



MEDIA RELEASE

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POLITICAL LEADERS FROM MUSLIM COUNTRIES MEET TO ADVANCE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

Historic Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World Convene in Istanbul

In the first gathering of its kind involving political leaders from predominantly Muslim countries, current and former heads of state, government ministers and parliamentarians headlined the first Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World.

Meeting in Istanbul on April 12-15, delegates to the Congress – from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East – are highlighting the compatibility of democracy and Islam by discussing their direct experience with democratic governance and their countries' common commitment to multiparty elections, independent legislatures, women's political participation and an active civil society. They are also addressing challenges to democracy and developing a platform calling attention to the fundamentals of democratic governance that are in place in many countries throughout the Islamic world.

The Congress of Democrats was developed by a group of political leaders from predominantly Muslim countries and is supported by organizations and governments from all parts of the world, including the UNDP, the Turkish Democracy Foundation and the Governments of Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Great Britain, the Netherlands, the United States and Yemen.

"Our vision for the future is based on the principles of democracy, freedom and human rights," said Turkey's Foreign Minister, Abdullah Gul. "At the Congress we set out to reaffirm our commitment that a Muslim identity can be democratic, can be transparent and can be compatible with the modern world."

"The Congress is the vital next step required to lead democratic reform from within, shaped by the people from the Islamic world for the people of the Islamic world," said Jordan's Foreign Minister, Marwan Muasher. "By discussing and learning from the experiences of previous democratic reforms, the Congress of Democrats will provide an opportunity to initiate further democratic reforms in the Islamic world."

Research shows support for democratic governance among the citizens of the Islamic world. An analysis of World Values Survey from 1995-2001 shows that 87 percent of respondents from predominantly Muslim countries favored democracy as a form of government. A 2003 Pew Global Attitudes study found that majorities in the nine predominately Muslim nations surveyed believe that democracy can work and supported democratic values such as freedom of the press.

While leaders attending the Congress pointed to the progress that has been made in their respective countries, they also recognize that taking the next steps will not be easy.

"Many challenges lie ahead as we further equal rights and democratic governance across the Islamic world," said Yemen's first Human Rights Minister, Amat Al-Aleem Alsoswa. "The Congress of Democrats is uniquely comprised of political practitioners in a position to implement the recommendations of the Congress and continue to advance democracy in their countries."

Today, the Congress featured keynote addresses by Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, President of Sierra Leone, Turkey's Minister of Justice Cemil Cicek and Jordan's Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher.

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There was also a plenary discussion on *Islamic Culture and the Democratic Tradition*, with Princess Basma Bint Talal, Chair of the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development; Mohand Laenser, Moroccan Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development; and Mahamane Ousmane, President of the Niger National Assembly and former President of the Republic. During this session, participants declared an end to the debate over the compatibility of Islam and democracy and described the practical implementation of democratic values in modern Islamic societies.

A platform for democratic governance developed by the Congress will be outlined at a closing press conference on April 14.

Delegates participated in working sessions to highlight progress already being made and discuss next steps, including such topics as:

- Learning from recent advances in democratic governance
- Implementing democratic legal systems
- Strengthening relationships between civil society and political organizations
- Empowering women and young people to shape the future of their countries
- Engaging the international community in supporting citizen-driven reforms
- Advancing economic prosperity with democratic reform
- Adding Muslim voices to the international discourse on democratic governance
- Overcoming cultural hurdles in implementing democratic governance

Delegates to the Congress are highlighting progress across the Islamic world as they seek to create a platform for the future. For example, Yemen held multi-party Parliamentary elections last year, and its legislature now has representation from five competing political parties and several independent candidates. In Morocco, democratic openings have led to electoral and social reforms – 35 women were elected to Parliament, school enrollment increased and access to children’s health care has been improved. The Indonesian government has instituted a new commission to improve voter participation in elections this year. In Bahrain a Supreme Council for Women will draft a plan for women’s participation and rights in that country. In Turkey, a party whose leadership is committed to the tenets of democracy is implementing far reaching initiatives to promote greater openness and accountability in the political process. And in Jordan, an unprecedented number of women were elected to parliament in recent elections.