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Before the

HELSINKI COMMISSION

October 22, 2009

**BRIEFING ON
“TWITTER AGAINST TYRANTS:
THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES”**

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Commission:

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the role of new media in authoritarian states.

For the last fifteen years the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has employed technologies as components of many of our democracy strengthening programs. A wide range of technologies and associated strategies have been used to support activists, political parties, legislatures, women in politics and civic groups around the world as our partners struggle to strengthen the democratic institutions in their countries, increase the space for broad participation in political life and safeguard their elections.

In this period we've been able to see the transformational potential of new technologies applied to democratic development. The new media and mobile technologies that have evolved over the last several years, while in many ways still exploratory in their application to politics, have been put to particularly good use in support of political campaigns and other forms of democratic expression. While introduction of new media and other technologies should not be seen as a panacea for democratic development or a goal in and of itself, these technologies paired with effective methodologies can help organizations make significant contributions toward advancing the democratic process in authoritarian states. Democratic development is a long term commitment and process, and effective use of technologies by activists, political parties, candidates, civic groups and others can support and even accelerate the process when the tools are used well.

Activists and civic groups have demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt new technologies and when combined with traditional organizing principles can create moments of opportunity for democratic gains and enhanced channels for political engagement in authoritarian countries. The key is not only to employ effective technologies, but to pair the technologies with strategies and approaches that are developed for the political environment where the technologies are being used. This approach can help activists get out ahead of authoritarian regimes and make relative

and even potential “game-changing” democratic gains when periods are identified where such innovations can rapidly be put to use. While regimes may quickly catch up, or clamp down, by employing technologies and other techniques to bolster their regimes, gains made during the gap created between early adoption and governmental response can have long term positive consequences for democratic activists.

The strengths of the early uses of new media for activism have been in communication and sharing information about political developments. However, thus far the tools have been less effective for the organizing required that can lead to constructive political outcomes. In some situations information has been produced by citizens using innovative new media tools that initiates a process of political change, but the process stalled due to a lack of the organizations or institutions required to capture the interests and information being shared, organize the people and channel the process toward purposeful, strategic and peaceful direct action. Assisting organizations in these countries to build this capacity is an important component in leveraging new media tools toward political reform.

For example, those that followed the Iran election on Twitter may have felt frustration as a fantastic amount of information was being captured and posted on the Internet during the election protests, but the organizations and political parties in the country were not in a position to channel the information being gathered and the energy of the crowds into a process that may have led to a reform-based outcome.

One set of institutions that are particularly well suited to this role but are often overlooked in international circles are political parties. Relatively little attention is paid to the important role parties play in aggregating citizen interests and channeling them into constructive and peaceful means toward democratic reform. One area of opportunity with tremendous potential in countries where NDI works is to provide more technology assistance to political parties, especially in autocratic states where the regime often has access to considerable state resources and controls the major organs of state communication.

NDI’s work with domestic election monitoring groups provides an illustrative example of combining new technologies, effective methodologies and strong organizations toward impactful political purposes.

A common approach to domestic election monitoring involves deploying citizen election observers with their mobile phones to a representative sample of polling stations around a country on Election Day trained to identify election irregularities or record observations and results. The observers transfer information from paper reporting forms to a centralized national database using SMS or voice messages. The information is aggregated and analyzed by organization leaders to evaluate the overall quality of the process or accuracy of the election result and shared with the public.

This approach is a way to collect substantial evidence to detect and deter fraud, while building public trust in the process and adding legitimacy to the election if things go well. These uses of new media tools and related election activities have been very effective. Due to the rapid and accurate reporting provided by the tools and data-driven analysis this methodology has professionalized the way civic groups use quantitative election information in “real time” around elections, and has been central to the ability of NDI partners to give the public a non-partisan view on the quality of the election process in their country. In many cases we believe our partners have made contributions that have prevented post-election related violence or identified and raised important concerns with the electoral process that have led to more democratic and peaceful outcomes.

The field of domestic election monitoring has improved significantly in the last several years partly due to improved methods and approaches, enabled by the new technologies and replicated due to the role of international organizations.

Citizen reporting is another method by which citizens have been able to communicate various aspects of their Election Day experiences using new media tools, usually text messages or “tweets”. The information reported by citizens is typically collected and made accessible to the public on a website or online map in raw form. The value of this approach is to increase citizen participation in the election process, but to date the challenge has been putting the information to good use. Tools are being developed to evaluate the authenticity and filter incoming information so that organizations could then be prepared to put this powerful “crowdsourcing” methodology to work. In the mean time as the tools and methods improve, citizen reporting can be a useful tool in some situations but isn’t a substitute for election monitoring in situations where assessing the overall legitimacy of an election is required.

The last component of success for activists struggling for democratic reform involves the political environment in which they live and conduct their work. The challenges faced by activists in autocratic nations are immense, and international actors have a role to play in trying to provide a more enabling environment.

Authoritarian regimes typically put in place legal mechanisms such as laws that not only limit the activities of international and domestic NGOs and parties; but also subversion and libel laws against citizens who try to express their views and opinions publicly or online; laws against “intermediaries” of communication such as Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and telecommunications providers; legalized surveillance of citizens including their online activity; and a wide range of technologies to enforce these legal tools including the Internet filtering and surveillance technologies being discussed today.

Needless to say, this makes it very difficult for activists and political parties to work in these countries and the international community has a role to play in seeking more enabling environments for our partners by advocating policies and implementing programs that foster

greater access to technologies for citizens, that seek more openness of these regimes, that advocate for increased freedom of expression and that protect the rights of privacy of its citizens in these countries.

To conclude and summarize, windows of opportunity for political reform can be created by the use of new media in authoritarian states with a combination of good technology tools and effective strategies and methodologies, put into use by organizations or institutions that can channel the energy of the public and the information generated toward constructive and peaceful political activities. The political environment provides the playing field under which all of this occurs, and we all have a role to play in trying to create an enabling environment in which activists and groups seeking democracy reform can work to build democratic societies without fear using new media tools.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission.