic and deeply-rooted linkages between segments of the political sphere and the darker side of globalization.

Criminal networks are shifting the playing fields at local and national levels by altering electoral behaviour through the displacement and intimidation of voters. They are establishing legitimate political parties that further their interests in legislative bodies at regional and national levels. They distort governance, security and financial architectures through money laundering, violence and illicit trade in drugs, humans and weapons. Criminal networks may, in some cases, function as an extension of political competition; in other cases they may use politics to start tinkering with democratic institutions to their own advantage.

As the experience of Mexico has shown, these challenges require an urgent revision of policies and legal frameworks at national level. They also highlight the need for the international community to work together to safeguard the legitimacy of political processes and allow democracy the space to grow.

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I see in attendance here today, not only the highest office-holder in Mexico, but also the heads of all of the major political, judicial and electoral institutions in this country, as well as the head of the UN Development Programme. And there is only one reason you have all taken time out of your hectic schedules to be here: your commitment to democracy. For me, as the head of the only global intergovernmental organization dedicated solely to supporting democracy, this is a wonderful sight. Your presence here bears witness to the strength of democracy, not only as a concept and an ideal, but as a working principle of government and development.

However, I think we need to do more than enjoy the hospitality of President Calderón in Mexico this morning. We need to take this commitment we have demonstrated to democracy out of the room with us and work to make democracy a greater priority on the international agenda. In particular at the United Nations, democracy should become a priority across the system, and the time has never been more right than it is now.

I want to express my sincere thanks and appreciation again to President Calderón for his initiative in hosting this celebration of International Democracy Day. Let us hope that when we celebrate this Day again in twelve months time there will be even more to celebrate and even more democratic countries around the world to celebrate with us!

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