

Remarks by Larry Diamond  
To the International Conference on  
**India and the Worldwide Movement for Democracy:  
What Can India Learn from Others' Experience and What It Has to Give**  
December 6-7, 2007, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi

I would like to begin by thanking the Institute of Social Sciences, and especially its Director, George Mathew, for organizing this timely and thought-provoking conference, and for asking me to make these concluding remarks. It is a privilege to sit beside Dr. M.S. Gill, who had such an outstanding career in helping to institutionalize the administration of free and fair elections in India, to be here among you, and to reflect with you on India's world role as a democracy at a time when it is undergoing what my colleague Sumit Ganguly has called "multiple revolutions" that are modernizing its economy, deepening its democracy, and projecting it ineluctably onto the world stage. It is also always a privilege to share the same podium, even a day later, as Anwar Ibrahim, a great and brave Asian democrat.

I have a simple thesis to present here today: India's power and presence in the world is rising, and will continue to rise for generations to come. Whether it wants to be so or not, whether it is ready for this role or not, India is becoming a global power, and it will have to decide what kind of global power it wants to be. With its economic might, its military power, and its cultural "soft power" all increasing steadily, will it be possible for India to continue its traditional foreign policy of non-alignment and non-intervention? I doubt it. Is it even in India's interest to do so? I don't think so. On a moral level, it is also possible to ask what responsibility the world's largest democracy has to other people in the world struggling for democracy under conditions even more difficult and

substantially less free than those in India today. It is presumptuous of me, as a non-Indian, to answer that question, but I do think the country needs to have a searching conversation with itself, and I applaud the conference organizers for contributing to that.

### **Why Should India Care About the Worldwide Fate of Democracy?**

Let me hasten to recognize some obvious grounds for caution. First, if we are going to have an honest conversation across our national boundaries, I think any American has to acknowledge that we are in a questionable position to lecture to another rising power about its global responsibilities to promote democracy. The history of American engagement for democracy abroad during its long rise to global dominance is a very mixed one, containing more than a little colonialism, neo-colonialism, unilateralism, opportunism, and hypocrisy. In the last three decades, I think this has been partially supplanted by increasingly effective efforts (especially when multilateral, practical, and soft spoken) to promote and assist democratic development around the world. And certainly, as a community of democrats, we have learned a lot about what kinds of programs and techniques work to foster democratic change. But one only has to mention the word “Iraq” to see the eyes of many of our friends roll in anger, sorrow, and deep disappointment. I do not pretend that we, as the most powerful democracy in the world, still have it even nearly right, and so I (like many of your American friends) am left in the awkward position of appealing to you to do as we hope, rather than as have so often done.

Second, I am not unmindful of the very serious and in some ways deepening problems that India has with its own democracy. These include continuing and in some respects—under the relentless force of globalization that no one has figured out how to tame—increasing social and economic inequality; rising political violence and criminality in some states; and a worrisomely fragmented political party system that makes it very difficult to take difficult decisions and to govern effectively. In the face of so much political, social, economic, and environmental challenge and turmoil, it is easy for Indians to say “Leave us alone to deal with our own problems.” And it is very hard for non-Indians to mount a reply to that.

Nevertheless, humbly, I will try to do so. The most obvious reason why I feel the need to do so is that, to put it bluntly, we need you. The global balance of power, of economic energy, and of moral authority is tilting from North to South. In the years and decades to come, the geopolitical weight of Europe and North American can only diminish, even if very gradually. With an oil-rich Russia turning away from Europe and from democracy with new resolve and resources to bolster its authoritarian allies in the former Soviet space and beyond; with a booming authoritarian China casting a lengthening shadow over Asia and projecting its power and hunger for resources deeply into the furthest reaches of Africa; and with democracy on the rails or under siege in such crucially important countries as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, the Philippines, Nigeria, and Venezuela, we face a much less favorable global environment for democracy than at any time since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. There are still a lot more democracies in the world than there were in 1989, but the momentum is going in the wrong direction, and a great many of the new democracies that have come into being in the last two decades are

under serious stress, or at least are very far from consolidated and stable. We are definitely in the midst of a democratic recession globally, and if we do not shore up faltering democracies and aid and empower democrats in need, then we could see this gather into a political depression, or what Samuel Huntington would term “a third reverse wave” of democratic breakdowns in the world. I do not say that such a reverse wave will be prevented if India more clearly joins the worldwide movement for democracy, and neither do I predict that it will happen if India retains its current posture on the margins of the global struggle. But the fate of democracy globally is more finely balanced than it has been for a long time. What India does could make a difference—more of a global difference than India has ever had the scope to make in its sixty years of independence.

Why should India care? I can think of a few reasons. The most obvious one is that the prospects for democracy within India could well be affected by what happens outside it. After sixty years, democracy in India has shown extraordinary resilience and capacity for renewal and reform. But the lessons of history show that democracies thrive in regions where they enjoy the normative comfort, the reinforcing legitimacy, and the mutual security of a preponderance of other democracies. The less democracy in a region, the more hostile is the environment for what democracy remains. So India should care about the politics of its immediate regional neighborhood. And it should question whether its democratic institutions and norms will be secure in a broader Asian and even global context where democracy is seen to have gone out of fashion, and new forms of authoritarianism—ones we cannot even imagine—are capturing the imaginations and political energies of the young and the angry. After all, Indira Gandhi declared her emergency at the low-point for democracy in Asia, during what the political scientist

Jyotirindra Das Gupta called “a season of caesars” in Asia. Now, more than then, more than ever before, political values and models are international in scope.

There are other reasons why Indians, and Europeans and Canadians, as well as Americans, should care about the fate of democracy outside their own national borders. We have learned some powerful lessons in the last few decades about the consequences of different regimes types. Those show that democracies do not go to war against one another; that terrorism emanates disproportionately from authoritarian soil; that democracies do a much better job of lowering infant mortality and advancing human well-being; that states fail in the context of bad, autocratic governance; and that democracies on balance do a better job of protecting the environment. Moreover, the higher the quality and the more institutionalized democracy is, with a strong rule of law, the greater its advantage over dictatorship in all these respects, including as well economic growth.

So Indians need to ask themselves, just as Americans and Europeans need to ask ourselves: What kind of world do we all want to live in? We know that the world has shrunk dramatically. We know the pathologies of failed or badly governed states—terrorism, crime, corruption, environmental stress, infectious disease, and so on—spill across borders more quickly and vengefully than ever before. We know—and what better affirmation of this is there than the history of India itself?—that the best way to hold together states that could disintegrate is with the constitutionalism, flexibility, and accommodation that democracy provides. And we know that we are threatened today with a global crisis of climate change that dwarfs anything human civilization has confronted in more than ten thousand years. So let’s all ask ourselves: With the

knowledge that we have from so many decades of comparative experience, with the conviction that we have in our hearts and minds, what do we think is going to be the better bet to deliver the more responsible governance on which our common fate increasingly depends: Dictatorship or democracy? Over sixty years, Indians have repeatedly, at times painfully, but resoundingly given their answer to this question for their own national good. Why should they—or any of us—assume that the answer is different for other nations? So to our Indian friends, I say: trust in your own convictions and national experience. Do not join the worldwide movement for democracy because the U.S. or Europe, or anyone else is asking you to do so. Join because, in a rapidly shrinking world where the fate of different societies is increasingly bound together as one, it is in your national interest, just as it is in ours.

### **What Can India Do To Aid the Worldwide Movement for Democracy?**

The more India does to support and foster democracy around the world, the more the momentum of democratic progress in the world can be buttressed and renewed. That is true today, and it will become truer as India's power and place in the world rise. But the most difficult change may be the initial one, for India to resolve that the fate of its own democracy is indeed bound up with democratic struggles around the world, and therefore that it has an obligation—most of all to itself—to become more actively engaged.

Certainly, democrats around the world would welcome any steps at all in this direction. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that change will come

incrementally, and it is not realistic to expect a rising power with a long tradition of non-alignment to suddenly transform its worldview and foreign policy. So what might be feasible and at the same time helpful in the near term?

At a minimum, India has an exceptionally rich history of democratic practice and experience to share with other developing democracies. Ideally, India would establish its own organization for international democratic solidarity and assistance to structure the sharing of this experience. And ideally, some of this sharing would involve Indian civil society activists, political leaders, and serving and retired civil servants—like the distinguished former chief election commissioners whose presence we have been privileged to have at this meeting—traveling and working abroad more systematically to assist the development of democratic institutions, governmental and non-governmental. But in the near term, a very useful first step would be to launch a program that would bring practitioners and scholars from emerging democracies to India for periods of time to study how democracy works and has developed here. This could include short-term visits for practitioners of two to three weeks, and longer-term study fellowships for both activists and scholars. Some of the obvious realms of experience that India has to share include: the evolution and functioning of federalism, the management of ethnic and religious conflict, the constitutional court, state and local government, electoral administration, the independent mass media, and civil society. There may be a particular logic to beginning where help is needed in the region, in countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. But help is needed in Africa as well, where there would be a strong desire to engage. I am certain that a wide range of African and Asian civil society activists, political and social scientists, journalists and broadcasters, judges, politicians,

and legislators, would welcome the opportunity to come to India, study its democracy, learn from its experience, and engage their peers.

The United States does quite a bit of this. We bring people over on various international visitor programs. We bring people to Washington—including to the National Endowment for Democracy—on fellowships of three to ten months to be in residence, take pause from their work, study, and reflect. Often these visiting fellows propose courses of research that involve looking at the U.S. model of this or the U.S. experience with that. But how relevant is the highly expensive, media-driven, decentralized, and disarticulated American model of democracy to the development of democracies in Asia and Africa? I often wonder why we don't send at least some of these democrats to countries like India and South Africa instead. Of course, we all know why: there is a good bit of national self-promotion involved in bringing people to one's own country and selling it. Well, fine. Let's promote India, too. It's the biggest democracy in the world, the most successful democracy in the third world, and a more realistic model in at least some respects than the United States, Britain, or France.

So I have a proposal. Maybe it won't go anywhere, but conferences like this are for the purpose of generating new ideas. Let India establish some kind of framework or organization to coordinate and organize exchanges with democrats around the world, and then let's all try to figure out collectively how to fund it. Since we all have a common interest in seeing democracy advance in the world, and seeing India join in the effort to advance it, then we also have a common stake in this new initiative. It should be possible to have the major democracies of North America, Europe and Australia share with India the burden of financing these exchanges and the Indian institution that would manage

them. The U.S. is spending about a billion dollars a year to promote democracy and good governance globally. So is Europe. So is the U.N. We all know that some of these funds are not having the effect that a systematic program of South-South exchanges, centered on India, could have. So I will just speak as one American taxpayer. I want some of my tax money to go to support these exchanges, to partner with India to bring democrats to India to learn from its institutional and civic experience, and to further enrich that experience. I don't want the United States any longer to only fund visits of democrats to the United States. We are wasting too much valuable opportunity to build a worldwide movement for democracy with such a narrow approach.

In the short term, we have a ready potential vehicle. The UN Democracy Fund has recently been established, with a substantial budget that includes sizable contributions from India and the United States. Wouldn't the initiation of a new program of democracy fellowships and exchanges in India be a wonderful use of some of that fund?

Of course, there are many ways this concept could be developed. India is a big country. Institutions to welcome and host visiting democratic practitioners and thinkers could be established in a number of different states, as well as New Delhi itself. Some of India's already outstanding social science think tanks—including this one—might also be enlarged in space and funding to host visiting scholars from around the world, and especially from emerging or aspiring democracies, for periods of time. These Indian institutions could be more effectively linked with their peers around the world, not only in the United States and Europe, but in emerging democracies, through forums like the World Movement for Democracy. Sister relationships of exchange might be forged among specific institutions. In particular, since India is part of the core support group for

International IDEA, I wonder if it might not be time to establish a second or parallel office of the organization somewhere in India, that would have an organic relationship with the Stockholm office of IDEA.

### **What is the Responsibility of the United States and the “West”?**

I do not pretend that the responsibility for bringing about this reorientation in the way India relates to the world is India’s alone. So let me close with some obligations I think we have in the West.

First, I want to stress, just as India still confronts large challenges to its own democratic development, so we in the West have serious problems with the functioning of our own democracy that we must repair. There is not the time to address these here, but since I am an American, I will simply mention that democracy in the United States suffers from serious problems such as the sale of influence through a broken campaign finance system and an unseemly lobbying industry; the uncompetitive nature of most Congressional and state legislative elections due to the grotesque and increasingly scientific gerrymandering of districts; the increasingly partisan polarization of politics which has produced gridlock on major national issues; low rates of voter participation due in part to the much greater difficulty in voting than in some other countries; and sheer ineptitude in electoral administration in some states and localities. In fact, particularly in the administration of elections, we could learn a thing or two from India, with its national and highly professional electoral administration, and I have said as much in my new book. Certainly, I do not hold up American democracy as a model for the rest of the

world, and I think we lose support and credibility when we try to do so. So let us all acknowledge that no democracy is perfect, we all have problems, and we all need to learn from one another. In fact, one should not underestimate the potential benefit to Indian democracy of the types of exchanges and support networks that India could foster.

Second, if we want India to become a more influential and active democracy on the world stage then we need to make a place for it on that stage. It is long past time for India to be given permanent membership on the UN Security Council. Obviously, this can only be done as part of a broader reform of the Security Council and the entire United Nations system, along the lines of what was recommended in 2005 by the UN High Level Panel on Threats and Challenges. But achieving such reform must move to the top of the foreign policy agendas of Europe and North America. At the same time, isn't it time for India to be brought into the collective councils of the advanced democracies of the world? Isn't the real and natural G8 the one that includes India? And if not that, don't we need to devise a better forum? And of course there is the obvious fact that this cannot be done—none of this revision of the global architecture of power and consultation can be done—without the close cooperation and involvement of India.

Third, I know: we are going to need to be patient. This is not a country or a political system that moves quickly. This is why I have proposed that movement begin with a series of small steps to engage and support democrats around the world, steps that would pose relatively little challenge to what India sees in the near term as its strategic interests.

If we need to begin incrementally, I hope we will not wait too much longer to begin. The worldwide movement for democracy needs the active engagement of India as never before, and perhaps more than ever before, India needs a democratic world.