

One year ago today, the polls were closing in Namibia. Democracy had just been tried there for the first time. And it worked. The Constituent Assembly chosen in that election went on to draft one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. And independence came to the last colony in Africa. That experiment in democracy was a victory for Namibia, a success for the United Nations, and a signal to Southern Africa that democracy could be secured peacefully, through partnership.

That same day Berliners from East and West were celebrating in their streets and climbing over the barrier which had once divided them. What was once a wall had become a gate. People had proven stronger than barbed wire, more powerful than dictators and secret police.

And next week, the leaders of 34 countries will gather in Paris at a CSCE Summit which is the consequence of that wall coming down. That Summit will signal a Europe whole, prosperous and free, where democracy and human rights are no longer concepts which divide, but a reality which unites.

Those events frame a year of extraordinary accomplishment. Never have there been such grounds for optimism that the observance of human rights around the world will become more the rule and less the exception. And never have so many societies embraced democracy -- in Europe, in Latin America, in Asia and Africa -- some for the first time and some once again.

But this is not a time to be complacent. The process is just beginning. In some countries, walls have been torn down -- real walls and walls of the mind. But new structures remain to be built. It is easier to tear down than to build up. And there is the danger that if new systems fail to improve lives quickly, democracy will be blamed and human rights could be threatened again.

And in so many other parts of the world, walls remain. Walls of power and poverty. Walls which deprive people of their most basic rights, walls which divide societies between those who rule and those who suffer. Walls which consign whole sectors of society to an existence barely worth the name. The fact that some battles have been won tells us that there are many battles yet to fight, many victories yet to declare.

What has happened in Eastern Europe -- and in Latin America and in Asia -- is the realization that human rights and democracy are not luxuries, nor are they the result of being developed or wealthy. They are conditions which make wealth develop.