



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ 1820 Jefferson Place NW ♦ Washington, DC 20036

---

## **“The Conspicuously Absent Fourth ‘D’: Democracy”**

*Society for International Development - Washington*

1875 Connecticut Ave., AED, Greeley Hall

July 30, 2010, 12:00 P.M. – 2:00 P.M.

The Society for International Development - Washington Chapter held a panel discussion on Friday to consider democracy promotion under the current administration. **Sarah Mendelson**, Deputy Assistant Administrator for USAID, **Lorne Craner**, President of the International Republican Institute, and **Kenneth Wollack**, President of the National Democratic Institute, participated in the panel. **Malcolm Butler**, Senior Vice President in Emerging Markets at Management Systems International, and SID-Washington Board Member, introduced the panelists and moderated the event.

**Kenneth Wollack** opened the discussion by “pushing the reset button” in the ongoing debate on how democracy fits into the United States’ national program. In his opinion, **Americans have long viewed democracy promotion efforts as serving US interests while also reflecting American values. However, in recent years, people have turned against this conventional wisdom and reignited the debate on the value of promoting democracy.** He added that some observers found the push for democratization too soft and idealistic, while others found the strategy overly bellicose, and third group synthesized the two concerns.

To situate the Obama administration in context, Wollack presented the historical narrative of US democracy promotion and described the strengthened connection between democracy and international development. After presenting this progression toward unquestioned support of democracy, **Wollack highlighted the irony that the “democratic idiom” is being debated once again, stating that the “Bush administration created controversy over what had been a bi-partisan initiative.” He added that the past four years have witnessed a global democratic recession**, and compounding this concern, “new democracies are suffering to meet voter expectations,” raising citizen discontent on the performance and therefore forms of democracy. Yet amid a democratic retreat in many countries, **Wollack reinforced positive developments, naming government progress in Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa, and the persistence of activists in Egypt, Iran, and Burma.**

In conclusion, Wollack asserted that survey findings should put domestic and foreign critics’ arguments to rest—**democracy is not a western phenomenon, but rather a global commitment and demand.** The dichotomy between America’s interests and values is false; **promoting democracy serves U.S. interests and is “the right thing to do.” The question Wollack finds more useful to investigate is: How can we best support indigenous democratic movements?**

**Lorne Craner** initially moved to dispel misconceptions. First, a discussion between IRI and NDI presidents will not resemble a Crossfire episode. Instead, he highlighted the two organizations’ long history in support of democracy, but with the understanding that each has come to specialize in certain areas. IRI has focused on political parties, civil society, and more recently on governance, because the Institute found that it was great at getting people elected, but “rotten” at helping them once in power.

Second, Craner stressed that IRI and NDI do not try to replicate the U.S. political atmosphere in developing countries. **IRI does not serve as a cheerleader of certain domestic reformers, but aims to provide objective advice and support to groups across the political spectrum.**

**Discussing democracy promotion, Craner argued, “it’s their country not ours” so “it’s their fight not ours.”** Therefore, “we really have to be engaged at a distance” because “**we cannot implant democracy**”. Also, Craner encouraged development organizations to avoid the “country of the year syndrome” and instead focus on long-term reform. Craner gave particular credit to the role that individuals from new democracies can play in supporting reform, because these people “bring an empathy and understanding that Americans can simply not bring” to this work.

In conclusion, the IRI president underlined the irony that **while people in the United States are questioning and qualifying whether the U.S. should promote democracy, new democracies are stepping up to support democratization.** According to Craner, **in some ways the U.S. is being left behind.**

**Sarah Mendelson** quickly moved to ensure the audience that the “fourth D: democracy” is not absent from President Obama’s broader strategy. She cited budget allocations, the National Security Strategy, and soon-to-be-published National Security Council documents as evidence of President Obama’s support of democracy. Concentrating on the current phase of USAID evaluation, Mendelson described interagency work to debate how USAID can best organize for success. “We are looking at the work we do on a variety issues,” she stated, and explained that staff increasingly see that they do their jobs better when in communication with democracy, human rights, and governance experts.

In Mendelson’s words, **a priority for USAID is helping democracies to develop so that new democracies gain credibility and public support.** To this end, Mendelson stated that she thinks “there’s also an interesting way we can do peer-to-peer work,” and proposed a “neighborhood approach” that would allow regional activists to empower one another. She cited a civil society event held in parallel to President Obama’s trip to Russia as a model.

Breaking down the idea of democracy, Mendelson emphasized USAID’s specific concern for space for civil society, as well as accountability and justice. In Mendelson’s opinion, **a nation’s reconciliation with its past is also “absolutely critical to their political trajectory” because a basis in the rule of law is difficult when favorable memories exist of a dictator.** Evaluating tactics to address these issues, Mendelson wondered, “How do you harness innovation and technology in support of democracy, human rights, and governance?” particularly to prevent genocide and to organize rapid responses to election violence and fraud.

She concluded by reaffirming that the White House is deeply invested in these themes and that the President has made clear that promoting democracy and human rights is a key priority for the US abroad. Instead, the main debate concerns “are we getting where we want to go?” with the money we are spending, and are there other strategies for getting there?

Responding to the moderator’s question on why there is a perception that democracy promotion is not getting the same emphasis that it used to, Mendelson stated: “We are organizing ourselves to better articulate what we have done.” She attributed this false perception to the organizational phase of USAID’s current work, though the organization is “moving rapidly” to an execution phase.

**Wollack** added that the perception of decreased support of democracy is natural following the “soaring rhetoric” of President Bush. U.S. credibility was diminished following the Bush administration because close ties to regional autocrats contradicted rhetoric. Yet Wollack underscored a major feat for democracy proponents: **democracy is now in every Foreign Service official’s portfolio. The question is, how high is it on the agenda?** Wollack expressed his confidence that the current administration is moving to balance these aspects of democracy promotion.

**Craner** stated that by January 2001 “we had our marching orders” on democracy under President Bush. So while many people may disagree with George Bush’s policies, Craner warned against throwing away 25 years of bi-partisan support on democracy promotion simply because the concept is now associated with President Bush. While acknowledging the difficult circumstances President Obama inherited, **Craner stated that every administration has many issues to deal with and cannot postpone democracy promotion.**

One audience member posed a question on how USAID’s Afghanistan agricultural strategy has promoted people’s confidence in the government. **Mendelson** responded that this is an issue of effective governance; **the US must work to ensure that the government delivers, while enabling civilians to hold the government accountable.** **Wollack** added that he and **Craner** were in Kabul for the presidential elections and were witnesses to the elections’ “grand theft auto”. Because international organizations and governments refused to take a tough stand on that election process, there is no hope that parliamentary elections will be any better. He stressed the need for measuring progress and the significance of devolution of power to give people a stake in the government.

**Craner** contributed to the response, stating that through the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan soldiers have re-learned that you need accountable, local, democratic government in order to witness any change. **According to Craner, we have yet to understand that elections cannot be something to be passed by; rather, we need to incorporate elections into a national level strategy.**

Expressing optimism about the prospects for democracy in the Arab world, **Mendelson** pointed out that focus group and survey research show that **while “democracy” as a term does not translate in many other regions, if you unpack that word, it has concrete meaning.** **Wollack** was also optimistic, stating that surveys tell us that **in every Arab country a majority of the people wants democracy.** While optimistic, **Craner stated that he does not expect real democratic change for another 10-20 years.**

A question followed on the phenomenon of a recession in democracy coinciding with a proliferation of democracy-promoting actors. **Mendelson asserted that the main issue is ensuring that dollars are spent effectively through monitoring, evaluating, establishing benchmarks, and building upon models.** **Craner** agreed, adding that there may be more aid and more actors, but resources are not exactly dispersed—mentioning a lack of aid to Somaliland. Agreeing with Mendelson, **Wollack** identified the **paramount issue facing democracy proponents as making politics horizontal by connecting individuals with their governments.**

Another attendee asked whether the U.S. should integrate democracy and governance into each of its programs or if a “separate but equal” mentality was preferable. Panelists seemed to agree that both types of programs are necessary, saying **there is a need to incorporate democracy promotion into sector projects, but at the same time, stand-alone programs are needed.**

Assessing the American public's attitude toward international development efforts, **Mendelson** acknowledged that there is no persuasive campaign targeting the American people to educate them on the role of USAID and the significance of democracy and human rights. Though direct advertising is not within the organization's authority, she believed more could be done to get out and talk about these issues—such as at universities. According to Mendelson, the American people want to “be a part of something larger,” and this is an untapped resource.

One individual commented that strong violators of human rights and democracy often are large recipients of U.S. aid, mentioning Egypt. **Craner** responded that due to practical concerns, every administration is forced to be hypocritical. Yet this does not mean that the administration should believe autocrats when they say: It's the extremists or me! **Wollack** responded, “States are not going to turn themselves into human rights organizations”. At times, democracy promotion will be high on the policy agenda and at other times low, he said. According to Wollack, the problem was that President Bush created the impression that it would always be high policy, which makes our low policy moments blatantly obvious. **Mendelson** added that, **converse to what some people may assume, the United States would not necessarily be helping civil society by shutting out their governments.**