

What Is the Future of Democracy Promotion?

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Introduction

There are hints of pessimism in the democracy business. Despite its ostensible centrality to US foreign policy since 2001, democracy promotion has not created very many free countries since then. According to Freedom House, the global share of electoral democracies stopped growing in 2005. Practitioners report increasing hostility to their work, and some missions have had to shut down. Finally, under President Obama, many see 'stability promotion' winning a quiet war with democracy assistance.

What explains the apparent impotence of this industry? One common answer is that the bravado and hypocrisy of George W. Bush ruined its credibility with the developing world. By equating democratization with war in Iraq, Bush made a benign project militant. The secret prisons and torture of a Global War on Terror, moreover, made our motives suspect.¹

I suspect democracy promotion's observed infirmity results more from its misapplication. In the very period that US influence on other states was declining, we increasingly worked in more difficult cases. The problem with this becomes stark if we consider the world for which democracy promotion was designed. We still need democracy promotion, but we need to accept its limits.

The Nature and Origins of Democracy Promotion

All governance reform programs ultimately require willful rotation of government through free elections. While this is obviously true of democracy promotion, the same applies to contemporary foreign aid. Both types of programs assume that governments will tolerate the opposition those programs engender. This is because those programs were conceived during the United States' unipolar moment.

Policy Instruments

The instruments of development aid are all designed to foster limited government and electoral accountability. These include party-building programs traditionally associated with groups like the National Democratic and International Republican Institutes. The dual purpose of a political party is to be loyal opposition and government-in-waiting. In a legislature, a strong party is a check on the power of an incumbent government. During an election, it offers voters an alternative if they choose to "throw the bums out."

Civil society programs have similar ends. Some are designed to build explicitly political organizations. These NGOs are meant to identify misconduct in the behavior of governments and parties. Apolitical groups also have ultimately political roles as barometers for the effects of public policies.

Programs designed to strengthen legislatures are also inherently oppositional. In presidential systems, the point is to animate systems of checks-and-balances. In parliamentary ones, effective support staffs and procedures help loyal oppositions do their work.

As technical and apolitical as they would like to be, governance reform practitioners are essentially in the same business as democracy promoters. Bad governance has political roots. Poor economic management,

1 Thomas Carothers. 2008. "Does Democracy Promotion Have a Future?" in *Democracy and Development*. Kit Publishers.

patronage in the civil service, and corrupt public goods provision all can shore up the political machines of elected officials. This is why we make reform a prerequisite for foreign aid disbursements. For governance programs to work, elected officials often have to behave in ways that hurt their re-election prospects.

Ambitions and Origins

These policy instruments grew out of - and therefore very much reflect - America's unipolar moment. From about 1989 until recently, the United States could influence the behavior of governments toward other states, the populations they governed, and sometimes even themselves. Aid conditionality and democracy assistance were products of this period.

Before the fall of the Soviet Union, foreign aid was essentially a tool of containment. As the superpowers competed for client states, transfers of wealth shared the same toolbox as raw coercion, covert operations, and military assistance. The United States did not really care about democracy or even healthy economies. The goal was having a stronger network of allies than the Soviet Union.

With the end of superpower rivalry, the United States realized it could invest less in foreign countries and attach that investment to high moral ends. Governments in poor countries no longer could turn to the Soviets for subsidies. The Castro government in Cuba, for example, decided that the end of the Comecon necessitated a "special period" of national austerity. If a leader wanted foreign cash, he now had to govern the American way.

Democracy promotion as we know it grew out of the unipolar moment. Sensing the untenable contradictions in state socialism, US decision-makers set up the National Endowment for Democracy and its ancillary party institutes. Francis Fukuyama declared "the end of history," arguing the process of dialectical materialism had culminated in liberal democracy. With social evolution having selected out all other regime types, all that remained was to kill off the laggards. This was democracy promotion's theoretical mooring.

Just as the end of the Comecon strained the Castro regime, leaders in less tightly controlled societies variously opened up to democracy programs in return for development aid. NDI could help Otpor antagonize the ex-communist regime in Serbia because Slobodan Milosevic's security apparatus saw its future in the graces of Western Europe. Egypt grudgingly welcomed foreign reformers. Gone were the days of Soviet-funded Aswan Dams. In return for American military assistance, Hosni Mubarak would have to entertain American democracy agitators.

Speaking at the National Endowment for Democracy in 2003, George W. Bush captured the spirit of this moment. "It is no accident that the rise of so many democracies took place in a time when the world's most influential nation was itself a democracy."

US Leverage Declines

Earlier that year, China launched its first manned space mission, and a heat wave in Europe killed 21,000. On one hand, emergent sources of wealth and influence enable autocrats to snub conditioned US assistance. On the other, environmental change portends global instability that the world's policeman may not be able to manage. Factors like these diminish US control of world events.

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Poor countries whose leaders do not want to reform can rely on other powers for economic support. Crackdowns are one possible outcome of transitional moments, but one must pay the troops if they are to crack down. A decade ago, Slobodan Milosevic's army abandoned him because its well-being lay with a new regime. In the present, Robert Mugabe has been able to use Chinese assistance to maintain the allegiance of his security apparatus. More recently, Chinese aid flows have allowed Fijian military dictator Voreque Bainimarama to refuse to hold democratic elections, making costless his country's expulsion from the Pacific Islands Forum.²

Possibly aware of this limitation, the US government has slashed aid to Egypt by 60 percent. While military support remains stable, most of the decrease has been in governance assistance. The goal here is to keep an ally regardless of its democratic credentials. This shift of priorities recalls our Cold War footing: unconcerned about the content of governance so long as it favors US strategic interests. In Egypt, in other words, the US has backed away from its unipolar outlook.

While the availability to dictators of relativist patron states is diminishing American leverage, factors exogenous to the system of states may do the same. Here I am thinking of climate change, dwindling fossil fuel reserves, and a global population boom.

Over the course of the next decade, several changes in humanity's material condition are likely. According to the National Intelligence Council,³ dry areas will become drier, temperate zones warmer and wetter, sea levels higher, and fossil fuel reserves smaller. All this will occur as some countries industrialize, others de-industrialize, populations grow, and technologies evolve. There will be price shocks to oil markets as advanced countries replace fossil fuels. Governments in oil-exporting countries will experience sharp revenue declines. There will be natural disasters in coastal cities, and atolls will go under water. Increasing numbers will seek decreasing supplies of drinking water. Looking to governments to replace what had been plenty, even people in old democracies like Australia will flee to overcrowding cities.

In short, many countries will become difficult to govern if not wholly ungovernable. It is difficult enough to have corrupt leaders accept electoral defeat. Crises of governance brought on by environmental disaster will only enhance their incentives for predation and violence.

Going Forward

Perhaps the question should not be how to adapt democracy assistance but how to promote stability. In a recent article,⁴ Charles Kupchan and Adam Mount imply that shifts in the international system mean the United States should replace the "freedom agenda" with an "autonomy rule" that appeases states with good-enough records on human rights and development. When we set aside the question of how to adjudicate "good enough," we can extract their core point: needing the good will of rising powers, the United States should stop harassing autocrats and abandon democracy promotion for its own good.

Their hyperbole undercuts insight. American capacity to promote democratic governance on the frontiers of freedom, like so many other desirable behaviors by foreign governments, is waning. US need to secure

2 Ed Johnson. 2009. "Fiji, Facing Suspension From Pacific Forum, Rejects Elections," Bloomberg. May 1.

3 National Intelligence Council. 2008. *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*.

4 Charles Kupchan and Adam Mount. 2009. "The Autonomy Rule." *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, Spring.

peace and economic well-being, however, is rising.

Contrary to Kupchan and Mount, however, there is no need to abandon democracy promotion or governance reform. Many leaders in many countries do want to go down the liberal democratic path.⁵ Because of that, political parties, civil societies, watchdog groups, free media, and independent businesses are evolving in those states. To the extent that these conditions improve, liberal democracies become more robust.

These are the countries where the unipolarity-inspired instruments of governance reform and democracy *assistance* - not democracy promotion - can have an impact. By doing the same work they have for the last two decades, NDI and the World Bank can catalyze ongoing democratization processes. What these organizations have to offer is technical know-how, which is a resource where there are governments willing to cooperate.

Controversy over elections in Honduras show that there is a role for this work. Here is a country whose leaders complied with its institutions, whose people saw their value, and whose democracy was therefore consolidating. Due to the absence of clear presidential impeachment provisions, however, Honduras and its neighbors disagreed on the legitimacy of elections and, more fundamentally, how to restore constitutional governance. In this country, attentive technical assistance might have precluded this impasse.

There is no way, however, for the conventional instruments to adapt to the challenges of hard cases. They were born of a world where the preponderance of influence rested with one state. That world is gone. The United States simply does not have the leverage - military, economic, or otherwise - to pry open regimes.

What is the strategy, then, for advancing democracy in closed societies?

The nature of the intervention should depend on the obstacle. In states that are failed or failing, the obvious aim is establishing government. Because stateness is logically prior to democracy, it does not make sense to work in these places.

In other places, government is bad, but socioeconomic conditions are worse. Russia and Turkmenistan are two countries where wealth and its sources are too concentrated for any meaningful liberal order to emerge. Here, donors can support democracy movements by fostering independent centers of wealth and power in each society.

In a final set of states, the socioeconomic conditions for liberal democracy are right or close to being so, but government refuses to liberalize. In these cases, covert activities may be necessary to link reformers and soft-liners.

Conclusion

Every people must fight its own revolution. Practitioners have long subscribed to the mantra that "democracy cannot be transplanted," but reversals of late have made it palpable. This does not mean the democracy project is bankrupt. Democracy assistance has always been valuable, but assistance is not the same thing as democracy promotion. While we may fail to promote political change in the hard cases, we

5 Thomas Melia. 2008. "Back to the Future: Mobilize the Democratic Faction." Freedom House.

know we can support it in others.

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