

IFES DINNER

Ken, thank you for those kind words. I wish my parents were in attendance this evening...my father would be proud of what you said —and my mother would believe every last word of it!

My saving grace may be the old adage that you are judged by the company you keep. This evening, that makes me a lucky man. In addition to Ken Blackwell, an inspirational voice in the conservative movement, I'm sharing the spotlight with Sen. Chris Coons, a warrior for democracy, a good friend, and a fellow African hand.

I mean, how often do you walk into Senate offices to be greeted in Kiswahili? Shikamoo, Mzee!

And of course Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, both living history and a symbol of what Africa can be. So many achievements ... from restoring peace to Liberia to restoring hope for a new generation across the continent. She is a stinging rebuke to those occasional voices that imply that democracy can only work in the West, a view that Ronald Reagan once called, "cultural condescension or worse."

And, of course, my friend Bill Sweeney... I've seen him at work in the halls of the Capitol...I've seen him at work in places like Burma and Ukraine. He's a relentless bulldog for free and fair elections.

A few thoughts for this occasion...

I'm always amazed at how quick pundits are to pronounce the decline, if not the demise, of democracy in much of the world.

In fairness, there's little doubt that authoritarian forces are doing everything they can to unwind freedom's gains from the last few decades.

It's also true that their tactics are more sophisticated, and perhaps more devious, than ever before.

These days, few authoritarians are willing to dispute democracy or its virtues head on. They've seen that approach fail time and again.

Instead, they often try to redefine the term and hope no one will notice.

One approach they take is to publicly "embrace" democracy...while working to rig the next elections before they start.

Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro is a not-so-subtle disciple of this approach. A year in advance of the May 20 elections, his hand-picked supreme court effectively absorbed all of the powers of the duly elected national assembly. Then Maduro created a brand new "constituent assembly," which quickly stripped the National Assembly of any remaining power and set about rewriting the constitution to give Maduro nearly unlimited powers.

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Not long after, they banned two of the most popular opposition leaders from running in the election. And for good measure, right before Election Day, Maduro changed the location of hundreds of polling stations in opposition strongholds.

Surprise, he won. See, he loves democracy.

Another tactic authoritarians use is resorting to phony election observers --“zombie observers”— as they’re sometimes called.

Many of them come from China — who’s only too happy to help its clients.

Earlier this year, in advance of elections, Cambodia’s Hun Sen took numerous steps to extinguish political competition. He not only dissolved the main opposition group and banned it from politics, but he arrested and jailed its leader.

At the same time, he announced that he actually wanted observers to be present. They would see how smooth elections can be — my aside...especially when, for all intents and purposes, no opposing candidates are allowed.

Traditional democratic voices — the US, Canada, Europe, etc.-- refused to take part. China, which also purchased election equipment for the government, was only too happy to oblige.

The Chinese praised the election as “orderly.”

Yet another tactic authoritarians use is to so restrict civil society and independent media that party line propaganda is the only voice their citizens hear.

In Iran, 7 journalists were recently jailed and flogged for covering a protest. In Venezuela, a freelance photographer was recently whisked off to military prison, and just this past 24 hours, Nicaragua’s regime force shot students and journalists covering them.

41 journalists were in prison in China at the end of 2017.

In other words, my friends, I can understand why some fret about the challenges facing the democracy movement in many corners of the world. Our opponents are increasingly sophisticated in the way they seek to thwart the will of their people.

What I don’t understand is the gloom some have over the future. They act as though authoritarianism is an unstoppable force...as though democracy is in irreversible decline — that its best days are past.

In the Trump Administration, we simply don’t buy it. The only way democracy will fall away is if we let it...if WE surrender. And I promise you this Administration will never surrender.

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To adapt a phrase from my friend Sec. Mike Pompeo, this is a time for democracy to get its swagger back. Tonight...right now.

Let's be clear: the activists, the grassroots champions, have never lost theirs.

Despite the threats and violence, Las Damas de Blanco, Cuba's Ladies in White, STILL gather every Sunday and peacefully walk to church to protest human rights violations.

Despite Ortega's brutal crackdown, his regime's shoot to kill policy against student protesters, the defiling of churches and attacks upon Catholic priests... Nicaragua's citizen activists continue to call for peace and free elections.

What keeps these and other brave souls going is they realize what the naysayers do not: those anti-democratic tactics I've described aren't signs of strength, they are proof of weakness.

The authoritarians aren't motivated by courage, they are driven by fear. Quite simply, the authoritarians are afraid.

They're afraid of students, women and priests. They are afraid of reporters and cameras and bloggers. They are afraid of their own people and their hopes and dreams. They are afraid of freedom.

According to recent reports, Chinese censors are busily scrubbing the internet of images of Winnie the Pooh. That's right: the Bear of Very Little Brain because some apparently believe he bears a subversive resemblance to President Xi Jinping.

Is that a sign of strength or weakness and self-doubt?

We should celebrate tonight because there are leaders like Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, there are brave students and priests in Nicaragua, Cuban wives and mothers who will march to highlight the plight of political prisoners.

There are journalists, who despite the floggings, imprisonment and threats, continue to do whatever it takes to bring voters the truth.

We should celebrate tonight because there are people like the great team at IFES who work tirelessly to ensure that citizens have a chance to shape their own future.

We should celebrate tonight not because democracy is flourishing in every corner of the world, but because it remains the highest and best hope for people everywhere. And we, USAID, and all of you, will never surrender that hope.

I'm truly grateful for this award and all that it represents.