**Opening Statement – Madeleine K. Albright**

**House Democracy Partnership Hearing**

**December 1, 2021**

Chairman Price, Co-Chair Buchanan, members of the HDP – thank you for convening this hearing and for inviting me and Ambassador Dobriansky to participate in it.

I have long admired the HDP not only for the critical work it does with legislatures around the world, but also for the important example it sets of bipartisanship.

That example comes from the top, so I want to commend Chairman Price and Co-Chair Buchanan for your strong and productive partnership.

The National Democratic Institute, which I chair, is proud to partner with the International Republican Institute to support the HDP. We are especially honored to be working with HDP in its role hosting the Legislative Track of the Summit for Democracy. That effort formally kicks off tomorrow, when we will convene the first in a series of exchanges with legislative leaders on each of the summit’s key themes.

Now with the drumbeat of bad news from abroad and polarization here at home, I understand why so many discussions about democracy are pessimistic and why some question the value of convening a summit at all.

For at least 15 years, the pendulum swinging worldwide between democracy and despotism has moved in the wrong direction.

A lot of observers expect that to continue.

I disagree. I may be crazy, but I think democracy is poised for a comeback.

Let me explain why.

First, the sense of complacency among those who care most about democracy has disappeared and with it the unrealistic euphoria that took hold when the Berlin Wall fell. Alarms about freedom’s future are spreading far and wide. The Summit For Democracy and the activities around it are evidence of that. A challenge cannot be met until it is recognized, and small “d” democrats are well aware that we are in for a fight.

Second, it is easier to move upward from a valley than from a peak.

Many states whose democracies are now troubled were under authoritarian rule until about 30 years ago. Today, the world takes note when, for example, the opposition leader in Tanzania is arrested, the Tunisian parliament is dismissed, the president of Brazil threatens to cancel elections, and the Hungarian prime minister rules by decree.

Yet there was a time in recent memory when these countries were not democracies at all. Despite our current distress, the globe is still far freer now than it was during the first five decades of my life. We democrats have an enlarged platform from which to mount a revival.

Meanwhile, and this is my third point, China and Russia have squandered the best opportunity they may ever have to offer a convincing alternative to liberal democracy.

Consider that, between 2017 and 2020, the United States pulled back its international engagement and Europe was preoccupied with Brexit and other intramural disputes. The stage was set for Beijing and Moscow to present themselves as global models. They failed.

According to the Pew Research Center, unflattering views of China are at a historic high while Putin is neither trusted nor admired by four-fifths of those polled.

These are just some of the reasons why a democratic comeback is possible. I know and you know, however, that should one begin, it will be opposed.

Dictators are very adept at shaping public perceptions and checkmating political opponents.

They also have the advantage of intimidation. Few are above using force to harass rivals and disrupt protests. Their goal is not so much to change minds as it is to convince people with democratic aspirations to give up. Sometimes, this works.

But we should not abandon hope. We have learned from the past that people and democracies are resilient, that time brings new opportunities, and that even so-called presidents for life come with a built-in expiration date.

And here is another key point.

Despite the battering democracy has endured, most people want to strengthen – not discard – their democratic systems.

Having worked with NDI and organizations with comparable goals for more than 35 years, I can testify that there are now more talented women and men striving in more places on behalf of democratic principles than ever before.

Despite democracy’s struggles, popular participation in shaping public agendas is up, not down.

Strides toward gender equity contribute to this rising level of commitment, as does the fact that a record percentage of today’s young adults grew up in relative freedom. They consider self-expression a right to be exercised regularly and regardless of obstacles. Polling indicates rising levels of optimism among young people about their ability to achieve positive social change and to play a role in how their countries are governed.

This brings me to the role of the House Democracy Partnership and legislatures more generally.

In a democracy, there is nothing more important than a strong and vibrant legislative branch. It is the reason why Article I of the U.S. constitution begins with the role of Congress. And it explains why no U.S.-led effort to spark a global democratic revival can succeed without your active engagement.

So I would urge you to do everything you can to help democratic forces regain the initiative by rallying friends of freedom around the world, and by using your combined influence to support civil discourse, due process, fair elections, and the essential freedoms of speech, worship, and the press.

Mr. Chairman and members of the HDP, there is much more I could say, but your time is precious and so I will stop now and look forward to our discussion.

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