

TESTIMONY OF CYNTHIA R. BUNTON
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“DEMOCRACY IN ASIA”
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Caucus, let me begin my statement today by thanking you for the opportunity to testify and commending you for convening this caucus hearing. I would like to request that my statement be submitted to the record.

From the standpoint of the International Republican Institute’s (IRI) work in Asia this hearing is a testament to the strategic importance of Asia’s democratic development as it relates to the interests of the United States, and it is crucial for democracy’s continued expansion in the region that Congress continues to focus its attention on this issue.

Asia has undergone a significant transformation in the 15 years that IRI has been working in the region. Rapid economic development in many Asian countries has led to a dramatic rise in standards of living – but economic advances have not always coincided with similar advances in democracy or led to a stronger commitment to address longstanding social ills. There is no “road map” for the region: Each country in the region has its own distinct set of challenges and each country has embraced democracy or democratic values in its own unique ways and at significantly different levels of commitment. The political landscape in Asia runs the gamut from established democracies such as Japan and Korea to emerging democracies such as Bangladesh, Mongolia and Indonesia, to one-party authoritarian states like China, to completely closed authoritarian regimes like Burma and North Korea. IRI believes that sustained support for the countries of Asia -- from those successfully transitioning to democracy to those still struggling for the most basic rights and freedoms -- is critical to the expansion of democratic principles and economic prosperity of the region.

Let me highlight a few countries that illustrate the diversity of democratic development in Asia:

Mongolia: As Mongolia celebrates its 800th anniversary this year, the Mongolian people can be proud of their transition from communist rule to democracy. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, pressure on the Soviet-installed government to democratize or step down grew in Mongolia. When thousands joined together in a peaceful protest in March 1990, the government finally succumbed to the pressure by resigning and allowing the election of a new parliament.

In 1992, the newly elected government adopted a new constitution and held multi-party parliamentary elections for a 76-member unicameral legislature. In 1993, pro-democratic parties won the presidency and in 1996 won a majority of parliamentary seats. The 1996 election was soon overshadowed by volatility and unstable leadership. During the subsequent four-year period, four prime ministers were forced to resign amid allegations

of corruption and other scandals. However these set-backs did not dampen Mongolians' support for democracy. Mongolians returned to the polls in 2000 and 2004 to freely elect new governments. In December 2005 after the break-up of the "Grand Coalition" government, a new coalition, made up of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) and some former members of the Motherland Democracy Coalition (MDC), joined forces to install a new government – all through parliamentary procedures. While it still has its flaws, Mongolian democracy has become one of the fairest and most stable systems in all of Asia. As Mongolia moves to the next stages of its democratic transition, I am pleased to note they will do so with the support of the House Democracy Assistance Commission (HDAC), which selected Mongolia to participate in its 2007 Parliamentary Assistance Program. Finally IRI would like to commend the House International Relations Committee's resolution H.Res. 828, commending the people of Mongolia on the 800th anniversary of Mongolian statehood, and reaffirming the US Congress' commitment to continued partnership with that great nation.

Bangladesh: Bangladesh, a young democracy created in 1971 after a short but regionally destabilizing war of independence with Pakistan, has seen political assassinations, military interventions, a polarized political system, and a series of coups during the late 1970s and early 1980s. General Hussain Mohammed Ershad who assumed power after a 1982 coup, ruled the country for eight years, slowly liberalizing the political system and allowing for a transition from martial law. Ershad was forced to step down in December 1990, and since that time Bangladesh has held three successive competitive and relatively peaceful elections -- the last in 2001 -- with regular alternations of power between the two primary political parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL). Unfortunately the political situation appears to be stagnating. The opposition Awami League (AL) boycotted parliament for most of 2005, refused to contest parliamentary by-elections, rejected offers of dialogue from the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and threatened to boycott the general election expected in January 2007 unless the BNP accepted its demands for major changes in the caretaker regime and electoral systems. Added to political stalemate, pre-election violence is on the rise and "hartals" or boycotts are becoming increasingly routine. Other election benchmarks such as government approval of foreign-supported voter and civic education activities and the voter list are yet to be finalized. Hopefully, the government and the opposition will compromise to enable resolution of these issues and, ultimately, a peaceful, free, and fair election.

Indonesia: Despite heartbreaking natural disasters, Indonesia seems determined to continue its march toward democracy. Under the Suharto regime, political freedom and dissent were severely curbed and democratic principals largely were ignored. However, after 32 years of authoritarian rule in Indonesia, large-scale protests led by pro-democracy students and the effects of the Asian economic crisis led to the collapse of Suharto's regime in 1998.

Although less than a decade has passed since Suharto's fall, Indonesia has made important advances in its democratization. There have been four peaceful transitions of presidential power and two national elections that were certified as free and fair.

Moreover, the people of Indonesia have demonstrated a remarkable commitment to democratization. On April 5, 2004, 82 percent of Indonesia's nearly 150 million registered voters participated in the national legislative election which has been called the most complex single-day election in history. In July 2004, voters were able to participate in the country's first direct election of their president and vice-president, a milestone for Indonesian democracy. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was elected in a run-off that was held in September 2004, with 76 percent of registered voters participating.

Less than three months into his term, President Yudhoyono and the people of Indonesia faced the devastation of the tsunami that left nearly 170,000 Indonesians dead or missing and caused wide-scale destruction in the province of Aceh. However, the tragedy united Indonesians and provided an opportunity for the government to restart peace talks with the separatist insurgents who had fought for an independent Aceh for 30 years. A peace agreement was signed in Helsinki on August 15, 2005, demonstrating the commitment of the Indonesian government to restoring and advancing democracy in that troubled region.

However no democracy is perfect. There are issues of concern in Indonesia, particularly the situation in Papua. While the military's role in Papua's political affairs has decreased, human rights abuses conducted by the military and police in Papua remain unresolved. This has implications in other areas, for example, the on-going peace process in Aceh. The ability of the Indonesian government to hold human rights abusers accountable will thus become increasingly important.

Freedom of the press is another example. While press freedoms have generally been respected, it is troubling to see that defamation is still being treated as a criminal offense by the Indonesian courts, despite the recent introduction of a law that allows defamation to be considered a civil offense. Further, some media activists have noted a growing intolerance or lack of recognition of the role of the press, particularly in relation to topics such as the role of the military and anti-corruption efforts.

As the people of Indonesia again begin a difficult and painful reconstruction effort – this time as a result of the May 26 earthquake – we applaud the Indonesian government and the Indonesian people for their courage, tenacity, commitment to community, transparency and support for democratic principles and hope that we can continue to work together to further strengthen democracy in Indonesia.

China: The Chinese government has declined to match reform of its economy and society with concomitant political change even two and a half decades since the Communist Party began its “reform and opening up” policy. It has allowed legal reform and some experimentation to improve governance, but China remains a one-party state and Chinese citizens still have few legitimate, institutionalized avenues for political expression. Encouragingly, civil society groups, legal advocates, and the media are staking out ground to give voice to citizens' concerns and there is a growing consensus within China on the need for an end to official corruption, limits on state power and greater government transparency and accountability. Ultimately any serious attempt to address these issues must include a discussion of political reform.

Despite all of the growth and development in China over the last 25 years only modest steps have from time to time been taken to address human rights concerns. Some examples of these steps are the recent visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, the oblique indication that the Dalai Lama may be allowed to visit Buddhist holy sites in the PRC and the addition to the Constitution of an amendment acknowledging the state's obligation to "respect and preserve" Chinese citizens' human rights. However free speech is still restricted, religion is still not practiced freely, the press remains censored, the courts are not independent, human rights are not fully protected and workers cannot associate freely. Sadly, political dissidents, journalists, workers' activists and religious leaders can all be found in China's prison population.

The picture for China, however, is not altogether grim. In the 13 years since IRI began programming in China, we have witnessed profound change in the consciousness of the Chinese people. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people are emerging to push the government to accept greater popular participation in civic and political life and to abide by the rule of law. There is rapid expansion of civil society, willingness within the legal community to push sensitive issues, and routine challenges put to the regime to protect rights from individual citizens, whether in the media, on the Internet or through petitions. Therefore while it is difficult to predict how the political system might eventually evolve, it is safe to say that the demand for reform and better protection of the rights and interests of the Chinese people will continue to grow. This pressure will continue to build until the government of China finds the will to respond to demands for change with meaningful political reforms that guarantee greater transparency, accountability and protection of rights and interests. IRI's program is continually adapting to the shifting boundaries of China's political landscape. We are helping to address the growing crisis in China's countryside by supporting programs to build local democracy and are also supporting the nascent civil society sector, which is so thoroughly committed to helping improve the lives of the Chinese people by addressing inequality and violation of rights.

North Korea: North Korea remains a closed society with one of the worst human rights records in the world. The North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 demonstrated the commitment of the U.S. Congress to those suffering under crushing repression in North Korea. The overwhelming challenges of working inside North Korea are well known, but IRI believes there is work that can be done to support those fighting to loosen the draconian grip of the current regime, and we are in the process of exploring ways in which we might lend support to the brave men and women who are leading the struggle for a free and humane North Korea. The task to bring about change is daunting. By all accounts there are as many as 200,000 people believed to be held in prison camps for political reasons. Basic freedoms for the remainder of North Koreans are virtually nonexistent. We applaud the recent efforts of Senator Sam Brownback who accompanied six North Korean refugees to our shores in early May and the April 27, 2006, testimony of Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Jay Lefkowitz who told Members of Congress that the United States "can and will do more" for these courageous people.

ARDA: IRI has supported ARDA since its inception in 2000. What ARDA does is critically important. Too many people in the United States have listened to the rhetoric of

the so-called “Asian Values” debate and have concluded wrongly that Asians do not want, or cannot have, democracy. As President Bush has said,

“All people must be free to determine their own destinies, develop their own culture and choose their own path. (...) It takes people working together, believing in the same basic elements of civilized society in every country, and in every culture.”

ARDA is an organization of Asians who embrace this vision, reject the false arguments about “Asian Values,” and in the process, activists like ARDA President Dr. Chee Soon Juan, risk harassment, imprisonment, violence and sometimes even death at the hands of the region’s authoritarian rulers. In ARDA, the democratic activists who struggle for basic freedoms, human rights, and reform across Asia have formed a powerful network to provide mutual support and to alert the world that Asians aspire toward a democratic future just as their sisters and brothers in the West, in the Middle East, in Central Asia, in Africa, and Latin America do. The Asia Democracy Index is an articulation of Asia voices that the distinguished members of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, and all friends of freedom, must hear.

Thank you very much.