



# **United States Democracy Assistance**

**Written Testimony Submitted by the Hon. J. Kenneth Blackwell,  
The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)**

**Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs**

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As Chairman of the Board of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), a former Ohio Secretary of State responsible for election administration, and a former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, I respectfully urge this Subcommittee and the U.S. Congress to continue its tradition of bipartisan support for democracy, rights and governance (DRG). Relatively small, strategic investments in electoral assistance will continue to contribute to a more prosperous, secure America.

To support the DRG sector, we ask that in FY2018, Congress provide \$2,308,517,000 for democracy programs under Title VII – General Provisions – including “shall” language that protects DRG funding from reprogramming to other sectors – and \$210,500,000 for the Democracy Fund under Title III – Bilateral Economic Assistance.

**About IFES: “A Vote for Every Voice”**

For thirty years, IFES – a 501(c)3 nonpartisan nonprofit – has worked in over 145 countries to support citizens’ right to participate in free and fair elections. Credible elections are the cornerstone of a healthy democracy and enable all persons to exercise their basic human right to have a say in how they are governed.<sup>1</sup> In many emerging democracies, a transparent and accurate election is the best evidence to citizens that their government can fairly deliver a public service to the entire nation.

Currently, IFES works in nearly 30 countries to build capacity and strengthen democratic processes across the electoral cycle. International norms and best practices inform our programming, and our work with both state and non-state actors enhances trust between citizens and government officials, supports the power of citizens to democratically sanction or remove government officials for unsatisfactory performance, and promotes systems and processes that provide the purest expression of citizen will.

IFES’ core service lines include the long-term capacity building of election commissions; the broadening of citizen participation and inclusion; the empowerment of marginalized groups; and research and surveys that inform our work and further the DRG discipline. IFES achieves its goals by providing targeted technical assistance to local partners on electoral frameworks; election dispute resolution; fraud and malpractice mitigation; political finance regulation; civic and voter education; leadership and advocacy; electoral security; the constructive relationship between the media and electoral stakeholders; innovative technology; and codes of conduct that support professionalism and high standards of ethical behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 21, *The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

In 2016 alone, IFES trained 5,791 election offices; reached over seven million individuals through voter and civic education; produced 244 electoral recommendations through collaboration and advice; and trained 4,402 stakeholders on electoral and political processes.

### Electoral Assistance: A Long-term Development Commitment



Figure 1. The Electoral Cycle, International IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

No team makes it to a championship without hard work in the pre- and regular seasons, as well as some intense post-season analysis and rebuilding. Similarly, although Election Day may be the “Super Bowl” of the electoral cycle (see Figure 1), it is simply one event in a long process.

To this end, effective electoral assistance demands investment several years in advance of an election date and in the period between elections. At the heart of a strong electoral cycle is the professionalism of the electoral management body (EMB) and an empowered civil society.

Consistent, long-term support throughout the electoral cycle also enhances stability during uncertain democracy building processes. Shorter term or immediate assistance does not allow for capacity building, the introduction of technology (or the training and public education necessitated by it), or strategic planning.

strategic planning.

### Electoral Assistance Advances American Interests

Stable democracies make for better trading partners, provide new market opportunities, improve global health outcomes, and promote economic freedom and regional security.

For example:

- IFES’ technical support ensured Guatemala’s fall 2015 elections were conducted in a peaceful and transparent manner. IFES helped implement the Inter-Institutional Security Committee, through which electoral authorities and other government agencies monitored and coordinated a prompt and adequate response to electoral violence. Credible elections contribute to a more stable Guatemala, removing incentives for its citizens to emigrate north.
- Nigeria’s watershed 2015 elections – despite taking place at the height of the Boko Haram insurgency – ensured stability through the first democratic transfer of power in the country’s history and its continuation as one of the United States’ largest African trading partners.<sup>2</sup>
- Tunisia, a bright spot in a rough neighborhood, has held three credible elections to date with U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported IFES technical assistance, and continues to welcome IFES support as it prepares for local elections in 2017. With USG assistance,

<sup>2</sup> The USG role in the elections’ success was acknowledged by President Muhammadu Buhari in July 2015: “The contributions of the IRI, NDI and IFES to the success of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria are well documented. I would like to use this opportunity to thank them for their partnership and support to the democratization process in Nigeria.”

Tunisia has resisted authoritarianism and failed statehood, and is a reliable partner in the fight against Daesh and violent extremism.

- Myanmar's historic 2015 general elections saw a landslide victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) and ushered in a new era of democratic process. Much of its success was due to USG assistance – as stated by the Chairman of the Union Election Commission after Election Day, “We wouldn't be standing here if not for IFES.” Not only has Myanmar's democratic transition helped open space for improved human rights, but will enhance U.S.-Myanmar cooperation on such international security issues as nuclear nonproliferation and North Korean arms sales.

### *Syria: Preparing for the Inevitable Political Transition*

No matter how or when the Syria crisis begins to resolve, Syrian citizens must prepare for the inevitable political and electoral transition. Since 2013, IFES was worked to enhance the capacity of government and political leaders, civil society actors, women's groups, and citizens at the grassroots level to support the establishment of inclusive and effective democratic processes and institutions in Syria.

IFES engages with local partners, including a network of civil society organizations and other stakeholders that IFES helped to establish, to share information about international standards and practices with the wider Syrian community and create opportunities for discussion about principles of democracy and governance, human rights, and conflict management. IFES also works with local partners on conflict mitigation, civic education and civil society capacity building efforts, while preparing government-level stakeholders to address critical governance issues and collaborate with key groups and organizations. Additionally, IFES engages with the Syrian diaspora to create linkages between citizens, non-governmental stakeholders, and government institutions to encourage the establishment of inclusive and effective democratic processes and institutions in Syria.

IFES' recent work in Syria has focused on displaced Syrian youth, a group at risk for radicalization – young Syrians have few avenues to express their desperation and even fewer platforms for civic engagement. In 2016, IFES assisted Syrian organizations based in Gaziantep, Turkey to found Musharaka, a forum to encourage civic engagement of Syrians living in Gaziantep. In its first year, Musharaka has reached over 1,060 Syrian youth in Gaziantep, an astounding 48 percent of whom have been young women. The popularity of the Youth Forum has led to the creation of a distinct Adolescents' Forum, designed to meet the unique needs and worldview of this youngest segment of Syrian activists. Today, the Youth and Adolescents' Forums are engaged in a leadership development program that focuses on fostering critical skills for young activists by placing them in leadership roles. Both the Youth and Adolescents' Forums have elected representatives from among their ranks to engage with Syrian opposition leaders and Turkish officials on a variety of issues, including the crisis of education facing young Syrians in Turkey. Through the Musharaka Forum, IFES and its local partners have established a beacon of hope and optimism where few others have realized success and meaningful impact.

### **Electoral Assistance Advances American Values**

In addition to the tangible benefits, DRG also promotes American values. For example, electoral assistance helps such traditionally marginalized groups as youth, women, and persons with disabilities gain equal access to public institutions, win economic and political self-determination, and fully realize their

individual rights. Inclusion and empowerment activities also help strengthen the credibility and stability of democracies more broadly, as democratic institutions flourish when all groups of society are represented.

IFES works to strengthen political participation and inclusion by conducting civic and voter education activities via diverse media, including face-to-face, radio, social media, creative print mediums (such as comic books), and street theater; providing technical assistance to government officials on how to implement international standards; empowering civil society organizations; and assisting citizen-led efforts to define best practices.

### *Combatting Violence Against Women in Elections*

In every country where IFES works, women represent the largest pool of potential voters. Violence against women in elections is a threat to the integrity of the electoral process – violence or the threat of violence can affect women’s participation as voters, candidates, election officials, activists, and political party leaders, and it undermines the free, fair, and inclusive democratic process. To better understand and address the ways in which electoral violence creates a barrier to women’s participation, IFES developed the Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWIE) Framework to specifically identify and address the unique issues related to gender-based election violence. Through analysis and program implementation focused on increasing women’s participation and leadership in democracy assistance, the VAWIE Framework makes narratives of violence against women in elections in their homes, political arenas and public spaces more visible.

### *Empowering Persons with Disabilities*

IFES seeks to empower civil society to sustainably advocate for equal rights. The General Election Network for Disability Access (AGENDA) – currently funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, but by initiated with USAID funding from 2011 to 2013 – was established as a forum to improve access to political and electoral opportunities for persons with disabilities in Southeast Asia through increased public awareness and advocacy for change. AGENDA is a creative partnership between IFES, disabled persons organizations, election-focused civil society organizations, and EMBs. The AGENDA network's principal objectives have been to promote election access in Southeast Asia and ensure that access to disability-inclusive political processes is on the human rights agenda of regional bodies, especially the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In the first phase of the AGENDA network, with USAID support, the project expanded its network to seven countries; conducted research in five countries to publish the “Accessible Elections for Persons with Disabilities in the Southeast Asian Countries” handbook; created the first ever checklist for monitoring election accessibility; and developed a training module for election administrators to increase awareness regarding electoral issues impacting the inclusion of persons with disabilities. IFES has leveraged USAID’s initial investment in the development of the election access observation checklist, conducting a total of 10 observations in four countries using the tool.

The AGENDA network has established a strong reputation among key stakeholders, including organizations focusing on politics and human rights, election commissions, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, and other ASEAN and Asia-Pacific officials. The AGENDA partnership is now considered the lead Southeast Asian regional actor promoting the political rights of persons with disabilities.

## **Case Study: Electoral Assistance in Georgia**

Georgia – squeezed between Russia and Turkey – is, quite literally, in a tough neighborhood. Despite its challenging geography, as well as continued encroachments by Russia on its territory, Georgia continues to be a vital trading partner and security ally of the United States.

Georgia and the United States belong to a number of the same international organizations, including the United Nations, Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization. Georgia also is an observer to the Organization of American States, a participant in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Partnership for Peace program, and a partner legislature of the House Democracy Partnership.

Additionally, Georgia is the largest non-NATO and largest per capita contributor to the war in Afghanistan. As Georgia's border with Russia links it to Chechnya and Dagestan, this ally serves as an essential barrier to the flow of foreign jihadists from Russia to the Middle East.

Given its strategic importance to the United States, as well as its dedication to strengthening its still-evolving democracy, IFES has been honored to play a pivotal, multifaceted role in Georgia's elections since 1995. For example, IFES' partnership has been key to the Central Election Commission (CEC), as the two organizations cooperated on a broad sphere of work which led to successive, peaceful elections and the first change of power to an opposition political party, a watershed event in Georgia's post-Soviet history.

### *Police Partnership Piloted*

Of particular significance in preparations for Georgia's October 2016 parliamentary elections was IFES' assistance in strengthening electoral security by establishing new procedures and clear responsibilities of the CEC and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). This took the form of training for the CEC and development of strict protocols through which EMBs and law enforcement interact. Electoral security is a new area of work for IFES in Georgia, and the assistance delivered had a positive impact by creating an electoral security coordination body between the CEC and MIA to discuss security threats and share information. This also led to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the CEC and MIA outlining improved coordination and delineation of roles and responsibilities for addressing security on Election Day. The effects of this closer coordination were realized on Election Day in 2016, when a Provincial Election Commission and law enforcement in the city of Marneuli worked effectively together to prevent an attack on a polling station, ensure the safety of voters and ballots, and raise the level of confidence in the election management bodies.

### *Civic Education for Youth*

To build the foundation for sustained civic and political engagement, IFES works with educational institutions and other youth-serving organizations around the world to provide both school-based and non-school based civic education for young people. In Georgia, IFES has partnered with 27 institutions of higher learning to implement a fully accredited university-level civic education course; there are more than 7,000 course alumni throughout the country. The curriculum requires students to apply the theoretical knowledge gained through classroom work to real-world situations in their communities, analyzing their communities and then designing and implementing projects to address identified issues. Student projects have focused on a broad array of topics including peer-to-peer voter education in ethnic minority regions and youth actions to promote disability rights throughout the country.

### *Adoption of Management Plan*

IFES has worked intensively with the Georgian CEC to finalize and implement an Electoral Integrity Management Plan. This project started with an Electoral Integrity Assessment and has included collaboration between IFES experts, CEC Chairperson Tamar Zhvania, CEC members and other key stakeholders on the development of a comprehensive plan to support electoral integrity. Through IFES assistance, the CEC served as host and made key presentations at an annual conference of international EMBs, and has emerged as a leader in adhering to the highest standards of electoral integrity by planning for and addressing areas of vulnerability within the electoral process. Other IFES assistance to the CEC is ongoing in the lead up to the 2018 local elections, including: improving efficient and effective election administration at all levels through development of learning modules and direct training; providing support and training to the commission on public relations; assisting in outreach to persons with disabilities, women and representatives of ethnic minority communities to improve electoral enfranchisement; organizing Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) trainings for all 365 District Election Commission (DEC) members; supporting finalization of accessibility adaptations to the CEC's website; supporting CEC civic education initiatives in ethnic minority and remote areas; and planning joint IFES-CEC training for CEC and DEC representatives to improve their written legal products.

### **The Case for Electoral Support: Strengthening the American "Brand"**

IFES' nonpartisan and technical approach allows us to work in some of democracy's most challenging environments. However, our ability to make an impact is also thanks to America's democratic "brand." Historically, champions for democracy around the world have held the United States as a model in electoral security, transparency, and accessibility.

It is important to maintain and strengthen this reputation, which has shown some signs of weakening. Each national American election, IFES holds its United States Election Program (USEP). In 2016, the USEP united 501 participants from 90 countries to witness American democracy in action. The focal point of the USEP is the polling tour, which takes participants to polling stations throughout the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. At these polling stations, participants ask questions of voting precinct personnel, voters, and members of Congress and congressional candidates.

In the 20 years that IFES has hosted the USEP, participants have been deeply impressed by the American political culture of trust. However, in 2016, participants' common refrain was "You Americans don't put your money where your mouth is," as electoral equipment and technical support did not match the recommendations provided by IFES and other democracy organizations or reflect American values of accessibility, sanctity of the ballot, and transparency of results.

I respectfully urge the President to uphold the American "brand" by promoting credible elections both at home and abroad. Supporting DRG funding is one such way to honor America's long tradition of electoral authority.

### **Key Accounts and Recommendations for FY2018**

I thank the Congress – and particularly this Subcommittee – for its continued support of DRG in even the most challenging budget environments. In the Consolidated Appropriations Acts of both 2016 and 2017, Congress mandated that the administration spend no less than \$2.3 billion on democracy programs.

Congress' provision of a funding floor protects critical programming. For example, actual spending on all DRG programming was only \$2.087 billion for FY2014 – 27 percent less than Congress enacted. The full funding of DRG programs is necessary to properly address democratic backsliding, to consolidate gains from economic development efforts, and to contribute to a more stable and prosperous world. We ask for Congress to continue funding DRG at existing levels.

#### *Development Assistance*

Development Assistance funds help further USAID's goal of promoting resilient, democratic societies. DRG assistance supports new and fragile democracies by helping them develop policies and practices to build effective, transparent, and accountable governments that can deliver political and socioeconomic benefits to their citizens.

Unfortunately, the leaked, draft Administration budget document obtained by *Foreign Policy*<sup>3</sup> eliminates entirely the Development Assistance account. This would severely restrict the United States' ability to achieve its longer-term development goals.

#### *Economic Support Funds*

Through the Economic Support Funds (ESF), the U.S. Department of State and USAID help partner countries meet short- and long-term political and economic needs so that they can transition to developed economies. Programs address the economic despair and lack of political participation that violent extremist groups exploit among youth, the unemployed, and marginalized members of society. DRG assistance empowers citizens to ensure broad-based participation; strengthens the rule of law; mitigates conflict; and cultivates respect for the democratic process.

ESF support many of IFES' programs both directly and through USAID's Elections and Political Transitions (EPT) Leader with Associates award. The EPT – held by IFES, the International Republic Institute (IRI), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) – is a pre-competed mechanism that allows USAID Missions to respond rapidly to urgent needs across the globe.

We support robust funding for ESF, particularly to help address the alienation of youth and the unemployed who are targeted by violent extremism, build local capacity to conduct credible elections, and strengthen civil society.

#### *Democracy Fund*

Through the Democracy Fund, State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance support democracy activists worldwide, minimize human rights abuses, including human trafficking, open political space, and enable positive transnational change.

The Democracy Fund allocates specific amounts for State and USAID. In recent years, increasing amounts have been shifted to State and away from USAID. I respectfully encourage Congress to split the Fund evenly between the two agencies, to ensure each agency's unique approach and priorities are honored.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/24/u-s-agency-for-international-development-foreign-aid-state-department-trump-slash-foreign-funding/>

### *Assistance for Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia (AEECA)*

This account – discontinued at the Administration’s request in FY2013 and reinstated in FY2016 – was also “zeroed out” in the April 2017 leaked Administration document. The AEECA is critical to strengthening our allies in the region (including Georgia), particularly via DRG.

### *National Endowment for Democracy*

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a critical component of the USG’s foreign aid strategy. However, the vast majority of its funding is reserved for its four core institutes, and does not support many critical organizations, like IFES, that have emerged in the more than three decades since its initial legislative establishment. To this end, it is vital that the other accounts for DRG remain amply funded.

### **Looking Ahead: The Continued Need for Electoral Assistance**

With the continued support of the U.S. Congress, DRG will further promote American interests and values abroad. Investment in electoral assistance simply cannot wait, and must be advanced in FY2018. Such pressing challenges include Yemen’s civil war (to which U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has called for a political solution<sup>4</sup>); Kenya’s August 2017 national elections; 2018 elections in Georgia, Mali, and Pakistan; and Indonesia’s 2019 presidential elections (Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim democracy and holds the largest single-day elections in the world).

DRG funding is also critical to global migration crisis, which could prove to be both a humanitarian and democratic disaster. IFES is at the forefront of promoting the electoral rights of internally displaced persons (IDPs), of which there are over 40 million worldwide. For instance, IFES has begun reviewing electoral laws concerning the rights of displaced persons. If political solutions through the ballot box are critical to the reestablishment of political legitimacy and future governments in countries ranging from Ukraine to Iraq and Syria, then the rights of displaced voters require serious examination. This process parallels with work already underway with many election commissions mandated to conduct overseas diaspora voting.

Again, I thank the Subcommittee for its continued dedication to DRG.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2017/04/18/Mattis-calls-on-UN-brokered-end-to-Yemen-civil-war/7751492529467/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2017/04/18/Mattis-calls-on-UN-brokered-end-to-Yemen-civil-war/7751492529467/)



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