



**The National Endowment for Democracy:
America's Foundation for Freedom Around the World**

Hearing Before the Subcommittee on National Security, Department of State, &
Related Programs, House Committee on Appropriations
February 24, 2026

Testimony by

Damon Wilson, President and CEO, National Endowment for Democracy

Chairman Díaz-Balart, Ranking Member Frankel, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss how the American people stand by those who seek freedom through the National Endowment for Democracy and our Core institutes. On behalf of the Board and staff, along with thousands of democratic partners around the world, we thank the subcommittee for its ongoing bipartisan support.

More than four decades ago, President Ronald Reagan stood before the British Parliament at Westminster and articulated a vision that still guides the National Endowment for Democracy today. Reagan argued that the advance of freedom was not inevitable, and that democracies must actively support those striving for liberty. He called for strengthening the “infrastructure of democracy”—the institutions, civic organizations, free media, and democratic movements that allow societies to govern themselves.

In 1983, Congress—led by former House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Dante Fascell and bipartisan lawmakers—answered that call by authorizing federal funding for the National Endowment for Democracy through the NED Act. The purpose of the law was to ensure that the United States would advance its long-term interests by supporting democratic actors abroad through a private institution with a public mandate. Congress authorized support, through an annual federal grant per the NED Act, for the Endowment as a public-private partnership that reflects American values and serves U.S. interests.

For more than four decades, NED has delivered on that vision as a congressionally funded institution dedicated to supporting democratic progress around the world.

NED's work is based on the principle that freedom is a universal human aspiration. No single election achieves democracy, and democracy does not need to replicate the model of any one nation. Rather, it must be grounded in the historical and political contexts and aspirations and energy of local citizens. We support those on the frontlines of freedom in their own struggles, who take the initiative to solve problems through democratic means in their own societies. They seek NED's support to pursue their own vision of democratic progress in ways that reflect their societies, cultures, and circumstances. When they succeed, it benefits America.

In Fiscal Year 2025, NED provided \$271 million in grants to support more than 1,550 projects pursuing democratic objectives across more than 90 countries. Our direct grants channel support to grassroots organizations, with 86 percent of awards totaling less than \$150,000. These grants bolster independent media, civic organizations, labor and business groups, faith leaders, human rights defenders, technologists, and reformers working to strengthen democratic institutions, ensure economic opportunity, and protect fundamental freedoms in some of the world's most repressive environments.

NED and its four Core institutes—the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the Center for International Private Enterprise, and the Solidarity Center—reflect the organized sectors of American political life. Together, this NED family embodies the mandate from our founding legislation, the NED Act. Through these four Core institutes and direct grantmaking, the Endowment mobilizes key pillars of democracy—political parties, business, labor, a free press, and civil society. This approach ensures that private American initiatives forge relationships of trust with local actors, built on shared democratic values, to ensure that democracy support is locally driven, not imposed from the outside.

NED also offers an exceptionally cost-effective model. With low administrative overhead, smart use of new technologies, and a lean structure, approximately 84 cents of every dollar entrusted to NED goes directly to grantmaking that supports frontline partners. This ensures that the vast majority of resources are directed to maximize the impact of those on the ground.

Commitment to Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability are guiding principles that underscore the legitimacy and efficacy of NED's work. NED operates under rigorous, multi-layered oversight, established reporting requirements, and independent audits. For more

than forty years, we have worked within a framework designed to ensure strong oversight of public funds while protecting the safety of democratic partners operating in repressive environments. Central to this framework is a robust due diligence and vetting process, through which all prospective grantees and projects are carefully reviewed for legal compliance, financial integrity, risk, and strategic impact before funding decisions are made. NED awards grants only after rigorous assessment of the effectiveness and potential impact of proposed activities, ensuring responsible stewardship of taxpayer funds. NED's bipartisan board reviews and approves all recommended grants.

We uphold NED's commitment to transparency and accountability through submission of an annual spending plan to Congress that outlines strategic objectives and allocations; submission of a comprehensive annual report to the President—also provided to Congress and published publicly—that provides detailed accounting of our grantmaking and financials; timely and complete monthly reporting to the U.S. Department of State on every grant obligation made and quarterly financial reports; regular consultations with State on priorities, political analysis, and program implementation; and prompt responses to congressional and executive branch oversight requests through briefings, written inquiries, and committee engagement.

NED is subject to independent audits, Government Accountability Office (GAO) review of NED's financial and operational practices, and review by the State Department's Office of the Inspector General. The Endowment is also subject to the Freedom of Information Act. Furthermore, NED publicly discloses grant listings on its website, providing grant-level objectives and activities while upholding partner security consistent with our duty of care.

A Global Contest Over Freedom

This structure and approach enable NED to be effective in consequential time for freedom around the world. Today, we face a moment in which authoritarian regimes are more coordinated, well financed, technologically capable, and aggressive in stifling freedom at home while exporting repression across borders.

Yet even amid intensifying repression, citizens around the world continue to stand up for freedom.

In Iran, the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement revealed the depth of public demand for dignity, accountability, and basic rights—a demand that continues to resurface in nationwide protests fueled by economic hardship, corruption, and entrenched political repression. The regime’s response to the latest protests has been swift and severe: upwards of 30,000 killed and over 50,000 arrested, violent suppression by security forces, and sweeping communications blackouts designed to silence dissent and isolate citizens from one another and the outside world.

In this environment, NED’s support is critical. By equipping independent, non-violent civic actors to document abuses, maintain secure channels of communication, and coordinate across fragmented networks, the Endowment helps ensure that repression does not occur in darkness and that democratic voices continue to reach Iranians at home and abroad. These efforts translate moments of protest into sustained civic capacity—strengthening leadership, resilience, and organizational infrastructure that can endure beyond cycles of unrest and position Iranians to shape a more accountable and democratic future.

In Venezuela, NED partners have helped sustain a network of dozens of organizations working to document human rights abuses, support election monitoring and political participation, inform citizens of their rights, and preserve civic space despite years of repression. That long-term investment is now proving critical at a pivotal moment. After more than two decades of corruption, human rights abuses, rigged elections, economic collapse, and mass displacement, the political landscape shifted dramatically in early 2026 following the capture and extradition of Nicolás Maduro for narcoterrorism, drug trafficking, and corruption.

NED partners are now focused on helping Venezuelans seize this historic opportunity by supporting a peaceful democratic transition and the restoration of fundamental freedoms. This work builds on more than twenty years of sustained engagement. NED’s Venezuela portfolio has grown to include the Core institutes and over forty civic organizations, providing momentum during this transition period in alignment with U.S. interests.

In Cuba, NED partners have played a similarly sustained and critical role in helping citizens break through one of the most entrenched information blockades in the world. Independent journalists, community media, and civic groups supported by NED continue to provide reliable reporting, document abuses, and create space for public accountability in an environment where the regime tightly controls information. In 2025, NED-supported independent media reached more than 10

million people—roughly half inside Cuba—ensuring that citizens had access to news beyond official narratives and could better understand decisions affecting their daily lives.

NED's work in Armenia has helped lay the societal and institutional foundation for a more peaceful and economically integrated South Caucasus at a pivotal moment for the region. For years, NED partners—including independent think tanks, citizen groups, and business associations—have advanced democratic reforms, strengthened the rule of law, and promoted integration with international markets as key to Armenia's long-term security and prosperity.

Through policy research, public dialogue, anti-corruption advocacy, and private-sector capacity building, these efforts helped build domestic support for peace, economic openness, and constructive regional engagement. As Armenia expands economic partnerships and cooperation with the United States in sectors such as energy and technology, these developments reflect groundwork laid by local democratic actors supported by NED, demonstrating how investments in democratic institutions can foster stability, commerce, and strategic partnership.

In Bangladesh, NED's support is helping the country emerge from more than 10 years of authoritarian rule, violence, and instability. For over two decades, NED has supported partners working to strengthen political parties and parliamentary institutions, advance labor rights, promote inclusive economic growth, and produce independent reporting on human rights and corruption—efforts that were especially critical under the rule of Sheikh Hasina, which collapsed in 2024.

The country now has an opportunity to restore peace and advance democratic governance and reform. In the lead up to the most recent elections, NED-supported partners and the Core institutes helped advance electoral reforms, monitor the integrity of the process, and promote voter education, contributing to this critical step toward the reestablishment of multiparty democracy. NED and the Core institutes' longstanding relationships and expertise will help local actors promote accountability, safeguard fundamental freedoms, and strengthen democratic institutions as Bangladeshis work to build a durable democratic future.

These examples underscore a central truth: the demand for freedom is global and persistent. But it requires sustained support.

Supporting the Next Generation of Democratic Leadership

Around the world, young people are taking center stage in the struggle for democracy. In countries such as Peru, Nepal, Madagascar, Morocco, Kenya, Georgia, and Serbia, Gen Z has often led civic mobilization against corruption, unemployment, and political exclusion, using technology and social media with remarkable sophistication to elevate their demands.

Yet translating the energy and ambition of these movements into lasting democratic outcomes remains a persistent challenge. The gap between youth activism and institutional change can limit the ability of civic actors to sustain momentum once protests subside. NED partners help bridge this divide by channeling frustration into constructive political engagement, leadership development, and policy innovation, enabling young activists to move from mobilization to meaningful democratic participation.

Furthermore, NED supports women's political participation as part of our broader mission to strengthen democratic institutions and ensure equal access to civic life. Our work focuses on expanding opportunities for women to engage in public affairs, citizen groups, media, and governance. These efforts are locally driven and consistent with each country's legal and cultural context. Our programs enable civic groups to pursue legislation that criminalizes violence against women; bolster women's participation in local governance, oversight, and public accountability efforts; and build capacities of women's business and trade associations to enhance their economic opportunities and voice in public affairs.

Countering the Chinese Communist Party's Global Reach

NED's work related to China provides one of the clearest examples of how democracy support reinforces U.S. national security.

NED-supported researchers exposed the existence of over 100 "Chinese overseas police stations" operating across 53 countries. These liaison stations, run through United Front affiliates by local Chinese public security authorities, were used to monitor and intimidate dissidents living in exile. They extended the Chinese Communist Party's repression beyond China's borders, blatantly violating other nations' sovereignty. Public exposure vastly increased governments' awareness of China's foreign interference activities and directly contributed to a growing series of efforts to counter Beijing's transnational repression.

NED partners have also played a critical role in documenting mass detention, forced labor, and cultural and religious repression targeting Tibetans, Uyghurs, and other ethnic minorities. NED-backed civil society researchers collected evidence, preserved testimony, and informed policymakers about extensive reeducation camps and forced labor in Xinjiang and colonial boarding schools in Tibet—helping drive international awareness and accountability.

NED has supported efforts that defend legal rights and due process inside China. With NED support, lawyers, researchers, and advocates have worked to document arbitrary detention and push for legal protections, contributing to long-term pressure that has helped advance reforms, including efforts to eliminate prolonged pre-trial detention.

This work is often quiet and incremental, but it represents one of the few ways the United States, through NED, can help local citizens sustain the idea of rule of law inside a closed system.

Advancing Religious Freedom

Religious freedom is a cornerstone of human dignity and democracy and why authoritarian regimes often view religious communities as threats—-independent moral authorities that can challenge state control. From churches and mosques to temples and synagogues, faith-based groups are frequently on the front lines of defending human rights and democratic values. Advancing freedom of religion or belief has long been central to NED's mission and reflects a core American tradition rooted in our own founding.

Since 1983, NED has stood with courageous partners defending the freedoms of religion, conscience, and belief. NED partners document persecution, expose discrimination, and support faith leaders who defend human dignity in difficult environments. Faith leaders also often enjoy the credibility to build broad-based coalitions to advance broader democratic objectives. NED-supported partners, especially faith-based groups, operate in some of the most complex or repressive environments in the world:

- In China, researchers and advocates have helped bring global attention to the persecution of Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim communities, entailing

mass detention, imprisonment of religious leaders, and sweeping restrictions on religious practice, including the repression of underground churches.

- In Cuba and Nicaragua, partners have built networks to monitor and document violations against religious communities and disseminate such abuses with the international community.
- In Burma, partners have documented attacks on Christian and Muslim communities, including killings, forced conscription, and the destruction of churches and mosques, helping drive global awareness.
- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Catholic and Protestant networks led the country's largest-ever domestic election observation mission, demonstrating how faith communities can play a central role in strengthening democratic accountability.
- In Nigeria, NED partners document attacks, strengthen community resilience, advocate for accountability under the rule of law, and pursue litigation to defend religious freedom.
- In Tibet, partners have worked to preserve and advocate for the protection of religious freedom and cultural identity.

Protecting Economic Security and Critical Supply Chains

NED's support for the struggle for freedom abroad also advances U.S. economic and national security interests in concrete ways. By strengthening transparency, accountability, and the rule of law in countries rich in strategic resources, our partners help reduce corruption, limit the influence of authoritarian state-linked actors, and promote fair and open markets that benefit American workers and businesses.

In Bolivia, civic organizations exposed opaque lithium contracts that would have transferred control of strategic resources to authoritarian state-backed entities. Public scrutiny helped halt these deals and strengthened transparency, protecting the integrity of supply chains that U.S. manufacturers increasingly rely upon.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, local transparency groups monitor mining agreements tied to cobalt and other essential minerals and expose the use of illegal imported Chinese labor. Their work promotes accountability in a sector vulnerable to corruption and authoritarian influence, helping ensure that global supply chains remain stable and less susceptible to coercive control.

Supporting Freedom Abroad Makes America Safer, Stronger, and More Prosperous

At its core, NED supports the foundational freedoms that define democratic life: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, and the right to organize and participate in civic life. Where these freedoms exist, societies are more stable, accountable, and resilient. Where they are suppressed, corruption grows, repression expands, and instability spreads—often creating conditions that threaten U.S. interests. Supporting these rights is not abstract. It is a strategic investment in the conditions that prevent conflict and foster long-term stability.

The reality is that hotspots most likely to erupt into violence are found in areas of the world that are nondemocratic. These are places that experience ethnic conflict and civil war. They generate refugee flows across borders and fuel illicit activities including drug production. They are places that harbor terrorists at home and support them beyond their borders.

Supporting freedom abroad directly advances U.S. interests.

- **It strengthens national security.** Societies with accountable institutions and civic participation are less prone to instability, extremism, and conflict.
- **It strengthens economic resilience.** Transparent governance supports fair competition, protects supply chains, and creates more stable markets for American businesses and workers.
- **It serves as preventative defense.** Helping societies build democratic resilience early is far less costly than responding to crises after instability takes hold.

NED is one of the most cost-effective long-term investments the United States makes in global stability.

As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, we are reminded that our nation's founding was rooted in a bold and universal idea: that freedom is not the inheritance of one people alone, but a right that belongs to all.

President Reagan captured this spirit in his Westminster Address when he called on democracies to strengthen the institutions and civic foundations that allow

freedom to endure. Congress responded by creating NED to carry that mission forward—not through force or in secrecy, but through open partnership with those seeking liberty in their own societies.

As we commemorate America 250, we are reminded of a truth our founders understood well: freedom is not a gift to be guarded, but a trust to be shared. That conviction continues to animate the work of NED. By supporting citizens, civic leaders, independent journalists, labor organizers, entrepreneurs, and faith communities around the world, the United States affirms that the principles at the heart of our own founding—dignity, liberty, self-government, and rule of law—remain universal in their appeal.

In this sense, NED's work is a continuation of a long American tradition: standing with those who seek to build freer societies, just as others once stood with us. At a moment of historic geopolitical competition, supporting freedom is not only the right thing to do. It is a smart, strategic investment in America's security, prosperity, and leadership.

Thank you for your time, attention, and support.
