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FPA Town Hall
New York Democracy Forum Dinner: Tsakhia Elbegdorj
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Featuring:

Tsakhia Elbegdorj, President of Mongolia

MR. TSAKHIA ELBEGDORJ: I think everything is great. Our national anthem was well performed today. I hope you see my face now. Yesterday there was President Obama's palm actually, closed in my face, in the group portrait at the UN. But today in Mongolia media, there is a new theory of conspiracy that President Obama and President Elbegdorj is making the PR for him, you know? For the Elbegdorj. That's really good PR for me. Sorry for President Obama, you know? He actually didn't intend to do that, you know? After the photo, he said hey guys, like this, and that goes to my face.

Yeah, Madame President Otunbayeva and my friends Carl Gershman and others, and let me thank, first of all, the Foreign Policy Association and the National Endowment for Democracy for inviting me and honoring me today. Thank you very much, thank you. I'm son of herdsman and you know, I've born and grown up, and it's a really, really great tribute to my people actually, who bravely choose freedom, standing in front of you speaking here. And also I want to start by offering my sympathy and solidarity with the American people on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy.

As we stand here in the shadow of the Freedom Tower, I can say this: America has emerged stronger and more determined, and I think the world is more determined to fight for democracy and individual liberties. Ladies and gentlemen, in this room I see many champions of democracy. I see representatives from the groups and organizations that have played leadership roles in promoting democracy, human

rights, and rule of law. Some studies show that the history of democracy accounts for roughly 2,500 years in the history of mankind. This year Mongolia celebrated 2,220 years of statehood, which marks a historic event when nomadic Mongol tribes choose their first ruler at a great assembly.

So I guess you can say we Mongols were there very close to the start of the burst of democracy as a system of government. That man who created a great Mongol estate - - one thing that we all have to be mindful. It is easy to conquer the world on the horseback. What's challenging is to dismount and try to run. Today Mongolia is recognized as one of the most politically and economically liberalized states in our region. My country has been referred to as the democratic anchor in the east, and I believe this is very true.

When we look around the world, I think we can say that democracy, all democratic - - is now the dominant political system in the world. In the early 1970s, professor - - and defined the - - global - - since then the number of democracies has tripled. Today a majority of the countries that are - - at this great assembly can be conceived democratic. I believe that - - we have witnessed this year have set forth a fourth way of democracy that is washing across the shores of many countries, especially those in the Middle East. This should give us a collective sense of optimism, but it must be careful optimism. If you examine the trends of democratic development as it has unfolded in many states, there are grounds for concerns.

In many instances it can be like a pendulum that can swing back as far as it has swung forward. Professor Larry Diamond, who directs the democracy development and the rule of law center at Stanford University, has studied democratic development and his findings should give us pause. He estimates that since the middle of 1970s there have been 53 breakdowns or reversals of democratic governments. Roughly half of them have occurred since 1999. Professor Diamond has stated his deep concern that these breakdowns in democratic governments are accelerating. As part of this - - institutions also under siege by anti-democratic forces.

Just as these countries and institutions are being stressed and facing possible reversals, there has been a decrease in financial support for democracy, building programs that will have wide ranging implications. For example, the lack of funds directed towards - - society organizations will have a direct impact on activities such as trainings, workshops, exchange programs, election monitoring, and support for - - programs that are critical to the entire institution - - of democratic governments. My friends, this is very sad.

There - - the fall of Berlin Wall, and the ending of the Cold War did not just happen by accident. The free world - - industrial democracies of North America and Western Europe were united in purpose in dedication to fight communism - - perseverance and sacrifice and focused work that involved many thousands of people who participated in workshops, trainings, and outreach to those living

under oppression. This helped collapse the Berlin Wall and peacefully end the Cold War without a shot being fired.

You know, now I'm reading my paper which I prepared for this meeting, and to share with you, and I think when I talk these things, I also said my concerns about democracy at the opening of the general assembly of the UN, and I would like to read also part of my speech here, as I feel here, as general assembly of democratically minded people here, you know I said: the - - change will be - - by the - - challenge. All the democratic purchases - - it should be supported by international corporation. Here I have a message to industrialize democratic countries. Do not withdraw from the battle. On the other hand, democratization does not mean westernization. Democracy - - naturally in line with historical and cultural development, especially - - given country. - - a respect for freedom, justice, and human rights, and - - by the rule of law are common to all successful and responsive democracies. Bad governance is the worst problem of all. Before any expression to improve the--and streamline such a governance ought to be strongly supported at all times. Libya has entered a new era as a result of the relentless courage and patience of the Libyan rebels who have persevered for many months in their struggle for freedom, human rights, and democracy. - - called his fellow countrymen rats, and brutally hunt them down and exterminate. Now he himself is being hunted as a rat from home to home, from trench to trench. And this is the fate which awaits anyone who suppresses the people, people's love for freedom, and desire to live in dignity.

I think that was a good line, that the rat line, that our diplomats wanted to escape from my speech. You know, eliminate. But I stood, I had to read it at the general assembly. I read it. Yeah. Also I condemned the international communities should not shy away from condemning - - who has inhumanely and brutally chosen bloodshed to crack down on freedom and justice. - - peaceful protestors by using combat - - is - - military force. Let us unanimously demand that he ends his atrocities. We must make the necessary decision to that effect without delay, and help - - those people of Syria who are craving freedom and justice, and are losing dozens of their brave sons and daughters every day.

The love for freedom is the greatest force in the world. No tyranny, no cruel - - can resist it forever. I would like to say these words to the authorities of Yemen and dictators seeking to suppress their citizens, fight for freedom. That was part of my speech at the UN. You know, my friends, I think justice is non-negotiable, it's absolute. - - human societies works as loss of - - and we all know all that apple falls everywhere the same. I think still it's a long way to go for either of the liberal democracy - - country, but desire to live in dignity with freedom and political choice has become an almost universal. In many places, people feel generally great - - if not disgust with the authoritarian rule.

We all know that on December 17, 2010 in Indonesia, young men called the Mohamed Bouazizi, but his cart was confiscated by police, and he went in front of the provisional headquarters and doused himself in fuel and lit himself on fire. I

think he does not have anything, no honest judiciary to hear his case, no independent media in Indonesia during that time, I think, to give him voice, no credible party to represent his views, no fair and just election to change their leader. But I usually think that - - making those media, those judiciary, today, work for that Qaddafi or - - tomorrow it cannot, yeah, it's really difficult to turn now. It should for, like, the man whose name is Mohamed Bouazizi.

I think it will take time. I think there will be difficult times in Middle East in emerging democracies, and we have to help them. I think when we were - - in - - in a cold winter, I think we felt that your support, Americans' support, and other friends' support, and because of that, we succeeded. And because of that, my simple message is do not withdraw from the battle. Every country has a problem you know, every country has a problem, and we have to support that those brave and women who are fighting for their freedom, and I think that kind of those tyrannies, those people have two strategies. One strategy is oppression, one strategy is diversion. But those strategies are not going to work at all, because world have changes, because there's new technology, because there is new generation.

You know, in 20 years there were, when we tried to change my country, there weren't any cell phone, any Facebook, any Twitter, anything. Now they have that, you know. Those dictators now ought to understand that. And imagine that Mongolia was 20 some years ago, like a North Korea like society. Mongolia is the second communist country. It remained under communism, you know, for 70 years. Today we are sharing a community of democracy. Today Mongolia is the champion for the global fight for democracy. And in 1990, without shattering a single window, we actually made the transition between Soviet Union and between China. During that time Soviet Union was intact and - - massacre happened, you know, but we made that great transition.

We made that great transition without bloodshed, and we made--although it can change and economic change at the same time. Many people say that that's not Asian way, you know, but we broke all the stereotypes. It can be enjoyed in Asia, it can be enjoyed even my poor herdsman in Mongolia. You know, when the journalists ask me why you are talking about human rights, why you are talking about rule of law, these are Western values. My answer is no, they are not western values, that's my value, that's my freedom, that's my democracy, you know? My parents worked for the - - they were confiscated all their cattles in order to slaughter one sheep, they had to get permission. In order to go from one province to another province, they had to get permission - -. Now I think they, in Mongolia, all those things are actually eliminated. Now all herdsmen have their herd, their cattles. And now, in order to slaughter any sheep, they don't need any permission, you know? That's their freedom - - their sheeps.

My mother, every night, prayed for Dalai Lama or - -, that's her freedom. That's not western freedom, that's her democracy actually. That's her freedom, you know, believing. And I think that kind of cry and that kind of things usually make

people to listen. I really think that people's outcry have a voice and - - they became personal. When they became the personal stakeholder, when they became having the personal voice, I think they became the stakeholders in their future. And we see many, many challenges in the world, you know. They go for their freedom, and they usually succeed, and they usually, you know, they even tolerate the high price, they even tolerate everything. But they cannot tolerate one thing: worse government corruption. Most of the democracies failed because of the corruption, because of that, while we are sharing the community of democracies, we launched initiative Zero Tolerance on Corruption. Zero tolerance on corruption, I think that's--I hope many states will support our initiative, and I really feel that people hearing that louder than those voices of freedom than the fires against them, you know, gunshots against them, and we have to support that, those peoples' voices louder than the gunshots from the militias, those tyrannies.

And the world, I think, listening to that, and Mongolia, we do not have anything to teach to the people, but we have something to share with others, and we really would like to share our lessons, and there are many lessons. I wrote many things, but it's too late, you know, you have to go to home and to enjoy, you know, this meeting here and I would like to say, you know, Mongolians want them exerted some nations to build biggest walls, longest walls. But today we would like to help those nations oppressed by tyranny to tear down those curtains.

And many people, just I entered to this room, many people ask, I would like to go to Mongolia. You know, please come to Mongolia. There is only country, you know, more horses than people. We have six million horses and three million people. Many ask if I would like to ride horses. Please come to ride horses, you know? That's a great place to do business I think. If you would like to see a real challenge coming from communism to freedom, that's the place to go to see. If you would like to see endless estate, if you would like to see good-hearted people, that's the place to go, that's the place called Mongolia. And I really want you to come to Mongolia and walk together, and to make our world a better place to live in. And you know, I really believe that god has planted in every heart the desire to live free. And even though that desire crushed sometimes, it will rise again. It will rise again, and I believe that one day all men and women will live free, and let the freedom come to every house, let the freedom come to everyone. Thank you very much, thank you.

MR. CARL GERSHMAN: I know it's late but we've received a number of written questions. It's late, we're going to do this, you know, maybe about half the questions I'll read and the president will--I've heard him do this before, he has a very succinct way of answering questions. So please take your seats and we'll be about five more minutes while he's going to respond to a few questions. First I want to note that while the president was speaking, we were joined by one of the people that Bob Miller introduced earlier, Erwin Cuttler [phonetic], who is a Canadian parliamentarian, the former justice minister, and really the leading voice in Canada for human rights, and really one of the leading voices in the world. Erwin Cuttler is sitting right there.

Okay here we go. How do you deal with the two powerful neighbors who are not democratic?

MR. ELBEGDORJ: You know, we really respect our two neighbors of course, our foremost importance to have great relations with our neighbors, and we used to live next to each other for centuries, and we know how to deal with our two neighbors. Sometimes I feel that like a freedom - - is more important between two big elephants. When you have that value, when you have that value connection, we feel that we are connected with the world. We feel that, you know, world is our friend, and because of that, you know, all other nations we call our third neighbor. But that third neighbor expression was first said by James Baker when he visited June in 1990 in Mongolia, and he said you know, you have two neighbors, and we would like to be your third neighbor. Actually we lacked that expression now that's in our official policy. And we really welcome all our people from the third neighbor, and we really welcome those investments. I see today, many investors here interested to invest in Mongolia. I think Mongolia can be great hub, financial hub, great hub for the mining and you know, we share with the China more than 4,000 kilometers border, and we are next to the biggest, fastest growing economy in the world, and also Russia is a big country and Mongolia can be, you know, very good hub not only for freedom, for the free market, for the exercising, for taking those opportunities that make good business.

MR. GERSHMAN: Now in following up on that there's a question that says as an emerging economy, how will Mongolia manage mining and other resource extraction in a way that balances development needs with environmental concerns?

MR. ELBEGDORJ: You know, we are aware about that. There are many nations who endowed with the natural resources, usually end up very badly. There are a few nations succeeded. When I see what kind of nations are succeeding, those nations are free, and those nations are open. Those nations are governed by not elite few, those nations are governed by the will of their people. I think Mongolia is a democratic country, Mongolia is an open country. Because of that, we listen to our people, and we are governed by their instructions. And people are closely, very closely watching. There is no single media entity which is controlled by our government. Every media in Mongolia free and proud. I think also we have a very healthy - - society, and they are following, they are seeing every mistake, everything we make. I think we do not feel that we are making mistake, but when they criticize, when they demand those things, we see that, and we are learning by doing. They are like that, you know, modern law and follow every - - things and look, you did this wrong, you did this wrong. You have those things alive there and keep it. I think those are will be guarantee of course, our great neighbors, and if you make their good business and protesting, if your export, there is very close, very close, big markets to the Mongolia. Those two things I think very attractive to make business in Mongolia, yeah.

MR. GERSHMAN: A few more questions. The first one is how should the world respond to the speech earlier today at the United Nations of Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?

MR. ELBEGDORJ: Yeah I actually spoke before him because of that. If I speak, I spoke after him, I speak the same. I would make the same speech, yeah. You know, those people are who are suppressing those freedom and their nations, you know, desire to live in freedom, I think they are not going to succeed. You know, I really-- why I like the freedom, why we feel that a strong link with the United States of America, usually say that some nations, you know, offer the world fine wine or fine cars. Why America is attractive? America is offer the freedom. Americans stand on the freedom very firmly. Because of that, that's the most strongest force, most strongest force to attract the world. I think we would like to be with you. You know, earlier, 20 years ago, we got your help and your support. Now our turn to support others. Even the small Mongolia has that commitment. When I met with President Obama I told him you know, we have a shared interest. Why I am saying that? Sharing means that we dream together for that interest, you know, rule of law, human rights, justice. And we share the strategic interest, we are fighting for that together. We fought it in Iraq, you know, more than thousands of men and women in uniform, they served shoulder to shoulder with others in Iraq; now in Afghanistan. Now we are dabbling our commitment in Afghanistan. I think you see that when you've got one small nation, free nation, it became, you know, friend of the free world. When people get their freedom, usually people tend to make their actions more thoughtful. When they make their actions more thoughtful, they became more creative. Because of that, from freedom, there is prosperity, from freedom there is peace. I really believe in that.

MR. GERSHMAN: It's beautiful, it's beautiful, thank you. One last question. We have a group here from southern Mongolia, which is in China, and they've raised the question of what the policy is of the Mongolian government toward Mongolian asylum seekers from China, who come to Mongolia. And they mentioned the case of Mr. Batanga [phonetic] who was arrested and sent back to China.

MR. ELBEGDORJ: Tough question. You know, in the world, there is 10 million Mongolians and roughly 3 million live in Mongolia, and 5 million live in China, in inner Mongolia. Twice as much Mongolians actually live in China, and of course we would like to maintain great relations with China, but we never try to speak in Mongolia about human rights violation. You know, we never shy those people who strive to be free. We talk it, our press talk it, our people talk it, my government talk it. But of course, maintaining neighborly and a respectful - - relations with China is very important. I think about China, all the world are speaking; not only Mongolia, you guys - - from China, even you are speaking here about China. And we are also talking about China, but we are trying to keep very good relations. But, but, but we are never trade with our values of course, yeah. We stand on our values.

MR. GERSHMAN: And I know that Mongolia is inspiration to the Mongolians in China, as well as to people around the world. This is a very special evening and thank you for taking those questions, and for answering them so clearly and so frankly. Mongolia really is something special, and your leadership is something which is valued very deeply; not only in Mongolia, but here, and thank you so much for being with us tonight.

MR. ELBEGDORJ: Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you, thank you.

MR. GERSHMAN: That concludes the evening, thank you very much.