



SPEECH BY

**THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS
GENERAL ASSEMBLY
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AT

THE LAUNCH OF 'DEMOCRACY RISING'

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be here tonight to launch ‘Democracy Rising’. I am pleased to be able to support both this important and topical book and its editor, my good friend and colleague, Ambassador Heraldo Munoz. Ambassador Munoz is widely known here in New York as a strong and consistent champion of human rights and human dignity. His views are all the more respected given his own experience of repression, and even torture, in his native country, Chile.

There are many commendable aspects to the book. But, in reading it, one is struck by the emphasis it gives to providing an analysis of democracy region by region, prepared in each case by a special commentator. In a publication such as this, it can be all too easy to write in the abstract and theoretical. This book is firmly grounded in the realities of democracy – and sets a concrete agenda for action.

I also thank the Community of Democracies, for initiating the process that led to the book’s publication, and for the work they have begun to do around the world supporting countries as they build their democracies.

In making some comments about the subject of democracy, I want to start by celebrating an achievement of the United Nations which is too little acknowledged. That achievement is the international acceptance that democracy is a universal value. Let me quote to you a few parts of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document.

In the opening section, the leaders of the world “resolve to create a more peaceful, prosperous and democratic world”.

In the section on democracy, they “reaffirm that democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives”. Importantly, they go on to reaffirm that “while democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy, that it does not belong to any country or region, and reaffirm the necessity of due respect for sovereignty and the right of self-determination.”

It is worth recalling the state of the world just a couple of decades ago. It would then have been unimaginable for the world's leaders to acknowledge that democracy is a universal value in the way they did this September.

It is also worth reflecting on what regional organizations around the world have been saying about democracy this year. To take just one example, at the Africa Union Summit this July, Africa's leaders resolved to "deepen transparency and effective participatory forms of governance and strengthen democratic institutions and processes" in their countries. They further urged "all Member States of the Union to join, as a matter of priority, the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) as soon as possible and to strengthen the APRM process for its efficient performance."

The African Peer Review Mechanism is, as many of you will know, a pioneering mechanism by which African governments open themselves to rigorous scrutiny of their governance systems by their peers. The first reports published this year were widely acclaimed as fair and, where necessary, demanding. Again, it would have been hard to imagine such a development just a few years ago.

Also in other respects, Africa is showing the way – Rwanda's Parliament has a higher proportion of female MPs than any other Parliament in the world. Democracy is becoming truly established as a value across the African continent – as it is across other continents too.

And it is not just a value. More and more, it is a practice. It is part of everyday life. This book tells us that in 2004, more than one billion people voted in national elections.

If democracy has been accepted as a universal value, what is the role of the international community in supporting it? To answer this question I would want to use a quotation from this book. It is taken from Abraham Lowenthal's study of democracy, *Learning from History*. I quote: "Because democracy inherently involves self-determination and autonomy, outside efforts to nurture it must be restrained, respectful, sensitive and patient". So while democracy cannot be forcibly exported, it must be internationally supported.

As President of the General Assembly, I am proud to state that this is what substantial parts of the United Nations system spend much of their time

doing. In his Report, *In Larger Freedom*, the Secretary-General reported that “the United Nations does more than any other single organization to promote and strengthen democratic institutions and practices around the world.” I agree with this assessment. The story of what the UN is doing to support democracy is one which deserves to be better and more widely told.

Perhaps one of the more well-known aspects of the UN’s work is helping countries conduct elections, and helping to monitor them. The UN has provided such assistance to over 90 countries, often at pivotal moments in their history. There is a long list of countries where this support has helped countries emerge from brutal civil wars – Cambodia, Namibia, El Salvador, Mozambique, Timor Leste, Burundi – to name just a few. Just recently, the UN helped Liberia with its elections, which saw the election of the first woman African Head of State in modern times. And in just a few days’ time, the UN will be helping the people of Iraq to go to the polls.

As election monitoring has become more widespread, the need for an agreed set of standards has become more acute. That is why it was gratifying to see the adoption in October of a Declaration of Principles and a Code of Conduct, bringing all observer groups under a common set of standards.

But much of the UN’s work to support democracy goes on behind the scenes. Through the work of its Funds, Programmes and Agencies, the UN is helping to strengthen the rule of law, to equip democratic institutions – including civil society and the media – so that they can hold their executive branches to account, and to strengthen the capacity of public institutions to fulfil the commitments made by governments. The UN is doing this work on governance primarily because individual countries, from Europe to the Middle East, and from Asia to Africa and the Americas, are asking the Organization to do so.

This important work will be stepped up as a result of the establishment of the Democracy Fund, launched by the Secretary-General in Sirte in July and endorsed by the World Summit in September. Once up and running, the Fund will help build and strengthen democratic institutions, and facilitate democratic governance in emerging and consolidated democracies. We should never forget that for some smaller and poorer countries the institutions of democratic governance come at a significant cost.

We should all encourage those working on the Fund to ensure that it is ready to support democracy in such countries as soon as possible. We should also call on donors to ensure that the Fund receives the resources it will need. I am encouraged to see that contributions have already come in from different regions of the world.

One problem until now is that we have been too focused on doing this work in countries where democracy was already reasonably well developed. By contrast, in countries emerging from conflict, we have been too slow to get in and help, as governments and peoples make the difficult transition from war to peace. This is where the Peacebuilding Commission, which is due to come into operation on 31 December as one of the first tangible products of the 2005 World Summit, could make a great difference. The people of countries like Burundi are waiting eagerly for its support. We must not let them down as we have let down so many other countries and peoples emerging from conflict in the past.

Thus far, I have talked about democracy on its own, in isolation. To do so gives us only a partial understanding. It is worth recalling that in September our leaders recommitted themselves “to actively protecting and promoting all human rights, the rule of law and democracy” and recognized that “they are interlinked and mutually reinforcing”.

Democracy and human rights are indeed interdependent and inseparable. Human rights standards underpin any meaningful conception of democracy, and democracy offers the best hope for the promotion and protection of all human rights. Democracy should be about more than structures and institutions; it should be about principles, norms, standards and values, many of which are enumerated in international human rights instruments.

I am sure that all of you applaud the work done in this regard by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and welcome the decision at the World Summit to double the Office’s regular budget resources over the next five year period. I am sure that, like me, you are looking forward to the establishment of the new Human Rights Council which will give added impetus to the quest to safeguard the human rights that underpin democracy.

There is also a clear link between democracy and development. For example, what is the practical value of a free press if people cannot read? For poor countries, there can be far-reaching positive consequences of

democracy, in terms of the accountability framework it creates and the incentive for effective management of resources it puts in place. It can help to increase the confidence of both donors and the international private sector. It can strengthen the sense of ownership in the country's development agenda.

But we should not be complacent. Democracy certainly does not guarantee development. For too many poor people, a recent history of democracy has not brought increased prosperity. Democracy has to go beyond the form of government. It has to mean listening to the demands of one's people, and making a determined effort to act and deliver on these demands.

Lastly, I want to step back for a moment from the national level, and look at our regional and multilateral institutions. In the context of globalization, the application of the principles of democracy to the regional and international levels has taken on added importance.

We need to pursue a continuum of democratic governance, from the village to the state, to our regional institutions and back. As part of this, we need to ensure that here at the UN there is a spirit of accountability and transparency in all our work. I know that those of us currently working on issues of management reform take these points as guiding principles.

And if there is one point you take away from what I have said tonight, I hope you will be struck by the extent to which democracy needs effective multilateralism. Without multilateralism – without the UN – who would have the wide international legitimacy to help countries organize their first elections as they emerge from conflict? Who would be seen to have the unquestioned impartiality to pronounce on the conduct of elections? And who would have the respect and the mandate to do all the other things that are needed to help countries develop and implement their models of democracy?

Democracy needs multilateralism, just as multilateralism needs democracy.