The Rise and Fall of Democracy Governance in International Law: A Reply to Susan Marks

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Abstract

Although going down a different path, this article reaches similar conclusions to those formulated by Susan Marks. It starts by showing that the years 1989–2010 can be hailed as an unprecedented epoch of international law during which domestic governance came to be regulated to an unprecedented extent. This materialized through the coming into existence of a requirement of democratic origin of governments which has been dubbed the principle of democratic legitimacy. However, this article argues that the rapid rise of non-democratic super-powers, growing security concerns at the international level, the 2007–2010 economic crisis, the instrumentalization of democratization policies of Western countries as well as the rise of some authoritarian superpowers could be currently cutting short the consolidation of the principle of democratic legitimacy in international law. After sketching out the possible rise (1) and fall (2) of the principle of democratic legitimacy in the practice of international law and the legal scholarship since 1989, the article seeks critically to appraise the lessons learnt from that period, especially regarding the ability of international law to regulate domestic governance (3) and the various dynamics that have permeated the legal scholarship over the last two decades (4). In doing so, it sheds some light on some oscillatory dynamics similarly pinpointed by Susan Marks in her contribution to this journal.

It has now been almost 20 years since international legal scholars took ownership of the question of democracy. Before that, such an inquiry had continuously been dismissed as being at odds with the almost unfettered constitutional autonomy

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recognized by international law to states – mostly in the form of a residual freedom rather than an express entitlement – and, accordingly, demoted to a purely normative exercise left to other disciplines. The international legal scholarship, however, found in the end of the Cold War the historical watershed that would allow it to attempt a revamp of international law and strip its subjects of their illiberal trappings. Like Susan Marks and Steven Wheatley, whose thoughts appear in this issue, I happened to be among that generation of scholars who were deeply provoked by the American literature of the early 1990s on the democratic entitlement – and especially by the ‘seminal’ 1992 article of the late Tom Franck published in the American Journal of International Law – and who accordingly decided to devote a major part of their research agenda to the question of democracy in international law.

Two decades after the inception of this new scholarly enterprise, it comes as no surprise that the – sometimes naïve – frenzy of the early years was superseded by a more cold-eyed, critical, and self-reflective outlook – the earlier work of Susan Marks at the turn of the century having been very conducive to the maturity gained by international legal scholars in this regard. Yet, this change of mindset alone does not suffice to justify filling the pages of this prestigious journal with another round of thoughts on this topic. Indeed, there is more than a rise of cynicism nowadays at the heart of the debate published here. In the eyes of the author of these lines, the 20 years that have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall now provide some of the necessary hindsight that helps realize the significant oscillations which have pervaded the practice, the political discourse, and, above all, the legal scholarship as regards the place and the status of democracy in international law. In other words, time seems – already – ripe for a short reevaluation.

It will be clear to the reader that the stocktaking which the articles published here have ventured is multifaceted and covers very different questions. Whilst Steven Wheatley’s contribution grapples with global democracy, Susan Marks’ article zeroes in on the international requirements of democracy at the municipal level. Because these two issues are radically distinct, the present article will not attempt to engage simultaneously with both of them. Rather, it will focus on the latter and, like Susan Marks’ endeavour, seeks to unearth some of the fluctuations undergone by the practice and the scholarship pertaining to the idea of regulating municipal democracy by international law.

Susan Marks’ article insightfully sheds some lights on three particular movements of the claim of an emerging right of democratic governance, namely the status and prospect of such a norm, its articulation with the democratic peace theory and the consequences thereof in a world nowadays entirely obsessed by its security agenda, and, finally, the shift from electoral democracy to development. The present reaction focuses on only one of these dimensions of contemporary factual and scholarly fluctuations, that is the status of the norm of democratic governance. In this regard, it seeks to unravel what has changed as well as what remains the same 20 years.

1 S. Marks, The Riddle of All Constitutions (2003).
after the fall of the Berlin Wall, both empirically and scholarly. Despite its primary concern with the most legalistic part of the debate, this article will at the same time show how the movements observed in this regard both in the international legal scholarship and in practice are closely intertwined with the other dynamics identified by Susan Marks. The conclusions reached here thus concur to a large extent with those of Susan Marks. Nonetheless, such arguments are made using a very different route.

In particular, Susan Marks’ article and the present reaction thereto, while reaching some similar verdicts, rest on a fundamentally diverging starting point. This article is premised on the idea that the prescriptions as to how power must be exercised at the domestic level (by virtue of major international human rights conventions) and the prohibition of certain political regimes (e.g. apartheid and fascist regimes) already enshrined in international law before the end of the Cold War were subsequently supplemented by a new democratic rule. Indeed, the author of these lines believes, as is explained in the following paragraphs, that the practice since the end of the Cold War – and the accounts thereof in the legal scholarship – witnessed – and gave form to – a consolidation of a principle of democratic legitimacy. This development constituted a remarkable phenomenon, for it came to limit the classical constitutional autonomy of each State. In that sense, the years 1989–2010 can be hailed as an unprecedented epoch of international law during which domestic governance – understood here in a traditional way as the use of public authority at the domestic level through a central governmental authority – has been regulated by international law to an unprecedented extent, the latter going as far as to prescribe a given type of procedure for acceding to power at the domestic level.

Yet, while Susan Marks may not entirely share the idea of the existence of a democratic rule in the post-Cold War period, our respective pieces come to similar findings as to the general orientations of both recent practice and legal scholarship. Indeed, it is submitted here that the rapid rise of non-democratic super-powers, growing security concerns at the international level, the 2007–2010 economic crisis as well as the inevitable instrumentalization of democratization policies of Western countries are currently cutting short the consolidation of such a principle of democratic legitimacy in international law. Contemporary practice shows signs of a return to realist and non-ideological foreign policies, threatening the centrality of democracy promotion in the foreign policies of most democratic states and the nascent consensus over the existence of international obligations about the democratic origin of power at the domestic level.

This article starts by exposing in some details the possible rise (1) and fall (2) of the principle of democratic legitimacy in the practice of international law and the accounts thereof in the legal scholarship from 1989 to 2010. In doing so, it substantiates as well as complements some of the finding made in the other articles published

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2 Cf. infra notes 6 and 7.

in this symposium. The article then seeks critically to appraise the lessons learnt from that period, especially regarding the ability of international law to regulate domestic governance (3) and the various dynamics that have permeated the legal scholarship over the last two decades (4). On this occasion, it shows that, although presenting their own specificities and perspectives, the dynamics unravelled here bear some interesting resemblance to those identified by Susan Marks, especially as regards the oscillatory moves observed within scholarly studies of the status and place of democracy in international law.

1 1989–2010: From Human Rights to a Requirement of Democratic Origin (the Rise?)

It is commonly accepted that the determination of those entitled to act and speak on behalf of states is not based on a formal certifying operation and is inextricably left to the unconstrained discretion of states, although sometimes acting in the framework of international organizations. This abiding and inevitable absence of formal certification of governments was, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, accompanied by a lack of rules affecting domestic governance. In particular, the form of the political regime of each state was considered to be an ‘internal affairs’ matter4 and the choice thereof was considered to be unconstrained by international law.5 Apart from the prohibition of apartheid6 and, to a lesser extent, of the fascist political system,7 the only prescriptions relating to domestic governance were found in human rights law – and especially the obligations pertaining to political and civil rights – which enshrines limitations as to how the power can be exercised by governments. Before the end of the Cold War, human rights law thus constituted the backbone of the international regulation of domestic governance.

The end of the Cold War impinged significantly on how domestic governance is regulated. International legal scholars promptly recognized that the post-Cold War international legal order had become more amenable to democracy. In what has been perceived as an intra-disciplinary truce,8 American scholars in particular – i.e. those who have subsequently been seen as forming the ‘democratic entitle-

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4 For a classical account see L. Oppenheim, International Law (6th edn., 1912), i. at 425.
7 In particular, see GA Res 36/162, UN Doc A/RES/36/162 (16 Dec. 1981).
ment school9 – have – albeit to various degrees10 – enthusiastically supported the idea that democracy today plays a crucial role in the international legal order and have swiftly provided various optimistic accounts of the extent of the legal changes brought about by democracy.11 European scholars, although they usually voiced greater scepticism and refrained from embracing the whole array of consequences that the abovementioned American scholars attached to a lack of democracy, growingly came to recognize that democracy – at least in its procedural and electoral dimension – bears upon the rules and the functioning of the international legal order.12

Even if one does not agree with all the legal consequences that American scholars have sometimes associated with the emergence of democracy in the international legal order,13 living up to some democratic standards, in the view of the author of these lines, increasingly turned to correspond with an international customary obligation14 – a stance from which Susan Marks shies away in the article published here. Indeed, I contend that the post-1989 practice contains strong indications that,

9 Because many of them were affiliated to NYU, these scholars were subsequently dubbed by David Kennedy members of the ‘Manhattan School’. See Kennedy, ‘Tom Franck and the Manhattan School’, 35 NYU J Int’l Law & Politics (2003) 397, at 432.
13 For one criticism of the liberal theories of democracy see d’Aspremont, supra note 12.
14 See ibid., at 291.
to a large degree, states consider the adoption of the main characteristics of a democratic regime to amount to an international obligation and act accordingly toward non-democratic states. For instance, entities which have reached statehood in the last few years thanks to the support or the involvement of the international community have been induced to adopt democratic institutions. Likewise, each experience of international administration of territory has led to the creation of democratic states, as illustrated by the cases of East Timor and, irrespective of its final status, Kosovo. Because the determination of subjects of international law and that of those who represent them are not carried out through a formal certification, democracy has never directly impinged on the legal existence of states or that of their governments. Yet, practice has shown that, in the policies of recognition, the democratic character of domestic institutions often offsets the lack of effectivité of an entity. While new and restored states have been endowed with democratic institutions, violent changes of government have been deterred by a large array of sanction devices: coups, especially those that lead to the overthrow of a democratic government, are systematically the object of condemnations and sanctions, their authors usually being denied any external legitimacy. These sanctions are usually eased once the authors of the coups pledge to organize free and fair elections. This systematic condemnation of coups against democratic governments surely buttresses the strong commitment of the international community to democracy — or at least the idea of a requirement of a standstill constraining existing democracies. We have also witnessed the resort to peace-enforcement missions to restore overthrown democratic governments, as illustrated by the intervention in Sierra Leone.

16 On this topic see E. de Brabandere, Post-Conflict Administrations In International Law: International Territorial Administration, Transitional Authority And Foreign Occupation In Theory (2009); See also C. Stahn, The Law and Practice of International Territorial Administration: Versailles to Iraq and Beyond (2008); d’Aspremont, ‘Post-Conflict Administrations as Democracy-Building Instruments’, 9 Chicago J Int’l L (2008) 1; d’Aspremont, ‘La création international d’Etats démocratiques’, 109 RGDIP (2005) 889. See generally S. Chesterman, You the People: The United Nations, Transnational Administration and State-Building (2004), at 204–235. This tendency to install democracies through the international administration of territories has occurred even with the veiled support of non-democratic states, as if these states acknowledge that democracy is the only admissible political regime: see, e.g., SC Res 1546, UN Doc. S/RES/1546 (8 June 2004) (unanimously adopted resolution addressing the question of the future democratic government of Iraq). But see SC Res 1244, UN Doc. S/RES/1244 (10 June 1999) (China abstaining from voting on the question of Kosovo).
17 D’Aspremont, supra note 12, at 57 ff.
19 D’Aspremont, supra note 12, at 338.
20 Petersen, Demokratie als teleologisches Prinzip, supra note 12, at 89 (this is what he calls the principle of Democratic Teleology). See also Petersen, ‘The Principle of Democratic Teleology’, supra note 12.
In the same vein, there is little doubt today that democracy has become a prominent yardstick by which to assess the legitimacy of governments. This explains why complex and multi-layered election monitoring mechanisms have been put at the disposal of states, many of them regularly making use of such possibility to buoy up the legitimacy which their governments can earn from democratic elections. This is not to say that a non-democratic government will never be deemed legitimate, especially if that government has been in power for a long time. The non-democratic character of a government is sometimes disregarded because of overriding geopolitical and strategic motives. But, leaving these situations aside, it can reasonably be argued that, since the end of the Cold War, democracy has become 'the touchstone of legitimacy' for any new government. All in all, these few examples – already much discussed in the literature – suffice to demonstrate the far-reaching structural changes international society has undergone after 1989 with respect to the form of governments.

It is of particular relevance that many non-democratic states do not oppose the principle of democracy, and even claim that they are themselves in the midst of

That some of these missions were led by non-democratic states as if non-democratic states themselves are coming to terms with the ascendancy of democracy over any other kind of political regimes. See, e.g., Nowrojee, 'Joining Forces: United Nations and Regional Peacekeeping – Lessons from Liberia', 8 Harvard Human Rts J (1995) 133 for a discussion of the ECOMOG force in Liberia, which was led by Nigeria. See generally Byers and Chesterman, “You the People”: Pro-democratic intervention in international law', in Fox and Roth (eds), supra note 11, at 259.


In the same vein see Fox, ‘Election Monitoring: The International Legal Setting’, 19 Wisconsin Int’l LJ (2001) 295, at 312; Pippan, supra note 12, at 34–35. This finding has led some authors to contend that there are ‘double standards’ in that regard: see Cohen, ‘La création d’Etats en droit international contemporain’, VI Cours euro-méditerranéens Barcoja de droit international (2002) 6, at 619.

The most obvious example is the government of the People’s Republic of China which is seen as legitimate by almost all countries in the world although it does not rest on any free and fair electoral process. The same cannot be said with respect to Pakistan since the government has relentlessly pledged to organize democratic elections. See infra note 107.


See generally Fox and Roth (eds.), supra note 11. See also d’Aspremont, supra note 12.

This led some scholars to claim that we had reached the end of ‘History’. On this use of such terminology see Marks, ‘International Law, Democracy and the End of History’, in Fox and Roth, supra note 11, at 535.
progress towards the establishment of democracy.\textsuperscript{30} In that sense, non-democratic states, with a view to strengthening the legitimacy of their governments, try to portray their political regimes in a democratic fashion rather than choosing to dispute the role that democracy plays in the international order.

The possible obligation\textsuperscript{31} to be democratic to the emergence of which the above-mentioned practice has contributed has been conceptualized by scholars in many different ways. Some authors have espoused a human rights-based conceptualization by defending the existence of a right to political participation,\textsuperscript{32} a right to democratic governance,\textsuperscript{33} a right to free and fair elections.\textsuperscript{34} Other scholars have captured the emergence of requirements of democratic governance through the lens of internal self-determination, thereby arguing that self-determination expands beyond decolonization.\textsuperscript{35} Others – including the author of these lines – have, more simply, put forward the existence of an international customary obligation to be democratic without such an obligation taking the form of a human right or an expansion of the principle of self-determination.\textsuperscript{36} Eventually, there are scholars who simultaneously drew on all of these conceptualizations to buttress the existence of a requirement of democratic origin of governments in international law,\textsuperscript{37} a path also arguably followed by the Human Rights Committee.\textsuperscript{38}

However it is eventually conceptualized, this legal obligation to adopt a democratic regime must surely not be exaggerated. First, the scope ratione materiae of the principle of democracy in international law is limited, as the obligation rests only on an electoral

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\footnotetext[31]{In the same vein see Pippan, \textit{supra} note 12 at 7. See contra Roth, \textit{supra} note 27, at 417.}

\footnotetext[32]{Fox, \textit{supra} note 11. See also Binder, \textit{supra} note 23, at 134.}

\footnotetext[33]{Franck’s right to democratic governance is itself very much grounded in participatory rights of human rights treaties as well as the right to self-determination. See Franck, \textit{supra} note 11, at 46. In the same vein see also J.I. Ibegbu, \textit{Right to Democracy in International Law} (2003).}

\footnotetext[34]{Cerna, \textit{supra} note 11, at 329.}


\footnotetext[37]{Peters, \textit{supra} note 12, at 274–275 and 277–278. For a criticism of the link between the right of political participation and self-determination see Vidmar, \textit{supra} note 36.}

\footnotetext[38]{HRC General Comment 25, Right to participate in public affairs, voting rights and the right of equal access to public service, 12 July 1996, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7.}
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and *procedural* understanding of democracy. Although the free and fair character of the elections inevitably requires respect for some of the elementary political and civil rights, states are only customarily obliged to abide by democracy to the sole extent that their effective leaders (or the parliamentary body that oversees their executive mandate) are chosen through free and fair elections. Indeed, by the account made here, the practice has conveyed only a restrictive and procedural definition of democracy, however defective such a conception may be from a conceptual and theoretical point of view—as has long been advocated by Susan Marks. Likewise, the ambit of that requirement should also not be overblown. While this customary obligation, whatever its conceptualization, probably constitutes an *erga omnes* obligation, it certainly is not of a *jus cogens* character as it is underscored by the existence of numerous persistent objectors to that customary rule.

As was already alluded to above, it would also be a mistake to consider the obligation to be democratic utterly groundbreaking. The development of a customary norm in this area is unsurprising, given that international law has long regulated some aspects of states’ political regimes. Through human rights law, the international community has regulated the way in which power is exercised and has prohibited some types of political regimes—for example, apartheid and, to a lesser extent, fascism. Moreover, the obligation to organize free and fair elections is not entirely new in the international legal order, as a similar obligation is already embedded in the

39 Fox, *supra* note 11, at 49.
40 D’Aspremont, *supra* note 12, at 15. On the specific criteria which ought to be met for an election to be free and fair see Binder, *supra* note 23.
41 This finding is also made (and subsequently discussed) by S. Marks: see Marks, *supra* note 1, at 50 ff. See also Pippan, *supra* note 12.
46 Cf. *supra* note 7.
47 See, however, J. Vidmar for whom the ICCPR obligation does not entail an obligation to organize multi-party elections: Vidmar, *supra* note 3, especially at 222.
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which has been ratified by 167 states to date. It must be pointed out, however, that even if the international legal order enshrines a principle of procedural democracy applicable to the political regime of states, there is no corresponding requirement of democracy applicable to the structure and the functioning of the international legal system as a whole. This is not totally astonishing, given the inapplicability of the classical domestic blueprints of governance to the international system.

While the requirement of democratic origin of governments, in the view of this author, has gained currency in the post-Cold War practice and legal scholarship, it would be untrue to say that this acceptance of a requirement of democratic origin of governments has been unchallenged. The abovementioned scholarly enthusiasm for the principle of democracy has aroused some severe criticisms with respect to its imperialistic or neo-colonialist overtones and the correlative reminiscence of the nineteenth century distinction between civilized and barbarian states. It has also been said that a principle of democratic legitimacy can help secure systematic inequalities among states and even within states. Because of the impossibility of clearly defining democracy, others have contended that any obligation pertaining to the democratic origin of governments is not normative and cannot yield a meaningful directive.

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50 On this debate see generally Peters, supra note 12.


52 See in particular E. Nys, Droit international, Les principes, les théories, les faits (1904), i. at 116 ff; A. McNair, L. Oppenheim’s International Law (4th edn., 1926 and 1928), at 42; J. Westlake, International Law (2nd edn, 1910), at 40; J. Kent, Commentary on International Law (1878); R. Phillimore, Commentaries upon International Law (1879–1889); H. Wheaton, Elements of International Law (1880).

53 Marks, supra note 1, at 101.
towards states. Even though it cannot be denied that the principle of democratic legitimacy stirs inevitable controversy as to its imperialist, neocolonialist character or its ability to produce any meaningful command towards international law addressees, it is not the aim of this article to discuss them. Rather, the following section turns to the setbacks encountered by the legal requirement of the democratic origin of government in very recent international practice.

2 Beyond the Post-Cold War Period: The Retreat from a Requirement of Democratic Origin and the Return to Classical Human Rights (the Fall?)

It is argued here that recent practice is jeopardizing the consolidation of the above-mentioned practice in favour of a requirement of democratic origin of governments. Indeed, subject to the important exception of regional regimes, contemporary practice weathers an incremental de-emphasizing of the democratic origin of governments and a growing emphasis on the requirements of transparency and the absence of corruption (good governance) and the respect for human rights. After almost two decades of care for the democratic origin of governments, it seems that we are witnessing a return to foreign policies centred on the manner in which governments exercise power. In that sense, the emphasis is increasingly less on governments originating in free and fair elections but rather on their respect for elementary political and civil rights, as well as standards of good governance. This is exemplified by the great attention to what I have called elsewhere the legitimacy of exercise in the practice pertaining to recognition, accreditation, or intervention by invitation, that is the idea that the manner in which power is exercised matters more than the origin of that power.

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56 Many of them have been insightfully examined by Marks, *supra* note 1. See also Ayers, ‘Imperial Liberties: Democratisation and Governance in the “New” Imperial Order’, 57 *Political Studies* (2009) 1. For an attempt to go beyond this criticism see Tully, ‘Modern Constitutional Democracy and Imperialism’, 46 *Osgoode Hall LJ* (2008) 461.

57 For an outline of the mechanisms geared towards the promotion or the enforcement of democracy at the regional level see Fox, *supra* note 55. For an insightful account of the European regional model see Wheatley, *supra* note 12.


Against the backdrop of this growing de-emphasizing of free and fair elections, it is not surprising that the non-democratic origin of a government, while likely to provoke some temporary diplomatic isolation or unease, more often proves insufficient to trigger non-recognition of the new government, particularly if the latter is being re-elected. Likewise, states are nowadays living up to a principled engagement with non-democratic regimes. In the same vein, diplomatic relations seem less affected nowadays than during the years following the Cold War by the dubious democratic origin of one of the partners. Indeed, the non-democratic origin does not prevent such relations, although diplomatic relations are occasionally demoted to a lower level to manifest some discontent as to the absence of free and fair elections. But even coups do not always lead to a suspension of diplomatic relations.

The same can be said as far as a various types of inter-state cooperation are concerned. Indeed, international cooperation among states in a wide variety of fields is increasingly unaffected by the lack of democratic virtue of one of the partners, especially when it comes to security or the economy. By the same token, cooperation policies based on mechanisms of democratic conditionality are increasingly challenged by non-Western states. That is not to say that after the Cold War all cooperation policies were systematically made conditional upon compliance with some democratic standards. It simply is that it is nowadays less so than it used to be. As is illustrated by the unprecedented challenge of the European Union’s famous

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62 See, for instance, the 2010 US National Security Strategy at 38: ‘Practicing Principled Engagement with Non-Democratic Regimes: Even when we are focused on interests such as counterterrorism, nonproliferation, or enhancing economic ties, we will always seek in parallel to expand individual rights and opportunities through our bilateral engagement. The United States is pursuing a dual-track approach in which we seek to improve government-to-government relations and use this dialogue to advance human rights, while engaging civil society and peaceful political opposition, and encouraging U.S. nongovernmental actors to do the same. More substantive government-to-government relations can create permissive conditions for civil society to operate and for more extensive people-to-people exchanges. But when our overtures are rebuffed, we must lead the international community in using public and private diplomacy, and drawing on incentives and disincentives, in an effort to change repressive behavior’: available at: www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.
68 Slackman, supra note 63, at 5.
democratic conditionality by African states, practice indicates that democratic conditionality is turning more controversial, which in turn may bring about its abandonment in some areas.

Although it is too early to gauge the extent of these changes, these few examples suffice to show that contemporary practice manifests a return to RealPolitik after almost two decades of ideological foreign policies centred on the democratization of foreign regimes through a requirement of democratic origin of governments. This change has been particularly noticeable in the foreign policy of the United States and confirmed by the 2010 National Security Strategy of the United States. As a result of this de-emphasizing of the democratic origin of governments, the fall of the Berlin Wall has been growingly seen in recent scholarship as a culmination rather than a departure. Interestingly, the international legal scholarship – which had until recently most of the time voiced an upbeat tone – has itself turned more sceptical about the existence of a requirement (or the extent thereof) pertaining to the democratic origin of governments.

Should future practice confirms these developments, this would underpin the idea that the emphasis put on the democratic origin of governments during the 1989–2010 period is ebbing away and that, in the foreign policies of many states the democratic origin of foreign partners has been demoted to a secondary issue. Because contemporary practice shows that the democratization of foreign governments has


74 See in particular at 10 and 37 ff. available at: www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.


taken a back seat and has given way to foreign policies prioritizing other objectives, the classical motives for supporting policies in favour of democratic legitimacy must be briefly recalled.

The requirements pertaining to the democratic origins of governments had classically been promoted and enforced by states and international organizations because of their common – but very disputable – belief that democracy bolsters peace and prosperity.76 It strengthens the respect for human rights,77 and even quells terrorism.78 Recent practice seems to indicate that these avowed driving-forces of democratization policies of the post-Cold War period have been outweighed by other political objectives which seem to indicate that, for many states, the 21st century imperatives can no longer accommodate democratization policies and the requirements of democratic origin of governments that go with them. This is probably not the place to appraise the reasons underlying this retreat of democracy in recent practice. This is a task left to international relations and political sciences specialists whose expertise is much more apt to take on such an examination.80 It suffices here to pinpoint four reasons underpinning the abovementioned return to less ideological and more pragmatic and realist foreign policies. First, it will not come as a surprise that the current economic crisis has made democratization policies more of a luxury. Fewer and fewer countries have been able to afford trade policies conditioned on the respect for some requirements as to the democratic origin of the partner. The same is true with the security agenda, a finding similarly made by Susan Marks in her article in this issue. The multilateralization of the security agenda of the 21st century has elevated security in the


78 UN Secretary General, supra note 36, at para. 3.


80 For a more detailed analysis of the reasons for this change see Laidi, ‘La Fin du moment démocratique’, Le Débat (Apr.–May 2008) 52.
overarching objective of states’ national and international policies, thereby making it more clearly and more systematically trump democratization policies. Thirdly, the overt instrumentalization to which democracy has been subjected in the past 20 years and the imperialistic policies which have been carried out under its banner have further curtailed the credibility and authority of such policies, democracy promotion being growingly demoted to a mere code word for ‘regime change’. This is also an aspect which Susan Marks has long tried to unravel and on which she further sheds some light in the article which is published above. Eventually, the rise of the People’s Republic of China as the first superpower – and its avowed rejection of any democratic standards regarding the origin of power – has enticed many emerging democracies to prefer the ideologically free cooperation offered by this new global power to the cooperation of Western countries and regional organizations, which is classically made conditional upon the respect for democratic standards.

3 The Possible Limits of International Law in Regulating of Domestic Governance

It is necessary to emphasize that some of the changes brought about by the end of the Cold War in terms of the regulation of domestic governance are probably too well ingrained in positive international law to be subject to such rapid fluctuations. In that sense, the possible retreat of the requirement of democratic origin of governments mentioned here certainly is not comprehensive. If the practice reported above were to be confirmed, there is no doubt that some of the changes experienced in the international legal system in the aftermath of the Cold War would outlive this return to – more realist – policies centred on classical human rights and good governance rather than the democratic origin of governments. In particular, democracy would most probably remain a standard by which to assess the legitimacy of governments.

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81 Ibid.; Carothers, ‘Repairing’, supra note 72. See also MacDonald, supra note 8.
82 On this point see Carothers, supra note 71, especially at 64. See also Carothers, ‘Repairing’, supra note 72. See also MacDonald, supra note 8.
83 See generally Marks, supra note 1.
84 If the requirement of democratic origin of governments is considered as a customary obligation, China could be considered a persistent objector: see d’Aspremont, supra note 12. For criticism of this idea see supra note 44.
85 This is a change to which I had already alluded to in my previous work: ibid., at 316.
and governments in quest of greater legitimacy would continue to seek improvement of their democratic standards. In the same vein, coups, especially those that lead to the overthrow of a democratic government, would certainly remain systematically condemned, and sanctions usually eased once the authors of the coups pledge to organize free and fair elections.

Despite the inevitable persistence of some requirements pertaining to the democratic origin of governments, it cannot be ruled out that, in the light of the practice reported above, the years 1989–2010 could someday constitute more an interlude than a sustainable change in the regulation of governance in international law. Indeed, 20th century international law, especially that of its second half, had come to regulate domestic governance through political and civil rights. As was indicated above, the end of the Cold War spawned the hope that international law could expand its grip on domestic governance beyond classical political and civil rights and could enshrine some requirements as to the origin of governments. Although not embracing the all-out – and somewhat naïve – enthusiasm of some American counterparts, I have myself defended a prudent and circumspect understanding of the obligation on states to ensure that their governments be of democratic origin. Whilst I still believe that international law regulates the way in which power is gained at the domestic level, I argue that the last years of that period have shown that even this minimalist customary obligation may be fading away. In that sense, these years could one day be perceived as being nothing more than an experiment, for regulation of governance through international law has returned to a more classical set of requirements centred on the exercise of power in the form of civil and political human rights. Yet, a rebound cannot be entirely ruled out. Indeed, it may be that we are witnessing only a temporary lull in the consolidation of legal requirements pertaining to the democratic origin of governments. However, the current economic and socio-political configuration of the global order seems to point to a move away from democratic legitimacy centred on the origin of power. Should such an enfeeblement of the democratic principle of democratic legitimacy be confirmed in future practice, this could indicate that international law is perhaps not the appropriate normative instrument to achieve that end.

It is probably too early to infer any definite lessons from the abovementioned recent practice. Many of the observations made here are speculative in nature. Additional research must still be conducted, and it is accordingly of great import that the principle of democratic legitimacy, even though the odds are rather ominous as to its consolidations, remains on the research agenda of international legal scholarship.\textsuperscript{90} If future research were to demonstrate that the years 1989–2010 constituted a unique experience in the history of international law from the standpoint of regulating governance, legal scholars would then have to come to terms with the possibility that international law probably is not an adequate normative instrument to regulate such an aspect of domestic governance. Rather than vainly trying to re-animate the rules pertaining to the democratic origin of governments once witnessed between 1989 and 2010 or creating soft conceptualizations of democracy in the international legal order, they should then make clear to those actually involved in international norm-making that other avenues need to be pursued if one wants to require governments to be of a democratic origin. This would surely not be idiosyncratic. Indeed, it seems to the present author that domestic governance may simultaneously be regulated through other normative systems. In particular, it cannot be ruled out that non-legal norms, political or moral directives may also enshrine some instructions as to the origin of domestic governance.\textsuperscript{91} From the vantage point of compliance, these instructions may sometimes carry more weight than legal rules. The question whether political or moral directives about the democratic origin of government may be more abided by than a corresponding legal requirement is not one that I ought to take on here, however.\textsuperscript{92} It suffices here to say that contemporary practice shows that international law could be falling short of extending its grip on domestic governance well beyond the imposition of legal requirements as to how the power is exercised at the domestic level. This must entice international lawyers to re-think the efficacy of international law as a tool for regulating accession to power at the domestic level.

\textsuperscript{90} According to Pippan, democratic governance remains a topic that has not lost its attraction and continues to inspire scholars of international law: see Pippan, ‘International Law’, supra note 12, at 5. A few years ago, Wheatley argued the contrary: see Wheatley, supra note 12, at 225.

\textsuperscript{91} These norms are often referred to by legal scholars as constituting soft legal norms. For a criticism of the concept of soft law see d’Aspremont, supra note 55.

4 Democracy in International Law and Scholarly Dynamics

The fluctuations observed in the contemporary practice – described in section 1 and 2 – make it necessary – as was demonstrated in section 3 – to keep the principle of democratic legitimacy on the research agenda of international legal scholarship. Yet, it is argued in this final section that any future research on the existence of a principle of democratic legitimacy necessitates a greater awareness of some of the abiding leanings of scholars engaging in the study of the principle of democratic legitimacy.

While Susan Marks’ earlier work93 as well as the additional thoughts which she publishes above in this journal are very instrumental in unearthing some of these dynamics, the following paragraphs aim to complement them by a few additional insights. In particular, the rest of this article focuses on three specific attitudes which have pervaded the literature on that question. Before mentioning these three inclinations of scholars, it is of the utmost importance, however, to make clear that unravelling some of these tendencies does not amount to an endorsement of the early sceptical rejection of the emergence of a principle of democratic legitimacy in international law. It is true, as some critics have argued, that the post-Cold War international legal scholarship, which has been outlined above, has occasionally conveyed the impression that international legal scholars woke up one day with the idea that democracy had suddenly crystallized in the international legal order in the form of a multifaceted obligation towards the democratic origin of governments.94 Such a criticism must nonetheless be limited to the very early studies, for later studies were grounded in thorough analysis of the practice and benefited from better hindsight. This is why critical appraisal of some of the scholarly attitudes which infuse the legal scholarship should not be seen as leading to any scepticism towards the studies – mentioned in section 1 – which have demonstrated that international law – and especially the classical constitutional autonomy of states – had not remained unaffected by the end of the Cold War.

A first attitude that pervades the scholarly literature on democratic governance in international law is the traditional inclination of legal scholars to construe international law as the receptacle of their own views on the ideal state of law. Most often, such a normative bent is unconscious. This attitude is as old as international law and has usually constituted the dividing line between natural law and positivism. While this classical antagonism no longer suffices to describe the state of contemporary scholarship,95 it is interesting to note that, even today, many commentators working on the

93 Marks, supra note 1.
95 Among many reasons, it is noteworthy that the natural law school can no longer be assimilated to that attitude: see Finnis, ‘On the Incoherence of Legal Positivism’, in D. Patterson (ed.), A Companion to Philosophy of Law and Legal Theory (1999), at 140: '[n]o natural law theory of law has ever claimed that in order to be law a norm must be required by morality, or that all legal requirements are also – independently of being validly posited as law – moral requirements’. It has even been argued that formalism is a common denominator of natural law and positivism: see Weinrib, ‘Legal Formalism: On the Immanent Rationality of Law’, 97 Yale LJ (1987–1988) 949, at 361. See also the remarks of Fletcher, ‘Comparative Law as a Subversive Discipline’, 46 Am J Comparative L. (1998) 683, at 685.
question of democracy in international law tend to channel their aspirations through legal scholarship. Indeed, although most areas of scholarly research have weathered such an inclination, the scholarly thinking about democratic governance in international law is an area where this leaning has been most prominent. One of the most common manifestations of such attitude is, for instance, found in the contemporary constitutionalist accounts of international law, according to which democracy is elevated into a constitutional principle of the international legal order. It is partly in reaction to this inclination of legal scholars to broadcast their ideals or values through their conception of international law that Susan Marks famously defended a principle of democratic inclusion whereby democracy should be construed as a transformative instrument continuously allowing the empowerment of citizens and popular participation. This is surely not the place to discuss the merits of such general scholarly attitude and the extent to which the criticisms thereof are cogent. It only matters for the sake of this article to highlight that the scholarship about democracy in international law has proven the embodiment of the (old) inclination of international legal scholars to mould their interpretation of international law along their own ideals. Besides those ‘idealistic’ scholars who project their own ideals about domestic governance in their accounts of the rules of international law, others, mindful of the actual underdevelopment of international law in this regard, have purposely engaged with the actual state of the law with a view to changing it. This ‘reformist’ attitude departs from the previous one in that its normative bent is much more conscious. It is equally being witnessed in the international legal scholarship pertaining to

96 See, for instance, the evaluation of the customary status of some of the rules of International Humanitarian Law in ICTY, Case No. IT-95-16-T, Kupreskic, 14 Jan. 2000, at para. 527.
97 Peters, supra note 12, at 263–341.
99 Marks, supra note 1, at 109 ff.
100 Legal realists have very early taken issue with such a scholarly attitude. Their critique was later refined and expended by critical legal scholars. See, among others, M. Koskenniemi, From Apology to Utopia (2005).
102 Ibid., at 14–15.
democratic governance in international law. Indeed, among the many abovementioned scholars who have embraced the idea that international law enshrines a requirement as to the democratic origin of governments, many have been convinced that change of international law with respect to domestic governance could be achieved through progressive scholarly interpretations.¹⁰³ Like the inclination to construe international law as a receptacle of one’s own ideals, this conscious use of progressive interpretation to change the law is far from being unprecedented. It comes down to the old belief of international legal scholars that they not only are commentators but that they also take part in the law-making in their capacity as scholars – a belief actually nurtured by Article 38(1)(d) of the Statute of the International Court of Justice which scholars relish referring to.¹⁰⁴ Such an inclination is nowadays observed in other scholarly constructions, like the whole concept of soft law which is also informed by the conscious attempt of scholars to promote an expansion of international law in areas thus far unregulated.¹⁰⁵ As far as the rules of international law pertaining to domestic governance are concerned, such an attitude – which in the more general area of human rights has often been lambasted for being ‘droits de l’hommiste’¹⁰⁶ – has commonly manifested itself in the adoption of a very deductive approach towards customary international law. This is especially true as regards those scholars who have tried to re-interpret the concept of self-determination beyond its decolonization-restricted scope with a view to deducing a principle of democracy.¹⁰⁷ But the promotion of a change of international law as regards domestic governance has not only taken the form of a deductive approach towards customary international law. Others have tried to live up to the classical inductive methodology to establish customary international law,¹⁰⁸ although they have then lowered the standard of general and consistent practice and that of opinio juris.

A third attitude could equally explain the amenability of legal scholars to the principle of democratic legitimacy. The legal scholarship having been interested in the study of the principle of democratic legitimacy also bespeaks an inclination to see the world in black and white and the correlative tendency to draw categories and statuses.¹⁰⁹ I must acknowledge that my own take on the question of democratic

¹⁰³ Roth, supra note 76, at 419.
¹⁰⁵ On this aspect of the soft law agenda see d’Aspremont, supra note 55. I have further elaborated on the agenda of deformalization elsewhere: J. d’Aspremont, Formalism and the Sources of International Law – A Theory of Ascertainment (2011).
¹⁰⁷ See the authors mentioned in supra note 35.
¹⁰⁸ For the classical inductive process see Delimitation of the Maritime Boundary of the Gulf of Maine (Canada v. United States of America) [1984] ICJ Rep 246 (Judgment of 12 Oct.).
governance in international law is not completely alien to this inclination. It must
nonetheless be acknowledged that such a dynamic is almost congenital to
international legal scholarship the task of which is often seen as the rationalization of an
otherwise heterogeneous and highly contingent practice. I am convinced that the
need felt by legal scholars to rationalize even the most intricate factual phenomenon
played a role in the prompt affirmation that the principle of democratic legitimacy has
crystallized in international law. Indeed, a principle of democratic legitimacy allows
a taxonomy between different categories of sovereign states and, possibly, between
different sorts of rights and privileges. In that sense, the principle of democratic le-
gitimacy has helped legal scholars to conceptualize and rationalize the volatile and
highly fact-dependent question of statehood. While the theories of the fundamental
rights of the state have yet to be revived, the introduction of a principle of demo-
cratic legitimacy makes possible such differentiations in the legal status of states and
their respective rights.

These three leanings observed in the international legal scholarship are only a few
of the many inclinations which pervade contemporary studies on democratic govern-
ance in international law. This is not the place to evaluate them. Yet, those that
have been mentioned here are probably the most common. It is ultimately argued
here that only the awareness thereof, if superimposed on the realization of the cir-
cular movements of the practice and legal scholarship depicted here, can preserve
the authority of scholarly research on questions of democratic governance in inter-
national law, especially at a time when empirical studies point to a de-emphasizing of
the democratic origin of governments in practice.

Concluding Remarks: Lessons from a Possible Interlude

Although many of the observations made here have remained speculative in nature,
this article, despite going down a different route from that followed by Susan Marks,
has similarly tried to demonstrate that, when it comes to regulating domestic govern-
ance through international law, both the practice and legal scholarship have moved
in a circle over the last 20 years. It has more specifically demonstrated that practice
and international legal scholarship originally started with a regulation of domestic
governance centred on classical political and civil rights, subsequently approaching
it from the standpoint of a principle of democratic legitimacy based on the democratic

110 See d’Aspremont, supra note 12, at 84–142.
111 See the enlightening and famous interpretation of the role of scholars by Reuter, ‘Principes de droit inter-
national public’, 103 Collected Courses (1961-II). at 459. This inclination may partly explain the success
of Carl Schmitt’s distinction between friends and enemies among international legal scholars. See, e.g.,
Friedrichs, ‘Defining the International Public Enemy’, 19 Leiden JIL (2006) 69. See also Nouwen and
112 Mouton, ‘La notion d’État et le droit international public’, 16 Droits — Revue Française de Théorie Juridique
113 I have critically evaluated some of them elsewhere: see J. d’Aspremont, Formalism and the Sources of
origin of governments, before finally returning to a traditional – and probably more comfortable – human rights-based conception of domestic governance. Shedding some light on these empirical and scholarly dynamics does certainly not call for a disregard of early scholarly studies of the principle of democratic legitimacy in the international legal order. First, as was explained above, some of the changes in the international legal system in the aftermath of the Cold War will certainly outlive the current return to policies centred on classical human rights and good governance. Indeed, although the democratic origin of government may possibly take a back seat in the foreign policies of states and in the agenda of international legal scholarship, this parameter will continue to bear upon the evaluation of the legitimacy of governments in the years to come. Secondly, these early studies about the principle of democratic legitimacy will long remain of great importance as the practice of the years 2007–2010 is still too uncertain and fluctuating for any definite lesson to be drawn. Above all, if any lesson can be learned from the years 1989–2010, it is thanks to the scholarly efforts devoted to the study of the changes brought about by the end of the Cold War in terms of domestic governance. Many of these studies have usefully demonstrated that international law reached an unprecedented degree of regulation of domestic governance which possibly took the form of an obligation pertaining to the democratic origin of government. While the relevance of studies on democracy of the first decade that followed the end of the Cold War is not by any means put into question by the argument put forward here, the possible fall of democratic governance currently observed in practice nonetheless shows that these early studies must now be complemented by new scholarly inquiries if one wants correctly to capture the fluctuating state of the practice and legal scholarship on the question. In that sense, the argument put forward here leads to a paradoxical conclusion. Indeed, the possible fall of the principle of democratic legitimacy observed in contemporary practice entails renewed scholarly attention being paid to the principle of democratic legitimacy. In other words, the de-emphasizing of the democratic origin of governments in practice and legal scholarship necessitates that democracy return to the top tier of international legal scholars’ agenda with a view to their more correctly appraising the continuous changes in the international legal system. If that were to be the case, it is hoped that subsequent research will be carried out with a greater awareness of the empirical and scholarly dynamics which this modest article has sought to unearth.