

: Global Governance Spotlight

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Still a Bumpy Road. The Multiple Challenges of External Democracy Promotion

Stephen Brown

In the early 1990s, after the collapse of the communist bloc and the end of the Cold War, democracy seemed triumphant. Numerous Western foreign policymakers, commentators and academics expressed unbridled optimism. In the most extreme case, Francis Fukuyama spoke of the coming “end of history”, at which point all governments would be and forever remain liberal democracies.

During this period, many Western countries rapidly expanded their work in the area of democracy promotion and supported some multilateral organizations’ efforts in this area. They sought to help new democracies, especially those in Eastern and Central Europe and in Sub-Saharan Africa, to institutionalize and consolidate their systems, as well as encourage remaining authoritarian regimes to liberalize politically and make a transition to democracy. The results, however, proved disappointing.

Higher-than-expected barriers

Despite the rapid expansion of democracy promotion efforts, the spread of democracy soon slowed and, in some years, reversed itself. The wave of democratization that had begun in Latin America and Southern Europe in the early 1980s stalled by the mid- to late 1990s. According to calculations by the US nongovernmental organization Freedom House, the number of electoral democracies quickly grew from 69 in 1989, to 89 in 1991, 99 in 1992 and 108 in 1993, after which point it oscillated mainly in the range of

115-123 (representing 59-64% of the total number of countries in the world). A sizeable number of those countries, however, fell short of the level of civil liberties required for a country to be considered a liberal democracy. The proportion of countries that Freedom House considers free was 37% in 1989 and rose to 46% in 1998, but subsequently stagnated. Africa and the Middle East in particular boast few countries that can be considered liberal democracies. In recent years, the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq have illustrated the difficulties of founding new democracies, in spite of massive international state-building efforts with important democracy-promotion components. Even in cases of successful democratization, it is not clear (and impossible to prove) how many can be directly attributed to Western democracy promotion efforts. Malawi and Kenya in the early 1990s are probably the best examples of democratic transitions where international actors played key roles, but both have periodically experienced significant democratic setbacks since then.

Where external democracy promotion has been much more successful is on the technical side. International actors have assisted scores of countries with setting up independent electoral commissions, voter registration, ballot material, vote tabulation and other procedures that help ensure that elections, the cornerstone of democracy, adequately reflect the will of voters. This helps strengthen democracy when rulers sincerely wish to hold free-and-fair elections, but is rarely – if ever – sufficient to ensure a transition to democracy when a ruler is determined to cling to power by manipulating the process.

The various challenges of democracy promotion

Numerous factors contribute to these lacklustre results. One of the most fundamental is that democratization is first and foremost a domestic process. It is only under very exceptional circumstances, such as in post-World War II Germany and Japan, that it can be successfully imposed through the use of force. In general, authoritarian regimes proved much more resilient than expected. They have adapted to external pressure by allowing some electoral competition, but not enough to actually cause them lose power. Thus despite the holding of some form of multiparty elections, many former one-party states remain at least semi-authoritarian.

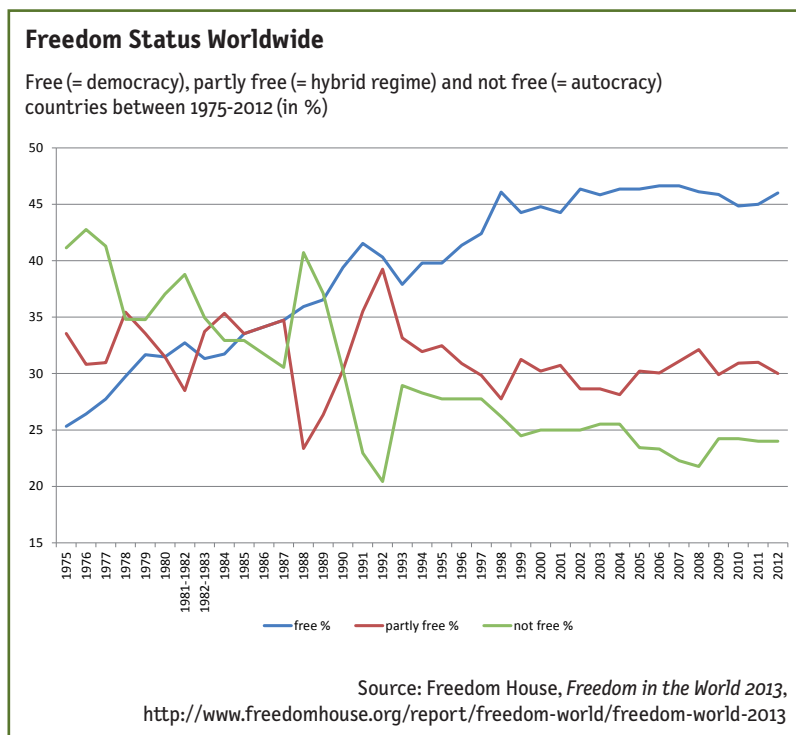
Western countries, in many cases, severely undermine their own democracy-promotion efforts when they prioritize other foreign policy goals, such as security or economic interests. Many clever authoritarian leaders have benefited from continued Western support because they presented themselves as valuable partners. Several have leveraged their utility as an ally of the West, for instance in efforts to combat terrorism since 2001, in order to maintain repressive structures at home. This has exposed Western

External democracy promotion is most effective when combined and coordinated with local pro-democracy actors, but not those who merely use democratic rhetoric to add legitimacy to their own claims to power – a distinction that can be hard to make ahead of time. Further complicating efforts is the lack of coordination among international actors. Pressure for democratization works best if there is no adequate alternative source of support. Political conditionality is likely to fail if France or the World Bank step in when the US or UK withdraw foreign aid or other forms of support. Assistance from non-Western countries has made it easier for authoritarian regimes to resist pressure to democratize, for instance, China in neighbouring parts of Asia and Sudan, Venezuela in Cuba, and Russia in Central Asia. Smart authoritarian rulers can use the threat of “looking East” to retain Western support.

Whose task? Multilateral, regional and “arms’ length” organizations

In theory, coordination can best be achieved through multilateral institutions. However, most actors that undertake democracy promotion are national, usually via government institutions such as aid agencies or foreign ministries. Many countries have created specialized “arms’ length” organizations, including the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and the International Republican Institute in the United States, the Westminster Foundation in the United Kingdom and the various political party foundations in Germany. Much of the assistance they provide is technical, often to political parties themselves, and does not constitute actual pressure to democratize. Similarly, the United Nations provides access to know-how in the holding of elections to states that request it, but does not actively promote democracy per se. (Still, its human rights-related activities do favour civil and political rights that underpin democracy.)

One intergovernmental organization, the Community of Democracies, with 25 member states, officially seeks to promote democracy elsewhere, but it is virtually moribund. Many other non-universal international organizations such as the Commonwealth or regional groupings (such as the Organization of American States or the African Union) officially support democratic principles, but rarely exert significant pressure on their members to democratize. They often conduct election monitoring as a way of promoting or defending democracy. However, with the exception of work in post-Soviet states by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, their reports rarely outright condemn elections as illegitimate. These organizations normally only take strong positions when trying to reverse coups or other subversions of an existing democratic process, sometimes responding by suspending or expelling



countries to accusations of hypocrisy. For instance, why did the US claim it lead an invasion of Afghanistan in large part to bring democracy to that country, when it does virtually nothing to promote democracy in Saudi Arabia? Democracy promotion can thus be used as a tool for overthrowing an unfriendly dictator, but conveniently forgotten when dealing with a friendly one. In many cases, democracy promotion did not really fail because no serious attempts were made.

the member state, as the Commonwealth did with Pakistan (1999) and Fiji (2001 and 2006), the Organization of American States with Honduras (2009) and the African Union with Madagascar (2009), Guinea-Bissau (2012) and the Central African Republic (2013). Some regional organizations may embrace democratic aspirations but do not actively apply pressure on established governments because of their non-democratic practices. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, in particular, has relatively high proportion of non-democratic members. The most effective regional grouping in terms of democracy promotion is the European Union, which has had a strong democratizing effect on states on its Eastern frontier who aspired to membership, providing an important motivation to carry through with democratic reforms.

Next steps required

The higher-than-expected barriers to success in democracy promotion and international actors' lack of commitment (in large part because of competing priorities considered more pressing) have combined to cause a scaling back of democracy promotion in the past decade.

If international actors want to be more effective in democracy promotion in the future, the following measures should be considered:

1. Western countries should ensure that they have government-wide support internally. Democracy promotion by a bilateral aid agency will not be effective if the donor country foreign ministry or military forces are sending very different messages about the need for political reform. Many of their actions have prolonged authoritarian rule and prevented democratization across the world.
2. International actors should ensure greater coordination among national governments and multilateral institutions.
3. International actors should more actively engage non-Western countries in seeking support for political reform. To obtain it, it may need to be relabelled support for good governance, rather than democracy, which could shift the focus away from elections and more towards the rule of law. Countries such as China, which will not countenance democracy promotion, nonetheless have an interest in stability (including for uninterrupted trade) and the respect of contracts (protection from nationalization and corruption). China, for instance, has sometimes played a positive role in Sudan in recent years, especially in relation to Darfur and South Sudan.
4. Regional organizations should consider taking a more proactive role, which is often compat-

ible with their charters (for instance, the African Union), in promoting democratization among member states (challenging the status quo) and not limiting action to reversing unconstitutional transfers of power. This will weaken accusations of imperialism and interference in domestic affairs that are often directed at Western countries' democracy promotion.

5. International actors should work more closely with local pro-democracy actors and pay more attention to their priorities and strategies, reducing the risk that democracy promotion could cause a crackdown on local activists or otherwise be counterproductive.
6. Observer missions, whether bilateral or multilateral, should demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of local politics and the subtle nature of many undemocratic activities at the local level. Otherwise, they reinforce the interests of the status quo. If they are not able to report honestly on objective indicators of free-and-fair elections, they should not be deployed.
7. International actors must not expect only quick wins and should be prepared to engage for the medium to long term. Democratization sometimes requires action that must be sustained. In Kenya, for instance, Western donors suspended aid to Kenya in 1990 and 1997, but renewed it after only superficial political liberalization, sabotaging their own efforts, to many local activists' dismay.
8. Finally, international actors should consider the *longue durée*. Democratization is a multidimensional process and benefits from a host of underlying structural facilitators, such as higher education rates and the growth of a middle class. As argued by Thomas Carothers, international actors should simultaneously provide both short-term assistance, directed at strengthening democracy, and long-term support for development, which will enhance the chances of successful democratic transitions and consolidation.

Democratization is a complex process and there are no easy formulas for achieving it. However, if international actors are unprepared to take the required steps to improve the effectiveness of democracy promotion, their efforts will continue to achieve mediocre results and further weaken democratic governance as a norm worth supporting.

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Further information

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