

Submitted Statement
Former Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright
HFAC Briefing on Democracy, Authoritarianism and COVID-19
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Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, members of the committee: good morning.

Let me begin by saying how pleased I am to be with all of you, albeit virtually. I know that like all Americans, you have had to adapt in unprecedented ways to meet the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. I want to express my personal appreciation for your efforts to help guide the country through this crisis.

I am honored to participate in this important discussion alongside two great champions for democracy, National Democratic Institute President Derek Mitchell and International Republican Institute President Dan Twining.

As Chairman of NDI for the past two decades, I have been gratified to see Republicans and Democrats embrace the idea that the global health of democracy is of vital importance to America's interests in freedom, prosperity and security. I am grateful, as well, for the strong support that NDI, IRI and the other NED institutes have enjoyed from leaders in Congress and from this committee in particular.

This continued support is essential because the pandemic is threatening more than the lives and livelihoods of people throughout the world. It also poses a direct threat to democratic governance. And our future depends, to a great extent, on whether democracy succeeds or fails in this new and rigorous round of tests.

I want to be clear at the outset that no system of government can guarantee health, prosperity, or peace. But history offers ample proof that democracy promotes progress towards those goals, whereas autocracy by its very nature makes crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic more likely.

When a government does not trust its people; when it suppresses the free flow of information; when its data cannot be trusted; and when its officials, including health professionals, are afraid or prevented from speaking truth to power ... the ground is set for disaster.

So it is not a coincidence that the pandemic started in a closed society such as China. Nor is it a coincidence that many of the places which have led effectively in dealing with it are strong democracies — including Germany, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Taiwan and Finland; all headed, coincidentally, by women.

These examples and others such as South Korea show that the credible and free flow of information, fact-based debate about policy options, the voluntary self-organization of civil society, and open engagement between government and the people are all vital assets in combatting the pandemic.

But even as we see a clear need for effective democratic governance to prevent and respond to future health crises, opportunistic leaders on every continent are using COVID-19 as an excuse to enhance their authority.

Authoritarian rulers have been quick to argue that a strong hand is needed to deliver the health and security that citizens crave. But even democratically elected governments are responding by enacting open-ended states of emergency, restricting civil liberties, and tilting the electoral playing field to their advantage. Many nationalist leaders are also exploiting the fears of their followers by scapegoating minorities or foreigners.

To be sure, these are extraordinary times. We need our governments to act firmly and decisively to protect the common good. In a public health emergency, it is not anti-democratic to close schools and restaurants, restrict travel, mandate the production of needed medical equipment, or to take other temporary measures on the advice of experts and scientists.

At the same time, there is a clear distinction between using power and abusing it. In Hungary, for example, the Prime Minister has been given the indefinite authority to bypass parliament, govern by decree, and throw journalists in jail whenever he wants. That is the opposite of the rule of law.

Not too far away in Poland, the ruling party appears to be trying to use an election during a nationwide lockdown to consolidate its position. Governments should not turn the health crisis into an excuse to indefinitely delay elections. Nor should they rush to hold elections that prevent meaningful political participation and put people's health at risk.

There is a real danger that such excesses, if left unchecked, could decapitate democracy around the world. This would be damaging, unsustainable, and all-too

reminiscent of the early 1930s, when the Great Depression undermined faith in governments across Europe and nationalist fervor led to the murder of millions.

Democracies need to wake up to this threat. We must speak out when needed and sanction political opportunists, even when they are allies. We must strongly affirm that the degradation of democratic rights and political freedoms is not required even during the current crisis. And we must support activists around the world as they struggle to safeguard their political rights in an era of social distancing.

Democracy support organizations such as NDI and IRI are doing their part in this effort. In NDI's case, as Derek Mitchell will explain in more detail, our team is adapting quickly to ensure that our vital programs in over 70 countries continue, and that our partners receive the support they need to respond to new challenges.

One special area of concern is disinformation, which has spread widely and rapidly in response to the pandemic. China has been particularly aggressive in launching an external information campaign aimed at upending the global discussion of its handling of the virus. Russia, meanwhile, is also fueling mistrust in the ability of democracy to deliver effective responses to the pandemic. Independent media is critical to combatting disinformation but too many countries, including Poland and the Philippines, have restricted the ability of journalists to report on the crisis.

NDI and other democracy support organizations are helping equip our partners on the ground to fight back against antidemocratic disinformation. But the best way to counter these campaigns is for the United States and its democratic allies to go on offense by working together to achieve victory over the virus.

One of the great weaknesses of authoritarian leaders is that they seek legitimacy by claiming a monopoly on the skills and muscle required to defend their homelands. This makes them less likely than democratic counterparts to admit, let alone emphasize, the value in cooperating with others. Instead, they treat appeals for international comity as signs of weakness or betrayal.

But the pandemic has reminded us that the modern world demands strong leadership at every level. To succeed against the virus and other threats that do not respect international borders, democratic nations must help revive the basic international understanding that by working creatively with others, every country can reap benefits.

I noted earlier that democracy does not guarantee an effective response to the pandemic. In the United States, the virus has exposed vast shortcomings in the social, economic, and political structures that shape our lives. But the greatest strength of democracy is its resilience, which is on display in communities across our country, and in each of your districts.

The United States can still do more than any other country to help move the world in the right direction. But we must lead globally. We must bring together the democratic world to oppose the unconstrained power grabs of authoritarians and would-be dictators. We must be unwavering in our support to those struggling in this environment to maintain their rights, their voices, and their dignity. And we must recognize the stakes of failure – a world that is more insecure, unstable, and unhealthy.

Thank you for all you are doing to help guide our democracy through this perilous moment. If we work together, on a bipartisan basis, as we are doing today, I am confident that we can emerge stronger and more united than before. I look forward to our discussion.

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