

Democracy promotion as development assistance and diplomacy



by Stephen Sherlock

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The following is a review of Thomas Carothers and Richard Youngs “[Looking for help: Will rising democracies become international democracy supporters?](#)” [pdf], Carnegie Papers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2011.

Since the early decades of the 20th century, an element of international relations has been the notion that democratic ideals are universal and that their spread across the globe can be encouraged by governments. One of the more recent expressions of the idea has been the “democracy promotion” programs funded by official aid agencies of developed democracies, but the idea has changed and evolved over time. In fact, the first advocates of the idea of universal economic and political rights were mainly non-government organisations, particularly the international labour movement, which organised across borders from the late 19th century onwards to defend workers’ conditions and to fight for the right to vote. But following the First World War and the break-up of a number of European empires, the earliest state-sponsored initiative was US President Woodrow Wilson’s promotion of the ideal of an international system of states based on the rights of peoples to self-determination. While not explicitly an argument for democracy, the motivating principle was that nations and peoples, rather than emperors and kings, were the legitimate source of political authority. Wilsonian values have remained an inspiration and symbol of liberal democratic internationalism ever since.

It was no accident that such ideas emerged from the US, because a strand of liberal thinking in the western hemisphere had long been critical of European political practice, especially in the old pre-WWI multi-national empires. Critics pointed out, however, that Wilsonian partisans tended to steer clear of the issue of self-determination for non-white nationalities in the remaining empires such as the British and French: not to mention the fact that US policies in Latin America and Asia in practice resembled those of European powers. A related line of argument was that US anti-imperialism was a convenient instrument for the advancement of

the US's own economic and political interests in the old European realms. Was it simply the case of a new power wanting to edge out the old? Thus, from the very beginning, debate over the promotion of democracy could never be neatly disentangled from arguments about the interests of the countries doing the promoting. Nor was the internal record of the democracies ever unblemished, as the political exclusion of African-Americans and indigenous Americans exemplified.

WWI had shattered many European monarchies and weakened the grip of colonial powers, but the biggest advance for democracy came with the end of WWII. The naked grab for power by Japanese imperialists had had the unintended effect of shattering the entire edifice of colonialism, starting a process that ended with today's global system of "nation-states", democratic and otherwise. Of the first wave of newly independent states in the post-colonial world after 1945, India emerged as a shining example of how democracy could flourish in the unpromising soil of dire poverty and a mixture of cultures. But it is only recently, with the country's accelerating economic growth, that India has really been accorded significant recognition and status in what is generally referred to as the "international community", including regarding the lessons its democratic experience might hold for new democracies. As always, international discourse on ideas cannot be separated from the realities of power—arguments about democracy will always be taken more seriously when they emanate from states with economic and political clout, regardless of any inherent cogence of the ideas.

During the Cold War, the politics of democracy promotion, as it was beginning to be called, was inextricably linked with the struggle between the US and the Soviet Union. In fact, the US's first formal program of democracy promotion was launched by President Reagan in 1982 in a speech to the British parliament that explicitly advocated the downfall of the USSR. That initiative led to the foundation of the National Endowment for Democracy which has, ever since, formed the umbrella for many US efforts to influence the global spread of democracy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a wave of euphoria about the prospects for democratisation internationally, based on sometimes unrealistic assessments of the potential difficulties facing post-authoritarian governments. This period was also marked by a degree of triumphalism in some quarters in the US and the West generally. There were even notions that a combination of free-market capitalism and democracy as practiced in the West had finally conquered any alternative, thus ushering in "the end of history".

Of course, the policy of providing assistance to pro-democratic forces in other countries has not been the monopoly of the US government. Democracies in Europe and other parts of the developed world have also maintained major democracy promotion programs, whether directly by their respective aid agencies,

through organisations such as the UK's Westminster Foundation or by political party foundations such as those run by the German parties. To varying degrees these efforts have been linked to the strategic priorities of the donor countries. The programs of many European countries have often centred on former colonial possessions or on areas of economic or diplomatic interest such as the Middle East and Africa. But only the US has the power and global sweep of interests that make its efforts so prominent and so potentially intrusive and controversial.

Promoting democratic change can mean providing advice and assistance to pro-democracy forces, to political parties and to institutions of democratic governance in new democracies. This is the technical assistance and capacity-building that has largely been the subject of this article so far. But democracy promotion can also be interpreted as more direct and politicised interventions in a country's political processes. This can take the form of speeches by Presidents, Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers, motions in international forums such as the UN and other types of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic pressure, as well as assistance to exile groups and asylum to prominent dissidents. Stronger measures include diplomatic and economic sanctions, financial or military assistance to rebel groups. The ultimate measures are direct military intervention on one side of a conflict, such as has occurred in Libya, or full-scale invasion to overthrow an incumbent government and bring about the "regime change" that was the object of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The whole project of democracy promotion entered a new and potentially dangerous period, however, following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US. The Bush administration's response to the attacks starkly revealed the dual nature of democracy promotion and the tension that sometimes exists between its two aspects. The US invasion of Iraq was criticised in many quarters but, from the point of view of democracy promotion organisations, the most damaging aspect of the invasion was that it was accompanied by sweeping rhetoric about a new US policy of spreading democracy globally, with the inference that this might be achieved by force. As discussed above, democracy promotion is an inherently politicised project but its association with a perceived arrogation of a superpower's right to unilaterally intervene in the affairs of smaller countries created deep suspicions in many parts of the world. As Corothers argued in 2006:

The way that President George W. Bush is making democracy promotion a central theme of his foreign policy has clearly contributed to the unease such efforts (and the idea of democracy promotion itself) are creating around the world. Some autocratic

governments have won substantial public sympathy by arguing that opposition to Western democracy promotion is resistance not to democracy itself, but to American interventionism.

Despite the passage of time and the change of administration in the US, such suspicions are still encountered by democracy promotion organisations in the developing world. Today, Corothers and Youngs make the point that the wariness about motives has “much longer roots [than Bush administration policies], reaching back across decades and in cases centuries of unhappiness with Western interventions” (p.4).

In today’s world, moreover, new factors have been added to the equation. In a “multipolar” world, where the US no longer holds unchallenged predominance, a range of new economic and strategic powers are emerging. Along with the oft-cited example of China, countries such as India, Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey and South Africa are undergoing substantial economic growth and their demographic weight makes them new and potentially major players on the global scene. In the case of China, India and Russia, they have the capacity to challenge Western-defined norms and conceptions of international relations. And many of the countries are not only “rising” powers, they are what Corothers and Youngs call “rising democracies” who have their own story to tell about what democracy means and how it can be made to work in difficult circumstances. India has six decades of democratic experience, South Africa and Indonesia succeeded in transitions to democracy, while democratic institutions are taking progressively firmer root in Brazil and Turkey. So just as the US and the West can no longer dominate the diplomatic world generally, so they will have to come to terms with the views of the newly emerging powers when it comes to how democracy is promoted internationally.

Secondly, of course, the international environment has been greatly affected by the ground-shaking events in the Middle East and north Africa, called by many the “Arab Spring”. The initially rather guarded US response to the popular movements calling for the overthrow of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt was symptomatic of what many in the developing world saw as the West’s double standards: preaching democracy to certain autocratic governments but propping up other equally obnoxious dictatorships if they seemed to support Western interests. These events seemed, at once, to raise questions about Western credentials in democracy promotion and to highlight the fact that the “new democracies” might have more to offer in the way of practical support than the “old democracies”. Egyptian democrats might, for example, see more parallels between their situation and that of the new

but flourishing democracy of Indonesia than that of the US. Indeed, the Egyptians seem to feel they can more comfortably enter into a dialogue with the Indonesians without being seen as buying into a US-defined view of the world.

Against this recent background and longer history Corothers and Youngs have asked the question in their Carnegie Endowment paper: “will rising democracies become international democracy supporters?”. Will these countries exercise their growing influence in ways that add to the momentum towards global democratisation? The paper examines recent trends in the foreign policy of Brazil, India, South Africa, Indonesia and Turkey to ascertain the views of those governments and the policy measures they have taken.

As well as listing the key aspects of each country’s approach, they identify a number of points of commonality. They argue that all five countries:

- Support the international spread of democratic norms, but in a non-prescriptive fashion;
- Insist they support democracy just by being democracies;
- Provide help only if they are asked to mediate;
- Rail at Western double standards;
- Argue that democracy support cannot be de-linked from other Western foreign policies they see as unjust; and
- Prefer to focus on greater interstate justice rather than the traditionally defined democracy support agenda.

The paper provides a short outline of certain aspects of the five countries’ record of support for human rights and democratisation in other countries and the way in which they have attempted to reconcile the inevitable tension between the ideal of democratic change and the need to advance their own country’s interests. Each of the five countries is a growing power in their own particular region and have understandable ambitions to exercise influence amongst their close neighbours. In fact, some of the five, such as India and Indonesia, have even been criticised for punching below their weight on the regional and global scene, with the inference that they should assume a level of responsibility commensurate with their growing stature.

But the centrepiece of the paper is actually not the policies of the new democracies. Given the limitations of space, the studies on each country are quite sketchy and mainly based on secondary sources. The real question the paper considers is how the US and other Western countries should respond to those policies and how the rising democracies’ foreign policies should be engaged with in order to encourage increased commitment to the promotion of democracy. The big underlying question

is: has the US, in particular, really lived down the association between democracy promotion and the policy of externally-imposed “regime change” and will the West generally continue to be mistrusted as hypocritical and self-interested? Will the rising democracies become allies in the project of democracy promotion if they remain suspicious about its real intentions and, if they do join the project, just how differently might they approach it?

Carothers and Youngs make a number of observations about what it is necessary for Western policy-makers to do to come to terms with the new realities. They see it as important that there be a “recalibration of expectations”, by which they seem to mean that the West can no longer act on the unspoken assumption that this is “their” cause to which the rising democracies are being enlisted and that the West can therefore define the agenda. Rising democracies will expand their role in actions to support human rights and democracy in response to their own motivations and “not in response to pressure from the West”. The paper argues that engagement with the rising democracies must be low-key and sustained and should not be pre-occupied with highly visible but short term public gestures. The positive examples the authors cite indicate that they see one of the main ways to achieve this objective is for Western governments to use their aid programs as a way to influence the character of the aid initiatives that the rising democracies’ themselves have been pursuing in recent years.

Influencing policy thinking in a country which is strong and self-confident enough to set its own priorities could clearly only succeed if it were undertaken through what the authors call “slowly developing partnerships”. The question remains, however, whether the governments of major powers, especially the US, can adjust to a new non-directive way of working. It may well be that small and middle-level Western governments, accustomed to working with a little less hubris and carrying less diplomatic baggage, may be more successful at this approach.

The paper emphasises that Western governments need to adapt to the reality that there will be a range of “different and potentially clashing approaches on international democracy support”. The authors cite examples of where the five countries in the paper sometimes have taken initiatives that are not to the liking of Western countries, such as including countries (eg. Burma) in regional forums and dialogues when the West might prefer that they were excluded. This relates to a more general source of tension which can arise from the fact that the rising democracies have generally been inclined to multilateral engagement, while the policy in Western capitals is often bilateral. There is a Western tendency to “pick winners”, to focus on particular countries that are seen as likely to play a role favoured by the West, while forums such as the Indonesia-led Bali Democracy Forum are broadly inclusive. The authors note that European countries have been

more comfortable with multilateralism than the US.

Carothers and Youngs' analysis does not draw a clear distinction between two possible understandings of democracy promotion in practice: diplomatic and strategic policy actions aimed at directly influencing events, as distinct from programs of assistance, advice and dialogue-promotion focused on knowledge transfer and sharing of ideas. The former have traditionally been executed by heads of government, foreign ministries or even the military, while the latter are more the field of official development assistance agencies and government-supported NGOs.

The examples of “low visibility”, long-term engagement that Carothers and Youngs cite as successful or promising instances of democracy promotion are all certainly more akin to technical assistance and policy dialogue than to attempts to assert great power authority. But they seem reluctant to argue explicitly that the field of democracy promotion should be the rightful reserve of such approaches and that the assertion of power, with the implied or actual threat of force, should not in any circumstances be allowed to appropriate the name of democracy promotion.

Democracy promotion should be seen primarily as an element of development assistance and diplomatic dialogue rather than an instrument of strategic-level foreign and security policy. It sits more appropriately in the toolbox of second-track diplomacy rather than at the front line of power relations between states. Suspicions in developing countries about underhanded motives and hidden agendas in democracy promotion have principally been a product of the conflation of democracy promotion with power projection or, more accurately, the use of a benign phrase like “promoting democracy” to paint a veneer of idealism over the exercise of military force. It is only when these associations are eliminated that new and rising democracies will lose their sense of discomfort with actively engaging other governments in dialogue and programs of assistance designed to promote human rights and democratic change.

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