

**Statement of Madeleine Albright**  
**House Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
**The Call for Economic Liberty in the Arab World**  
**May 21, 2013**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, good morning.

At the outset, let me be clear that I am here today solely on my own behalf, not representing any organization, including the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, which I chair.

I will, however, draw on lessons learned through the work of NDI, which has been supporting the democratic cause for more than a quarter century.

Mr. Chairman, I'm pleased to be here with my friend and colleague, Hernando de Soto, with whom I served in 2008 as co-chair of the United Nations Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor.

As Mr. de Soto has testified, Arab countries, like all countries, would benefit from an economic system in which access to the protections of law are available to rich and poor alike.

People want to vote but they also want to eat and economic frustration has contributed much to the unrest we see in the Arab world and elsewhere.

Through their research, Mr. de Soto and his Institute for Liberty and Democracy have established an intimate connection between legal rights and economic development.

Experts in fighting poverty are now agreed that legal rights are essential for the poor to acquire assets, build capital, obtain credit, and lift themselves into the middle class.

This is a fact we should bear in mind when observing events in Arab countries, and when contemplating our own regional role.

As we know, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt have overthrown dictators and are in the process of building alternative governing structures.

In so doing, they face two fundamental risks.

The first is that, fearing disorder, they will retreat from real change and instead offer the same menu of opaque decision making and centralized power characteristic of the old regimes.

The second danger is that the new leadership will be so fragmented that it lacks the capacity to govern – causing a decline in public services, economic disruption, and popular discontent.

To sidestep the risks, these governments must be more open than their predecessors, but they must also take practical steps to deliver on the promise of a better life.

That requires creating institutions that will address urgent problems in a visible and effective way, ensure fair representation for all, and give citizens a chance to take charge of their own economic futures.

Such a process begins – but only begins -- at the polling booth.

True democracy demands a parliament that functions, an independent judiciary, a culture that rejects corruption, an economic system that generates opportunity, and a free and vibrant civil society.

As we have seen, revolutions and other sudden changes in government are usually accompanied by a sharp rise in public expectations.

People who have been promised change and have supported new leadership naturally hope to see improvements in their lives – but it is much easier to demand reforms when out of power than to implement them when confronted by the hard realities of public office.

Across the Arab world, officials without a background in democratic government are striving to draft constitutions, write legislation, organize ministries, and forge new political coalitions in an environment where most everyone has the means – in particular through social media -- to publicize every mistake.

It's little wonder that there are many in the region who would like to learn from the experience of others.

In my view, we should do all we can to help.

Every situation is unique, but the road from autocracy to democracy has become, in recent decades, a well-travelled one.

There is much to be gained by bringing people in the Arab region together with the authors of change in Central Europe, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and South Africa.

And we too can offer assistance, in cooperation with other democratic governments, in such tasks as organizing and observing elections; establishing viable political parties; working with legislative bodies; training judges; fostering pluralism; and extending the protections of law to include all citizens.

Mr. Chairman, the United States has neither the desire nor the power to dictate what happens in the new Arab democracies – but we can still exert a positive influence by fulfilling requests for technical aid and by remaining steadfast in support of democratic principles.

We must have faith that, as complicated as the democratic system often is, it is still far more likely than any other to produce societies that are at peace with themselves, with their neighbors, and with us.

Let us not forget that the alternative to democratic support is embracing governments that lack the blessing of their own people.

That leads not to stability but to its counterfeit -- leaving us shackled to dictators, at odds with Arab democrats, distrusted by Arab populations, and unsure of ourselves.

Make no mistake, we have an interest in seeing these democratic movements succeed; we will all do better if Arab societies are able to create a new model for governance in their region; and if the next Arab generation is known for its commitment to intellectual inquiry, its openness to fresh ideas, and its ability to thrive in freedom.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you once again for your invitation to be here.

I look forward to our discussion.