

Wanted: Genuine democracies

BYLINE: Thomas O. Melia and Theodore J. Piccone, National Post

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A little-known but potentially valuable place for the world's democracies to advance shared interests and common values is facing a critical test this summer.

The Community of Democracies is a club of more than 100 governments launched in Warsaw in June, 2000. With such diverse countries as Mali, Chile, India, South Africa and the United States leading the group, the initiative cuts across ethnic, religious, regional and cultural lines, imbuing it with broad legitimacy to promote democratic practices.

Though still nascent, the Community of Democracies has begun to take action. It was instrumental in creating a new UN Democracy Fund, which has attracted donations of more than US\$65-million to support civil society groups in over 100 countries. It organized teams of experts from around the world to share expertise in democratic governance to transitional states such as East Timor and Georgia. And it is developing a handbook for diplomats on how they can support civil society's efforts for democratic reforms.

The group also has launched a Democracy Caucus at the UN. Far from being a threat to the world body, as some contend, such a caucus can serve to strengthen it by, in the words of former secretary-general Kofi Annan, upholding the UN Charter's "noble ideals of protecting human rights and promoting social progress in larger freedoms."

Inclusion in the club is not permanent; after all, adherence to democratic norms waxes and wanes. Now the 16-member convening group, including the United States, must decide which states to invite to its November gathering of foreign ministers in Mali. This will determine membership for the next two years (although a coup against an elected government can result in eviction at any time).

Knowing who belongs at most international gatherings is easy because they are built around a common language (la Francophonie), geography (the African Union) or even oil resources (OPEC). When the club is organized around a state's credentials as a democracy --a title to which even the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (a.k.a.

North Korea) lays claim -- it gets more difficult. It helps to have clear standards and a transparent process for selecting who is in and who is out.

Fortunately, the Community of Democracies has adopted an unimpeachable set of official criteria based on such widely accepted instruments as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the main international human rights treaties and subsequent declarations adopted by nearly all members of the United Nations. Members who uphold these standards between biennial meetings are invited back. Governments that don't meet the test are not invited. Those making progress, but not yet crossing the threshold, may be invited as observers.

This year, the convening group has welcomed the input of an independent group of leading figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy and academia. Based on the Community of Democracies' own criteria for participation, this blue-ribbon panel has recommended that increasingly autocratic states such as Russia, Thailand and Egypt not be invited. Regarding Iraq, the group concluded that the new government has not met the test for participation; despite the importance of last year's elections, rudimentary functions of democratic governance are not in place.

The international panel also has sounded the alarm regarding the marked deterioration in democracy and human rights in Venezuela and Bangladesh, urging that invitations be withheld until recent attacks on free media and rule of law are withdrawn.

Yet it is not clear that the leading democracies of the world will accept these recommendations. Some governments want to invite Russia. Mali wants to invite its neighbours, including some fairly obvious non-democracies. South Africa wants to invite all the countries of the world.

Even inside the Bush administration, strong lobbies are working to have various autocratic governments invited. Failing states like Iraq would also make their list. If they succeed, the President's "Freedom Agenda," already in crisis for a variety of reasons, will lose yet more credibility.

If Russia, Egypt and other authoritarian governments are invited to the gathering in Bamako this year, the world will know that the Community of Democracies remains a good idea whose time has not yet come.

This brings to mind the famous line from Groucho Marx: "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member." Groucho knew there should be standards. The United States government, and the others in the Community of Democracies, should be able to tell a democracy from a dictatorship.

Thomas O. Melia is deputy executive director of Freedom House. Theodore J. Piccone is executive director of the Democracy Coalition Project. They are advisors to the International Advisory Committee of the Community of Democracies.