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The New World of Democracy Promotion

LINCOLN MITCHELL

Democracy promotion efforts and their relationship to American foreign policy have been framed in recent years by several factors. Some of these factors, such as the legacy of the George W. Bush era and the contemporary US political environment, are reflections of American policies and politics. Others, such as events this year in the Arab world and the ongoing defensive strategies of authoritarian regimes, are external to the United States. In both cases, recent developments have significantly altered the political and economic context in which America can promote democracy abroad, and have presented new challenges for encouraging democratic development.

The first important contextual variable is simply that we are no longer in the 1990s. Obviously this has been true for over a decade, but it is worth emphasizing nonetheless. The 1990s were the period when democracy promotion in the form we think of it today began to take shape. But that global political environment was unique. It was a time when leaders in many countries sought assistance in developing their democratic institutions. Things have changed since then.

The Bush administration's aggressive foreign policy during the first eight years of the new century further influenced democracy promotion. The “freedom agenda” was linked—in the media and among many of Bush's critics—with unpopular US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as with an American approach to the rest of the world that was broadly seen as arrogant and insensitive. During this period, democracy promotion became tied for the first time in the United States to one politi-

cal party, the Republicans, and even to one faction of that party, the neoconservatives.

The major set of global events that has changed the context for democracy promotion since the end of the Bush administration has been the dramatic developments earlier this year in North Africa, frequently referred to as the Arab Spring. Many observers initially viewed the uprisings as a series of democratic breakthroughs, rejuvenating democratic development as a global political force. Significantly, these breakthroughs occurred in countries where the United States and the West had generally supported the nondemocratic regimes.

Changes in the US domestic political environment since the end of the Bush administration also have had an impact on American support of democratic reforms. Increased awareness of national debt and concerns over federal spending may begin to play a greater role in decision making regarding foreign policy. They almost certainly will dampen public enthusiasm for foreign assistance—including for democracy promotion.

THE BUSH LEGACY

Before the Bush presidency, democracy assistance was viewed in the United States largely as a benign policy of which few people outside the Washington beltway and a few universities were even aware. Although democracy promotion had been more or less a central tenet of US foreign policy since the mid-1990s, and had existed in various other forms throughout much of the cold war and even before, it was not something around which heated debates erupted or that found its way very frequently into presidential remarks or speeches.

This changed during the Bush administration. Importantly, however, with the exception of the American-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, democracy assistance policies and activities themselves did not change dramatically during those years.

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The battery of civil society development, election support, and rule-of-law programs that had begun during the 1990s continued to characterize democracy promotion throughout the Bush years.

The rhetoric around these programs, on the other hand, changed markedly. The implicit moral dimension of democracy assistance was made explicit—often linked by the president, a born-again Christian, to some kind of divine inspiration. Moreover, Bush placed a greater rhetorical emphasis on democracy promotion than had his predecessors, often describing it as central to US foreign policy and part of America's responsibility in the world.

Paradoxically, Bush's devotion to advancing democracy (which was most pronounced during the middle four years of his time in office) undermined support for democracy promotion both inside and outside the United States. In some sense Bush, as his popularity approached its nadir and the divisions caused by his presidency deepened, became the face of democracy promotion. This was an unfortunate development for the endeavor, and did not reflect reality.

By 2006 or so most conversations about democracy promotion, particularly in the media, among the punditry, and in the blogosphere, were dominated by the Iraq War, American arrogance generally, and the missteps of the Bush administration. Democracy work had, to a large extent, become conflated with the administration's failed and increasingly unpopular policies.

Domestically, this meant that the left began to oppose democracy promotion because of its association with Bush. Internationally it became easier, particularly for nondemocratic governments, to portray the entire enterprise as an instrument of American hegemony. In this context it was increasingly difficult for the United States to effectively pursue democracy promotion policies. Much of the difficulty remains today.

INCREASED RESISTANCE

However, a more fundamental and even obvious fact that frames current efforts to promote democracy is that most of the world's nondemocratic countries are nondemocratic because their leaders do not want them to be otherwise. Even a cursory look around the world makes this reasonably apparent, but the reality has not yet entirely sunk in with those who form democracy promotion strategies in the West.

The constellation of programs that constitute democracy assistance was forged during the 1990s in

the aftermath of the cold war. At that time, a major mission was to help postcommunist states become democratic and rejoin the West. These programs rested on assumptions that no longer apply.

In particular, strategies that helped Poland and Estonia—or even some countries outside the former Soviet bloc, such as post-apartheid South Africa—were built on the good intentions of the new post-authoritarian governments and on good relations between donor countries and governments eager to strengthen their democratic credentials. These strategies are of little use today with consolidated semi-authoritarian regimes in the former Soviet Union, Africa, Asia, or elsewhere that have little interest in becoming democratic.

Yet, because of the dominance of the 1990s paradigm, democracy promotion efforts still engage with legislatures that have no power, or earnestly observe elections and help parties contest them even though the fix has been in for months. Moreover, donor countries continue to view host governments as partners in democratization despite ample evidence that those governments are committed to preserving undemocratic regimes. Many of these governments have become suspicious of democracy promotion and have created barriers for this kind of work.

This problem highlights an essential contradiction in democracy promotion. The gestalt of the activity, in the eyes of its practitioners, is that it is a modest form of assistance that does not seek radical change. But the reality of the undemocratic world today is that radical change, perhaps even arrived at through radical means, is the only way that democracy will advance in many countries, at least in the short term.

A corollary to this contradiction is that, while the public face of democracy promotion (particularly since the Bush presidency) is often that of war and invasion, the constituent activities that actually make up the work usually seem far more benign—they focus on training, capacity building, and technical support. The democracy promotion community has failed to incorporate new approaches that reflect the resistance of entrenched authoritarian regimes; this is one of the reasons that the community was so behind the curve in North Africa during the Arab Spring.

THE ARAB UPRISINGS

At the end of 2010, it was easy to describe global democratic advance as being in a slump. Recent years had provided little hope for meaningful

democratic breakthroughs anywhere. Afghanistan and Iraq, despite an ongoing American presence and the advent of formal elections, were still not close to being democratic. The “color revolutions” in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan had not led to democratic consolidation.

This perception began to change in early 2011 as the Arab Spring began in Tunisia, then spread to Egypt and subsequently other parts of North Africa and the Middle East. In the initial weeks of those dramatic events, many in the media and policy world viewed them as major democratic breakthroughs. Comparisons to the fall of communism were not uncommon.

Yet the Arab Spring raised very different questions for democracy promotion than had the events two decades earlier in Eastern Europe. The end of communism was a triumphant moment for the West. It presented a tremendous opportunity for the implementation of democracy promotion policies as countries in Eastern Europe and elsewhere sought to consolidate their nascent democracies.

The situation in the Arab world is very different. The protesters in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and elsewhere this year were demonstrating not against governments locked in an ideological struggle with the West, as was the case in Eastern Europe in 1989, but against governments that enjoyed the support of, and assistance from, the United States. Unlike during the color revolutions of only half a decade earlier, the West could claim no role in these democratic breakthroughs because it had de-emphasized democracy programs in recent years in those countries.

More significantly, because of American support for the incumbent authoritarian regimes, the activists who led the Arab Spring movements in many countries have been reluctant to seek assistance or guidance from Western-supported democracy promotion organizations.

Since the weeks immediately following the resignations of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, much of the West’s initial optimism, often based on unreasonably high expectations, has dissipated. Nonetheless, the Arab Spring represents a new chapter in democracy promotion, raising new challenges and questions about assumptions underlying the endeavor.

Increased concerns over federal spending may dampen public enthusiasm for democracy promotion.

Some have tried to retell the story of the Arab Spring with a bigger role for Western democracy promotion by highlighting relatively minor activities in some of these countries or by making tenuous claims for the role of, for example, Serbian democracy activists who shared their experiences and lessons regarding the 2000 ouster of Slobodan Milosevic. Although a kernel of truth resides in some of this, in general the idea that the Arab Spring was a Western-supported idea is implausible.

The Arab Spring has also prompted some to ask if democracy promotion is necessary at all. If democratic breakthroughs can occur in countries where the West has actively supported nondemocratic regimes and has carried out little democracy promotion, is democracy assistance perhaps unneeded? Although this question is a legitimate one, it overlooks the fact that the real work of democracy promotion begins after the initial breakthrough.

Carrying out this work, however, is especially difficult in countries like Egypt, where the United States is viewed as a patron of the old authoritarian regime, not as an agent for building democracy. Thus, the challenge facing democracy promotion activists after the Arab Spring is to win enough confidence from the new leadership for their work to be allowed and their advice, at least sometimes, to be heeded.

At the same time, the democracy promotion community needs once again to make the case to Western policy makers and voters that the work it does is important and valuable. This is difficult given that the public’s perception of democracy promotion is framed on one hand by military aggression, as in Iraq, and on the other by invisibility, as in Egypt and Tunisia.

ISOLATION AND AUSTERITY

As the Bush administration wound down, the future of the American democracy promotion effort was threatened because of its close association, in the minds of many, with that unpopular presidency and the American war in Iraq. Today, while that legacy still clouds perceptions of democracy assistance in the United States, other domestic political considerations have become more significant.

The two most important domestic challenges facing US pre-democracy efforts today are related: a growing sense of isolationism among American voters (most pronounced among, but not limited to, parts of the anti-Barack Obama radical right) and a growing awareness of the seriousness of the debt crisis that America confronts. This latter concern also is strongest in the Republican Party but is spreading across the political spectrum.

One of the enduring effects of the seemingly unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that Americans of various political beliefs, albeit for often very different reasons, now question their country's ability to accomplish its goals and the utility of even trying. In a sense the critique of democracy promotion has changed from the form it took during the late Bush administration—a left-leaning “Should we engage in this type of thing?”—into today's question, asked by Americans of different ideological and partisan leanings: “Can we?” The latter question is often linked to this one: “Can we afford it?”

US democracy promotion efforts, particularly in their post-cold war form, are based in part on America's vision of itself as ascendant and powerful. The belief that the United States could, and should, seek to re-make much of the world in its democratic image was considerably more plausible when the United States was the global superpower, and when the American people and their leaders felt optimistic and secure in their position.

Growing isolationism is a more significant problem than doubts about wherewithal; if the former trend continues, building political support for any enduring international commitment will become increasingly difficult. For most of democracy promotion's history, it has been a somewhat below-the-radar policy that did not need to be explained or justified to the American people. This changed with the Bush era. In the current political and fiscal environment, arguments for democracy promotion may meet resistance from across the political spectrum based on a lack of enthusiasm for foreign entanglements and a growing sense that money, if it should be spent at all, should be spent on domestic problems.

In fact, America's debt problem is not going to be addressed in any serious way by changing,

or even canceling, democracy promotion policy. Democracy assistance constitutes an extremely small portion of the foreign policy budget which, in turn, represents a very small portion of overall federal spending. Nonetheless, those seeking to reduce spending likely will focus on budget items that, because they lack widespread political support, are easiest to cut. Democracy promotion fits this description.

The vulnerability of democracy promotion efforts, and of foreign aid more generally, was made apparent in January 2011 when 165 Republican members of the House of Representatives signed a statement calling not only for cutting all democracy promotion money, but for abolishing the US Agency for International Development, and much of the rest of foreign assistance, altogether.

TAILORING STRATEGIES

The challenges facing democracy assistance, both substantively and politically, are not the same as those that existed in 1992, 2002, or even 2008, but they are serious, even daunting. They are not, however, insurmountable.

Some of the means to overcome these challenges are ones that have existed for several years. These include recognizing that nondemocratic countries today are largely not in transition or interested in becoming democratic; and reframing democracy promotion for the American people so that it no longer appears partisan, linked to a particular ideology, or tied to military adventurism. In addition, new strategies will have to be devised to take into account the emerging financial and political realities in the United States and the impact of the Arab Spring and other recent global developments.

The future of democracy promotion will occur in a range of countries facing various circumstances. Some states, like Georgia or Azerbaijan, are 20 years removed from Soviet dominance but still show little if any sign of becoming consolidated democracies. Some, such as Cambodia, are consolidated semi-authoritarian regimes that can no longer be described as transitioning toward democracy.

In post-breakthrough countries, like Egypt or Tunisia, the excitement of the old regime's collapse is slowly but almost inevitably giving way to growing disappointment with the pace

Strategies built on the good intentions of post-authoritarian governments are of little use today with regimes that have little interest in becoming democratic.

of reform. Other countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, remain mired in a post-conflict environment, or, like Libya, are a hybrid between post-breakthrough and post-conflict states. Still others, such as Cuba or Belarus, are authoritarian states where efforts to precipitate some kind of political breakthrough enjoy a level of support in Washington.

Seeking to create one policy that fits all of these countries would be foolish, so the first thing democracy promoters need to do is to understand how different regimes and contexts suggest different strategies. Democracy promoters have gotten much better at this over the years, but some problems remain. For example, regardless of regime type, elections are invariably treated as if they are of critical importance—even though in many consolidated nondemocratic states, elections have little bearing on political development and are no longer likely to move democracy forward. It is worth noting, for example, that none of the Arab Spring–related uprisings were precipitated by elections.

In many places where democracy promotion policies are implemented, state building and democracy building are pursued simultaneously, and in some cases, nation building as well. Getting the balance right between or among these efforts is very important. Focusing too much on governance programs or state building in countries where the state is relatively strong, but democracy is relatively weak, can have a counterproductive effect, leading to stronger states that are better able to repress freedom.

In general, the conundrum confronting democracy assistance today is that continuing to pursue policies that seek to help reform-minded governments become more democratic means being irrelevant in most of the world. On the other hand, pursuing a more confrontational path that seeks to change undemocratic governments will result in increased harassment of democracy activists and ultimately increased tensions between the United States and the countries it is trying to make more democratic.

There is no easy way to solve this problem, but one approach would be to reframe the question, moving away from a choice between support and confrontation and toward building the institutions, political and civic, that need to be in place once a breakthrough occurs. This requires a longer-term, perhaps even less interesting, approach, but it is probably the best way forward in

countries with relatively consolidated nondemocratic regimes.

REFRAMING THE ISSUE

Calls for reframing democracy promotion have been common since people in the field became aware of the damage done to the image of their enterprise by the neoconservative zealots of the Bush administration's middle years. Time has already healed some of the damage, but the need to reframe the project remains strong—no effort has been made in recent years to present democracy promotion to the American people as a bipartisan or even a progressive policy.

The Obama administration's tendency to speak of democracy promotion rarely and in very general terms, though it is frustrating for many in the field, has had the effect of a benign neglect. It has allowed democracy promoters to go about their work while the long shadow of the Bush years gradually recedes.

This approach, however, does little to address the newer challenge that has arisen in the post-Bush era: what might be described as political and economic fatigue regarding democracy work. Even if it is no longer viewed as part of a right-wing ideology, many Americans continue to have doubts about democracy promotion because they do not understand why the United States should play this role, or why their country should provide assistance abroad in light of ongoing economic troubles at home.

A constant drumbeat on the need to cut spending—heard everywhere, from Tea Party radicals to the opinion pages and blogs of many newspapers—makes overcoming this challenge especially difficult. During a time when extending unemployment insurance or keeping national parks open is threatened, it is hard to explain to Americans that their tax dollars should be spent, for example, on determining whether or not the most recent Armenian election was fairly conducted.

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

It is in this constrictive context that the Arab Spring, probably the biggest challenge and opportunity for democracy promotion in a generation, has occurred. Although comparisons between the Arab Spring and the end of the cold war are often overstated, it is clear that among policy makers and others working on democracy assistance, this year's events are viewed as seminal ones that bear enormous potential.

It is also clear that the future of democracy promotion—as a policy pursued and stressed by US administrations regardless of party—is tied at least in part to the success of political reforms in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere. While many democracy programs and activities such as legislative development, promoting the rule of law, supporting political parties, and providing training and monitoring for elections will be the same in North Africa as they have been in the former communist countries and elsewhere, the political approach needs to be somewhat different.

Heavy-handed Western approaches engender resentment everywhere, and the more effective democracy organizations and activists have eschewed them. Even so, the need for subtlety is even greater in the Middle East and North Africa, where anti-American feeling is far stronger than it was, for example, in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, or even in much of Asia and Africa throughout the past few decades.

The initial strategic challenge facing Western advisers—on everything from crafting new constitutions and setting up elections to assisting new candidates and legislators—is to get their voices heard and win a seat at the table. Progress has been made in some of these areas, and existing relations between reform elements and various Western nongovernmental organizations remain valuable. Yet obstacles persist, and they are in many respects qualitatively different from those that democracy activists encountered 10 or 15 years ago in other parts of the world. Democracy promotion will not succeed in the aftermath of the Arab Spring unless new approaches take into account the suspicion with which the West is viewed in much of the region.

The Arab Spring also places front and center a set of substantive issues in democracy promotion that have become more significant during the

twenty-first century. The countries involved are all Muslim. The democracies that might emerge in coming years will reflect that reality, and this will have implications for the domestic and international policies pursued by the new governments. We can expect that if democracy blossoms in Egypt and elsewhere in the region, the new governments likely will not be as pro-American as their predecessors, or share as many foreign policy preferences with the United States, and they will probably allow for a greater role for Islam in domestic political and social life. The West must find a way to reconcile this likelihood with its own vision of democracy, which is often implicitly pro-West and secular.

THE TEST

In the next several years Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and other North African countries could transition into new authoritarian regimes or even into post-conflict chaos, or they could eschew Western support and evolve into more democratic countries on their own. Any of these outcomes could discredit much of the democracy promotion project. The future of the project thus hangs on both the outcomes in North Africa and the perceived role played by the West.

It hangs, too, on the ability of Western policy makers to overcome deficits in both financial resources and political support for this kind of work. Democracy promotion flourished when the United States was wealthy enough to afford assistance initiatives (albeit minor ones, with outcomes that were difficult to predict, guarantee, or even describe), when it could plausibly position itself as a global leader on freedom and human rights, and when domestic political support for these activities was bipartisan. The test facing democracy promoters now is whether their endeavor can flourish in a very different environment. ■