

Forward: A growing emphasis on legislatures

The beginning of the 21st Century may be one of the most interesting moments in history for parliament watchers and for those who spend their careers in parliaments. There are more nations and more parliaments than at any other time in history, and more of them can be considered “free” (see Table 1, below).

Year Under Review	1994	1999	2004
Free	76	85	88
Partly Free	61	60	55
Not Free	54	47	49
Total	191	192	192

Political scientist Samuel Huntington has called this worldwide phenomenon the “Third Wave of Democracy”, and he dates the beginning of this “wave” from the military coup in Portugal which ended the dictatorship of Marcelo Caetano in 1974 (Huntington 1991). Changes since that time include the fall of the Berlin Wall, ultimately leading to the breakup of the Soviet Union, the creation of several new Central Asian nations, and the independence of former Soviet bloc nations, such as Poland and Hungary; the end of the Cold War, leading to the termination of US and Soviet support for wars in several nations; civilian governments replacing military governments in several Asian nations, including the Philippines, Korea and Taiwan;

¹ From Freedom House’s *Map of Freedom 2005*. Each year, Freedom House rates political and human rights developments in 192 nations, and divides nations into 3 categories. “In Free countries, citizens enjoy a high degree of political and civil freedom. Partly Free countries are characterized by some restrictions on political rights and civil liberties, often in a context of corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic strife, or civil war, In Not Free countries, the political process is tightly controlled and basic freedoms are denied. In 2004, there were 2.82 billion people living in Free societies, representing 44% of the world’s population. There were 1.19 billion people living in Partly Free societies, representing 19% of the world’s population. There were 2.39 billion people living in Not Free societies, representing 37% of the world’s population.”

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2005/map2005.pdf>. Viewed over the Internet October 18, 2005

the de-legitimization of military governments in Latin America; the demise of one party states in Africa; and the end of apartheid in South Africa and Namibia.

Several other factors have also encouraged the development of more effective parliaments. For one, citizens and groups in society are demanding more from their governments, and many are organizing and articulating their demands before parliaments. The growing concern with government corruption and the damage it inflicts on societies has increased pressures on parliaments to conduct more effective executive oversight. And third, through greater contact and information flows among parliamentarians and parliamentary staff worldwide, parliaments are learning from one another's examples.

A final factor leading to freedom in government is the changed focus of international aid programs. International assistance in the 1960s and 1970s tended to focus on agriculture and direct human needs. Governance assistance tended to concentrate on public administration – on upgrading government programs, staff development, drafting and administration of national development programs, etc. Public administration assistance, however, was followed by assistance in democracy-building– which included aid to legislatures, to civil society organizations, and to justice systems. Bilateral and multilateral agencies such as the World Bank , United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), US Agency for International Development (USAID), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), UK Department for International Development (DFID), and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) have all provided technical support of one type or another to parliaments in less developed countries. Some of this parliamentary support has been directed towards helping legislatures to carry out their representative function, and some of it has had a focus on anti-corruption, helping legislatures to more effectively carry out their oversight responsibilities.

The early 21st Century holds the promise of stronger, more effective legislatures and parliaments worldwide. Our hope is that this parliamentary staff orientation course gives you a clear understanding of the roles of parliaments, how they function, and how many of them are changing; provides you with new perspectives on your own parliament; and offers useful ideas which may help you as you further develop your own institutions.