

Democracy as Policy Goal and Universal Value

by Carl Gershman

One of the most significant but least appreciated changes in American foreign policy during the past two decades is the emergence of democracy promotion as a central, bipartisan dimension of United States engagement with the world. The support for democracy promotion took root with President Reagan's memorable Westminster Address in 1982 that spurred the establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The effort expanded geometrically following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when Congress and the administration of George H.W. Bush committed hundreds of millions of dollars, mostly through the Agency for International Development (AID), to support the consolidation of democracy in the post-communist countries, and still more resources to aid the transitions that were beginning to unfold in previously authoritarian countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The effort continued to expand during the Clinton administration with the creation of new offices in AID to back transitions and to support free elections, independent media, the rule of law, and civil-society NGOs, and also with the initiation of the Community of Democracies, a new multilateral structure designed to strengthen cooperation among established and emerging democracies. The administration of George W. Bush has magnified still further the United States' support for democracy, pledging most recently in the State of the Union Address that America will stand with the allies of freedom to support democratic movements in the Middle East and beyond, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.

It would be misleading to suggest that the consensus that now exists on the importance of advancing democracy overrides all other priorities in foreign affairs. In fighting terrorism and pursuing other strategic interests, the United States will inevitably maintain cooperative relationships with some governments, such as those in Pakistan or Russia, that are a good deal less than democratic. Moreover, as the debate over Iraq has made clear, the consensus on democracy promotion does not preclude sharp partisan disagreements on particular issues of foreign policy. It is important to emphasize, though, that the Iraq debate was not about democracy promotion, but focused instead on the decision to use military force to end Saddam Hussein's regime, largely because it was suspected of having weapons of mass destruction that could threaten the United States. On the issue of helping Iraqis establish a democratic system following Saddam's removal from power, however,

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the consensus has held firm. In fact, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the democracy-promotion organization associated with the Democratic Party, was one of the first groups to establish a presence in Iraq after the war and is today, with its Republican counterpart, fully engaged in aiding Iraqi NGOs and preparing Iraqi parties for the upcoming elections. Senator John Kerry himself, whatever his misgivings about the Iraq war, affirmed his belief in “America’s longstanding bipartisan commitment to supporting the spread of democracy, with the understanding that America will be safer in a world of democracies.”¹

The consensus is based fundamentally on three propositions: first, that the spread of democracy, as Senator Kerry said and as President Bush has emphasized time and again, serves the American national interest since it will lead to a more secure and peaceful world; second, that the spread of democracy serves the American national purpose in that it advances the ideals of freedom and human dignity which are the country’s core values; and third, that it is appropriate and desirable for the United States to provide moral, political, technical, and financial support to people who are striving to achieve democracy, all the while recognizing that democracy, as a system of self-government, must ultimately be built in each country undergoing democratization by the people themselves.

Underpinning the consensus on democracy promotion is the idea that democracy is an universal value, and that people throughout the world, in developing and developed countries alike, admire democracy and want it for their own reasons, and not because the United States wants them to be democratic for *its* reasons. This is by no means a self-evident proposition, and there are critics who believe that even the most peaceful and cooperative means of promoting democracy, such as providing financial and technical assistance to indigenous groups that request such help, is a form of arrogant imperialism. Dmitri Simes, for example, has accused Democrats and Republicans alike of being “messianic” and “condescending” in claiming “the right to impose democracy on other nations and cultures, regardless of their circumstances and preferences.”²

In fact, it is the view expressed by Simes that is condescending, since it assumes that people living outside the established democracies of the West either do not want democracy or lack the capacity to achieve it. It is also utterly divorced from historical experience and contemporary political reality since it ignores what Amartya Sen has called the single most important thing that happened in the last century, which is the rise of democracy.³ In just the last thirty years, according to the annual Freedom House Survey of Freedom in the World, the total number of countries rated “free” has doubled, from forty-four to eighty-eight. In addition to these eighty-eight liberal democracies, there are now an additional twenty-nine electoral democracies, meaning countries where there are some restrictions on basic political and civil rights, but where elections are reasonably free and fair. This brings the total of number of democracies to 117, representing more than 60 percent of the world’s countries. Democracy has now spread to every major region of the world, with the sole exception of the Arab Middle East where gains have still been minimal. It is more prevalent in

affluent than in non-affluent countries, but it has nonetheless established a significant presence in the developing world, with 38 of the 128 countries with incomes below \$3,500 rated “free” in the Freedom House survey.⁴

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By no stretch of the imagination can it be said that the United States imposed this vast change upon the world over the last three decades. When the “third wave” of democratic expansion began in the mid-1970s with the transitions in Spain and Portugal, the United States was reducing its involvement abroad in reaction to its defeat in Vietnam. The United States policy of promoting human rights and democracy was initiated shortly thereafter during the Carter and Reagan Administrations, and it certainly encouraged the democratization process as it gathered momentum. But in no way did it bring this process about or control it. In fact, in his analysis of the causes of the third wave, Samuel P. Huntington treats the United States policy of democracy promotion that was started in the 1980s, along with the role of other external actors such as the European Community and the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, as but one of five major factors that brought about the historic democratic transformation. The other factors were the legitimacy crisis that undermined many poorly performing authoritarian systems; the unprecedented economic growth of the preceding decades that raised education standards and expanded the urban middle class; the dramatic changes within the Catholic Church that prepared it to play a crucial role in the transitions in many countries with a Catholic majority, such as Chile and Poland; and the revolution in communications that made it possible for information about political changes in one country to spread rapidly around the world, creating a “snowball” effect. Thus, while the United States’ role was not insignificant, it was certainly not paramount or imperious.⁵

While the third wave of democratic expansion ended roughly a decade ago, it has not been followed by the anticipated reverse wave of democratic retreat. Since then, there have been numerous developments that could have set in motion a major reversal of the earlier gains: violent ethnic conflicts in the Balkans and in many African countries; sharp economic downturns in Asia and Latin America; rampant corruption, stalled transitions, and democratic back-sliding in many post-authoritarian countries; and, most recently, the war on terrorism that has fostered a less liberal international environment and given some governments new license to attack dissidents and minorities in the name of security. One certainly might have expected a broad setback for democracy as a result of these developments, but this has not occurred. On the contrary, democracy has continued to make modest advances, such as the recent elections in Indonesia, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Iraq; overall, the gains have outpaced the setbacks. The current Freedom House Survey, for example, reports

that in the three years since 9/11, fifty-one countries have made democratic gains as against twenty-seven countries where there have been setbacks.⁶

The most compelling explanation for this remarkable (and mostly unremarked) absence of a democratic reversal is the enormous support that democracy now enjoys in non-Western countries and cultures. The existence of such support has been confirmed by a recent study of world opinion using data gathered by the World Values Survey. The study concluded that “democracy has an overwhelming positive image throughout the world” and has become, over the last decade, “virtually the only political model with global appeal, no matter what the culture.”⁷ While attitudes in Muslim societies are less liberal than they are in the West on gender equality, gay rights, and other social issues, there is no difference at all when it comes to support for democratic institutions. Close to 90 percent of the respondents in Muslim societies favor democracy, the same figure as in the West.⁸

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In developing societies, support for democracy is actually greater among the poor and less educated than among the affluent. On the occasion of India’s 50th anniversary in 1997, the New Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) conducted a national survey assessing popular attitudes toward Indian democracy. The results constituted a stunning rejection of the common belief that the Indian people, the poor above all, had lost faith in the country’s democratic system. On the contrary, wrote Ashish Nandy, the director of the CSDS, “The democratic system enjoys greater legitimacy today than in the past. The poor and deprived defend democracy more vigorously than the elite.”⁹ Democracy’s appeal, he explained, owed a great deal to the Indians’ belief that its inclusiveness offered the best way to deal with the country’s staggering ethnic, religious, linguistic, and regional diversities. The poor especially value democracy, he said, because they are convinced that “their votes matter,” and they seem to relish exercising their franchise in defiance of their professional well-wishers among the more affluent classes who have their own ideas about what the poor need.¹⁰

The idea that ordinary people in developing countries benefit from democracy and, therefore, desire it and are willing to sacrifice to achieve it is not yet sufficiently understood in the United States and other established democracies. There is still the view, left over from the period of the Cold War when communism claimed to speak for the least advantaged, that democracy is a luxury for the poor, who need bread before freedom. To be sure, the poor need bread, but relinquishing their rights is not the way to get it. While the rich may sometimes take democracy for granted, the poor are keenly aware that it is essential for their protection and overall well-being.

There are eight fundamental ways that democracy benefits the people of developing countries:

1) *Democracy is the means by which the citizenry can hold governments accountable for their policies and prevent an abuse of power.* The political scientist Larry Diamond has written that “predatory, corrupt, wasteful, abusive, tyrannical, incompetent governance is the bane of development.”¹¹ There is simply no way to control or eliminate corruption if people don’t have access to the fundamental institutions of democracy: a free media that can expose corruption, an independent judiciary that can punish its perpetrators, and a system of free and fair elections that can hold political leaders accountable and remove them from office when they violate the people’s trust. This doesn’t mean that democracy will automatically reduce corruption or produce good governance. Responsible governance requires political will, effective institutions, professional officials, and an informed, alert, and aroused citizenry. But without democracy none of these things are possible, and the absence of political and legal restraints leads inevitably to inefficient, overbearing, unresponsive, and corrupt governmental behavior.

2) *Democracy promotes economic development.* In the past, conventional wisdom has held that development and prosperity encourage democracy, as better off citizens become more educated and have the ability to participate in politics and government. More recent analysis shows that the causal effect also works the other way around—democracy fosters development. This is a principal conclusion of the *Human Development Report 2002*, published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which notes that “democratic governance can trigger a virtuous cycle of development—as political freedom empowers people to press for policies that expand social and economic opportunities, and as open debates help communities shape their priorities.”¹²

In fact, research has shown that democracy not only helps people influence government policy, but aids development in even more fundamental ways by fostering productive economic activity. A study by Richard Roll and John R. Talbott concludes that more than 80 percent of the cross-country variation in per capita income growth among developing countries (using data compiled for 1995–1999) can be explained by factors that are aspects of democracy, among them the presence of strong property rights, political rights, civil liberties, and press freedoms. They also found that dramatic increases in per capita income in developing countries have tended to follow democratic events (such as the removal of a dictator), and that anti-democratic events tended to be followed by a reduction in economic growth. The variables that contribute to economic growth share two characteristics. The first is that they represent institutions and policies that establish a rule of law enforced with fairness and justice. This encourages economic participants to work, take risks, save, and engage in other forms of productive economic activity. The second characteristic is that the variables constitute forms of collective action at the level of government—the enforcement of contracts, the protection of political and property rights, and the collection of taxes that can be used for public services. Such actions constitute important

components of democratic governance, which explains why developing societies have so much to gain by establishing democratic systems.¹³

The reason is that democracy, by empowering people at the grass roots, gives governments the *political* incentive to guard against famines and to take preventive measures to relieve human suffering if there is a danger of mass hunger.

The economic advantages of democracy also refute the view, still held by some development specialists, that authoritarian regimes in poor countries are more likely than democracies to make the tough economic decisions that are necessary to promote development and reduce poverty. Responding to this view, Amartya Sen, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics, has observed that “there is...no convincing general evidence that authoritarian governance and the suppression of political and civil rights are really beneficial to economic development.”¹⁴ In fact, there is growing evidence to support the view that democracies actually outperform autocracies from an economic standpoint. This is the conclusion of a study based on World Bank data comparing the performance over forty years of democratic and non-democratic countries with per capita GDP under \$2,000 in constant 1995 dollars. Their growth rates were equal, even when including the performance of high-growth East Asian autocracies (some of which, such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia, have recently become democratic). Outside of East Asia, the poor democracies achieved 50 percent higher growth rates. The democracies also consistently outperformed the autocracies by wide margins on indicators measuring social well-being, such as life expectancy, infant mortality rates, and education.¹⁵

3) *Democracy promotes human rights and protects people from the cruelties of autocratic regimes.* Democracy is a law-based system that restrains the power of the state to deny citizens their basic rights or to control their lawful actions. As such, it is the political system that best protects the fundamental freedoms of expression, conscience, and assembly that are often called human rights. It does this by subordinating the executive authority to legislative power; by making the legislature accountable to a judiciary that is independent of political authority with the power to determine the constitutionality of the laws; and by decentralizing power to ensure the autonomy of local government from the arbitrary control by the central government. Democracy also protects citizens by preserving an open society with an independent media that prevents abuses from being hidden. It also allows independent civic organizations to monitor the government and defend the rights of individual citizens and minority groups. For these reasons, the most severe human rights abuses always occur in the most closed, undemocratic systems in which citizens are denied the protection of law or the ability to organize to defend their rights.

4) *Democracy also protects people from the effects of economic and social disasters.* Amartya Sen has shown that that “in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press.”¹⁶ The reason is that democracy, by empowering people at the grass roots level, gives governments the *political* incentive to guard against famines and to take preventive measures to relieve human suffering if there is a danger of mass hunger. Precisely because famine or other kinds of disasters endanger all citizens, not taking protective measures would be fatal to any government in a situation where the people are in a position to register their views. The protective power of democracy, Sen points out, might not be missed when things are going smoothly, but it becomes critically important to the most vulnerable parts of the population when a calamity looms that may be caused by changed economic circumstances or accumulated policy mistakes.¹⁷ In addition to deterring criminal negligence by government, democracy also prevents the deliberate use by government of apparently natural disasters to eliminate entire sectors of the population that are considered to be politically disloyal, a criminal practice sometimes used by totalitarian regimes. This is exactly what happened in the Ukraine during the “forced famine” of 1932–1933, which took the lives of millions of peasants, as well as in North Korea in the late 1990s when two million people died of famine as the regime blocked relief efforts and diverted humanitarian aid to the military. In South Korea, immediately across the border, Koreans lived in relative affluence, the beneficiaries of a growing economy and democratic political systems.

5) *Democracy encourages governments to be alert to the needs of their citizens and to promote, therefore, the health, education, and overall well-being of the population.* One widely used measure of the citizens’ social and economic well-being is the infant mortality rate (IMR). Patricio Navia and Thomas D. Zweifel have conducted two studies of the impact of the type of regime—democracy or dictatorship—on the IMR, the first based on annual observations of 138 countries between 1950 and 1990,¹⁸ and the second based on data gathered since 1990.¹⁹ In each case, democracies have consistently outperformed dictatorships. For example, after isolating the impact of regime type from other factors, the second study found that there were 10 fewer infant deaths per 1,000 live births in democracies than in dictatorships (42.8 versus 52.6) during the 1950–1990 period. The gap was smaller during the 1990–1997 period (45.9 versus 50.5), but still significant, leading Navia and Zweifel to conclude that “at an equal level of development, on average five out of every one thousand newborns will die *only* and needlessly because the land of their birth is not democratically governed.”²⁰ The gap also persisted at every level of development, with 7 more newborns of every 1,000 dying in their first year in dictatorships than in democracies with annual GDP per capita of more than \$6,000, and with the figure rising to 17 in countries with GDP per capita under \$2,000.

Even benevolent dictatorships, they found, are always outperformed by democracies, for the simple reason that democratic governments are naturally more

responsive to the needs of the people and are thus prepared to invest in social services to improve the citizens' quality of life. Overall, social security and welfare expenditures are five times higher in democracies than in dictatorships—10.4 percent of GDP as against 2.1 percent. “Not only do dictators ban political parties and forbid free speech,” write Navia and Zweifel, “they also fail their people in much more concrete ways,” ensuring that fewer infants reach adolescence and fostering a lower quality of life.²¹

6) *Democracy enriches the life of people by promoting peace, both between states and within them.* The idea that democracy is a pacifying force owes a great deal to the work of R.J. Rummel, whose multi-volume work, *Understanding Conflict and War*, concluded that free societies do not go to war with each other.²² Immanuel Kant had reached the same conclusion nearly two centuries earlier in his essay “Perpetual Peace,” where he noted that if “the consent of the citizenry is required in order to determine whether or not there will be war, it is natural that they consider all its calamities before committing themselves to so risky a game.”²³ Greater sensitivity to the cost of war is just one of the reasons that democracy fosters peace. James Lee Ray has also emphasized democracy's capacity to moderate the day-to-day relations among states, thereby preventing crises from developing to the point where they have to be peacefully resolved to prevent the outbreak of violent conflict.²⁴ We have also seen from the Indian case that democracy is an inclusive system that offers a way of accommodating ethnic and religious differences that are a principal source of conflict in the contemporary world.

7) *Democracy helps people in developing societies learn from one another through public discussion, thereby facilitating the definition of needs, priorities, and duties.* Amartya Sen calls this the *constructive* role of democracy since it involves the formation of values and the generation of “informed and considered choices.”²⁵ Through public discussion, he notes, the people of the Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have come to understand and internalize the harmful effects of high fertility rates on the community and on the lives of young women. The result is that Kerala now has a fertility rate similar to that of Britain and France and lower than China's, a result achieved without coercion.²⁶ Having people take ownership of an approach to solving a social problem through the formation of new values is ultimately far more effective than having a solution imposed or mandated by the government or by international assistance agencies. But such constructive action can't happen without democracy.

8) *Democracy enriches the lives of citizens by recognizing their dignity as human beings.* Sen calls this the *intrinsic* value of democracy. People value political participation in the life of the community *for its own sake*, not because it advances a practical purpose. To be denied such participation, he writes, is “a major deprivation” since “exercising political rights is a crucial part of good lives of individuals as social beings.”²⁷ As we have seen, freedom serves many purposes since it makes it possible for people to defend their interests, expand their potential, and create new opportunities for themselves, their families, and their communities. This is what is meant by “the pursuit of happiness.” But human freedom does not require an instrumental justification. It is important in itself.

Given the powerful link between democracy and the capacity to address so many needs that ordinary people have, including the need to pursue lives with dignity and self-fulfillment, it should not be surprising that nongovernmental civic and political organizations committed to the advancement of democracy have sprung up throughout the less developed and non-democratic regions of the world. The presence of such organizations constitutes a quiet revolution that has taken place over the last two decades, especially since the cresting of the third wave in the late 1980s when opportunities for democratic activism expanded dramatically around the world. Such organizations are enormously diverse both functionally and geographically, reflecting the complex challenges of democratization in post-authoritarian countries, as well as the need to open and liberalize the remaining autocracies. Their purpose and programs are invariably a response to the circumstances and challenges in each particular country, giving these organizations an identity that is distinctly local and that is formed out of grassroots movements to achieve particular democratic objectives.

Thus, in countries wracked by civil conflict, such as the Congo or Liberia, there are local NGOs that use radio, theater, and schools to promote tolerance and ethnic reconciliation and that advance human rights through monitoring, education, advocacy, and the provision of legal aid. In countries trying to make the transition to democracy, there are groups that fight corruption, promote the rule of law, encourage citizen awareness and grassroots political participation, strengthen local government and independent media, and seek the empowerment of women politically and economically. There are political parties that offer democratic alternatives in elections. There are also research centers that advocate democratic ideas and policies, trade unions that protect the rights of workers, business associations that advance transparency and market reforms, citizen groups that monitor elections, and civic education organizations that promote democratic values both in and out of schools. Not least, there are exile-based groups that expose human rights abuses in closed societies and that provide a lifeline of independent information to people living under dictatorship.

During the same period that such organizations have proliferated throughout the democratizing and non-democratic regions of the world, there has also developed among the established democracies a growing number of democracy-support institutions and programs. The German political party foundations were the first institutions of this kind, having been established in the aftermath of the Second World War. The role played by the largest of these nongovernmental, publicly-funded foundations—the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung of the Social Democratic Party and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung of the Christian Democratic Party—in the successful transitions in Spain and Portugal in the 1970s caught the attention of officials in the United States and was an important factor leading to the creation of the NED in 1983. The NED and its four institutes representing the United States' two major political parties, the trade unions, and the business community provide training as well as grant support to independent democratic parties and organizations throughout the world. Their work has expanded significantly over the last two decades and has added an important new dimension to the way the United States engages with the world.

With the fall of communism in Central Europe and the Soviet Union and of the many authoritarian governments in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, the need for programs to aid democratic transitions has increased dramatically. The United Kingdom, Canada, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and other established democracies have created political foundations of their own, as have some of the new democracies in Central Europe. The first democracy foundation in Asia was created in Taiwan in 2003. Privately funded institutions such as the Soros and Ford Foundations have also expanded their work.

In addition, governments and multilateral bodies have become increasingly involved in providing democracy assistance. Development agencies in the United States, Britain, Canada, and other established democracies have devoted substantial funding for the administration of elections, strengthening parliaments and local government, and aiding independent media and civil society organizations. The European Union now provides significant democracy assistance through member countries, and the United Nations itself has expanded its democracy-support programs, managing elections in war-torn countries such as Cambodia, El Salvador, and East Timor, and providing assistance in institution building through the UNDP. Regional bodies such as the Organization of American States and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have created democracy units to aid elections and assist new democracies; and they have also approved charters that set democratic norms that member countries are required to observe and establish procedures for defending democracy when it is threatened in particular countries.

Accompanying the growth of international democracy programs has been the creation of global networks at both the governmental and nongovernmental levels that promote greater democratic cooperation, contact, and solidarity. The nongovernmental World Movement for Democracy was founded in New Delhi in 1999 and brings together networks activists from over 100 countries "to foster collaboration among democratic forces around the world," according to the Movement's Founding Statement.²⁸ The networks include regional groups such as the Africa Democracy Forum and functional networks of parliamentarians, youth, women, intellectuals, and local government activists. At the governmental level, the Community of Democracies, established in Warsaw in 2000, brings together over 100 countries "to strengthen institutions and processes of democracy," as stated in the Warsaw Declaration, and to work together on such initiatives as establishing a democracy caucus within the United Nations.²⁹

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 have had the effect of increasing the importance that the United States' and its European allies' efforts attach to the promotion of democracy in the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world. The United States launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative in 2002 to advance political, economic, and educational reform and the empowerment of women in the Middle East. It also took advantage of its chairmanship of the G-8 to establish the Democracy Assistance Dialogue, a forum where NGOs from the broader Middle East will be able to discuss democracy issues with representatives of governments in the hope

that the results of these discussions, and the monitoring of democratic progress in individual countries, will increase pressures for reform in the region. Even before 9/11, the Europeans had created the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) or Barcelona Process to foster political and economic reform in North Africa and the Levant, and a democracy assistance budget for the region was established by the European Union. In 2003, the European Union also established democracy and human rights guidelines as a basis for discussing national reform plans with each of the EMP states.

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The scope and continued expansion of democracy programs supported by the United States and the European Union represent a new international reality that reflects the changed conditions of the modern world, in particular economic globalization and the revolution in communications technology. These forces have produced a more integrated and competitive international environment that has awakened previously dormant peoples to the possibilities of political and social change. The growing demands for change have put tremendous pressures on fragile, traditional systems that find it difficult to adapt to the conditions of modernity and face the threat of marginalization from the new order. The established democracies have come to the realization that they have a profound stake in the modernization of non-Western developing countries, authoritarian and post-authoritarian systems alike, since the failure to adapt could produce conditions that give rise to violent conflict and international disorder.

But in trying to press for gradual change in the non-democratic or democratizing countries of the world, the democracies are increasingly coming up against stiff resistance from old-guard and autocratic elites that feel threatened by the rise of new social forces and the constraints that democracy would impose on their power, and from anti-democratic political or religious movements that reject pluralism and liberal values. In addition, in some countries, the democracies face not so much organized resistance by anti-democratic forces as sheer chaos, in which the state has completely broken down and marauding gangs threaten each other and the general population.

At the present time, there are essentially four kinds of anti-democratic resistance in the international system, each of which poses a distinct challenge to the democratic world and to the efforts currently underway to strengthen democratic values and institutions. The first is the movement of Islamic radicalism that is centered in the Middle East, but whose influence extends throughout the Muslim world, including

among the Muslim minorities now living in the established democracies. The war on terrorism that began with the horrific events of 9/11 is mistakenly perceived by some people as a “clash of civilizations” or a war between Islam and the West. In fact, the 9/11 attacks sharpened a clash that was already underway *within* Islam between modernizing forces seeking political reform and integration into the world economy and extremist elements intent on shutting out the modern world and imposing an intolerant theocratic system on Muslim societies. The United States and other Western countries cannot determine the outcome of this clash, which is essentially an internal conflict, but they have an obvious stake in its outcome and can assist the democrats and modernizers in various practical ways.

It is of vital importance that governments in the Middle East also take the initiative to move forward and not try to block change or just make a few grudging concessions under pressure from within and without.

In the first place, by speaking out on the issue of democracy in the Middle East and devoting resources to reform, Western leaders have put the issue on the international agenda for the first time, ending what President George W. Bush has called “sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East.”³⁰ While the president’s message was initially criticized as an attempt to impose democracy from the outside, it soon got picked up by Arab intellectuals meeting in Sana’a, Alexandria, Doha, Beirut, and other cities who issued declarations citing the urgent need for fundamental democratic change. A broad agenda for economic, social, and political reform started taking shape, building on the UNDP’s Arab Human Development Reports, which were drafted by Arab intellectuals. The agenda calls for addressing three fundamental deficits: the absence of basic human freedoms as the cornerstone of good governance; the failure adequately to acquire, diffuse, and utilize the knowledge needed for integration into the modern world; and the subordination and marginalization of women in society.

The implementation of this extraordinarily ambitious agenda will require the collective effort of many different actors, both governmental and nongovernmental. Nongovernmental activists and practitioners will have to take the lead in fashioning the agenda, in mobilizing pressure from below to defend rights and promote reform, and in developing grassroots education and training programs to foster a new consciousness of engaged citizenship. In doing so, they will need financial, technical, and moral support from the United States and other democratic countries, delivered primarily through nongovernmental counterpart institutions, such as the NED and the democracy foundations in Western and Central Europe.

It is of vital importance that governments in the Middle East also take the initiative to move forward and not try to block change or just make a few grudging concessions under pressure from within and without. They are more likely to take

bold steps forward if the United States and its European allies are united in pressing for a reform agenda and in developing the policies and programs that will create political and economic incentives for governments to reform. In addition, Western governments will have to be decisive in defending the human rights of democracy activists in the Middle East, many of whom are now in prison or are threatened with retribution if they advocate basic freedoms.

Not least, it will be necessary for the United States and its allies, along with governments in the Middle East, to foster a political context that will encourage democratic progress. Such progress was achieved in Iraq in the elections held on January 30, 2005, when millions of citizens voted in defiance of massive terrorist threats, thereby taking an historic step toward ending the violence in the country through political inclusion and the creation of a truly democratic and legitimate government. Similarly, the elections held in the West Bank and Gaza on January 9, 2005 set the stage for progress toward an interim agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, which could lead, in time, to a revival of the road map and the creation of a Palestinian state at peace with Israel. While such progress cannot be made a precondition for efforts to promote Middle East democracy, it would remove a principal barrier to progress and give new momentum to the growing movement for reform in the region. Finally, continued movement toward Turkey's eventual accession to the European Union would add to regional stability and create new incentives for Middle East countries to deepen their relationship with the democratic world.

As we have seen, many important initiatives are already underway to promote a new democratic agenda for the Middle East. The Forum for the Future, which met in Rabat in December 2004, includes the participation of both Arab governments and representatives from Arab civil societies and private sectors and offers a framework, like the Helsinki Accords during the era of the Cold War, for stimulating and monitoring reform. There are also many initiatives underway at the nongovernmental level, such as the Transatlantic Democracy Network, that seek to create new forms of transatlantic cooperation in addressing the challenge of advancing democracy in the Middle East. No single program or initiative will be decisive, but cumulatively, these efforts have the chance of helping the countries of the Middle East turn the corner toward democracy and modernity.

The second form of resistance to democracy derives from the widespread prevalence today of semi-authoritarian or "hybrid regimes" where the existence of some formal democratic processes, such as elections, "masks (often, in part, to legitimate) the reality of authoritarian domination."³¹ The number of such regimes has actually grown as a consequence of the third wave of democratization, as democratic transitions have stalled and many countries have entered a "political gray zone" of illiberal democracy that is sometimes called "electoral authoritarianism" or "pseudodemocracy."³² Larry Diamond estimates that there were only about half a dozen such regimes in 1974, whereas today "at least 45 and perhaps as many as 60 are electoral authoritarian—roughly between a quarter and a third of all states."³³ He notes that "in proportional terms, authoritarian forms of multiparty electoral

competition have increased during the third wave much more rapidly than democratic ones.”³⁴

Fraudulent elections, involving electoral manipulation and various kinds of formal and informal disenfranchisement of voters potentially opposed to the government, are but one aspect of the “democracy deficit” in semi-authoritarian countries. Other features of such regimes are also the centralization of power in the hands of the executive authority, a weak parliament, a judiciary that lacks independence, a high level of corruption, significant government control of the media, serious human rights violations, and the weak rule of law. Nonetheless, despite these deficits, opposition political parties and civil society NGOs have sometimes been able to mount a successful challenge to the ruling party in countries where the government has not been able to close off political space, where the international community remains engaged, and where the regime has lost legitimacy among large segments of the population. Such breakthroughs occurred in Slovakia and Indonesia in 1998, Nigeria in 1999, Croatia and Yugoslavia in 2000, Mexico in 2001, and Georgia in 2002. In addition, the historic breakthrough in Ukraine, where hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in a struggle that culminated on December 26, 2004 with the election of a Europe-oriented democratic government was the most important democratic gain in the post-communist world since the collapse of the Soviet Union more than a decade ago.

Thomas Carothers has urged that in semi-authoritarian systems, democracy promoters should seek “to encourage the growth of alternative centers of power.”³⁵ Indeed, they should. But the autocrats who rule in these countries are determined to hold on to power, and they are becoming increasingly sophisticated in developing strategies to weaken and divide internal opposition forces and to frustrate international efforts to assist them. These strategies include bringing under the control of the central government the electoral machinery as well as all levels of governing authority, including municipal and provincial governments, the parliament, and the courts; tightly regulating the press, especially television and radio; dividing and marginalizing the political opposition; and bringing civil society to heel by harassing independent NGOs and restricting their international funding.

The problem of semi-authoritarianism is magnified today by the growing assertiveness of influential backsliding regimes that are determined not just to eliminate internal political opposition but to mobilize in their respective regions resistance to the spread of democracy. Russia is playing this role in the countries that once formed part of the Soviet Union (the so-called “near abroad”), some of which want closer political and economic ties to Europe and the United States. Nostalgic for the old Soviet empire and emboldened by high oil prices, Russia has, for example, interfered in Abkhazia, a Russian-oriented part of Georgia, and in Moldova’s Transnistria region, and it has backed the dictatorial regime of Aleksandr Lukashenka in Belarus. Venezuela, another oil power, is seeking to play a similar role in Latin America. Under the populist leadership of Hugo Chavez, a military man who twice led unsuccessful coups in the 1990s and has now consolidated internal power, the

regime is promoting what Chavez calls a “Bolivarian alternative for the Americas.” This alternative, according to Richard Lugar, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, consists of “a pan-hemispheric oil cartel, a congress of South American left-wing parties, and a state-sponsored regional TV network to broadcast his authoritarian propaganda.”³⁶

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There is obviously no quick or simple solution to the problem of semi-authoritarianism. The critical challenge is to defend the political space that exists and to mobilize international pressure to prevent the tightening of political controls and the persecution of democratic activists. It is also important to retain a regional perspective and not to view each country in isolation. The victories after 1989 in Central Europe aided the struggles a decade later in Slovakia, Yugoslavia, and Croatia, and these victories in turn contributed to the subsequent gains in Georgia and Ukraine. The momentum of democratic change is often propelled forward by the activists in successful struggles who feel committed—for reasons having to do with both democratic idealism and enlightened self-interest—to aiding like-minded activists in neighboring autocracies that could pose a threat to their democratic gains. The victory in Ukraine was made possible by earlier triumphs in Central Europe. If consolidated, it will certainly improve the chances for success in neighboring Belarus. In time, such progress may help the internal democratic forces in Russia gain sufficient strength to reverse the authoritarian backsliding that has occurred during the rule of President Vladimir Putin.

The incentive of closer ties to an enlarged European democratic community will also improve the chances for success in the post-Soviet region, as will the continuation of international support for democratic NGOs and parties, however weak they might be in certain countries at the present time. The fact that semi-authoritarian regimes are generally corrupt and economically inefficient means that they will always have a problem generating sufficient internal support to legitimize their rule. Discontent will inevitably create pressures for change and opportunities for a democratic breakthrough. The international community will be in a better position to help democrats take advantage of such opportunities if it stays engaged in semi-authoritarian countries during the hard times when the prospect for democracy seems very bleak.

The third center of anti-democratic resistance comes from the remaining dictatorships in the world, regimes that survived the third wave of democratization.

Such regimes are spread unevenly around the world. Many of the most important dictatorial systems can be found in East Asia (China, Burma, North Korea, Vietnam, and Laos), while Cuba is the only dictatorship in the Western Hemisphere, though it continues to have international influence out of proportion to its size. While all dictatorships deny fundamental human rights and multiparty political competition, they nonetheless differ in terms of the amount of space that exists for independent social, economic, and intellectual activity. There is a world of difference, for example, between China and North Korea, though both countries can be considered dictatorships. While China permits no challenge to the power of the Communist Party, it has joined the global economy; it has a growing private sector and middle class; and it has become a relatively wired society, with nearly 100,000,000 users of the Internet.³⁷ By contrast, North Korea is a genuinely closed totalitarian system, completely isolated from the world, from where thousands of desperate people *flee to China* for refuge.

Dictatorships are not static systems. They can open up somewhat if a particular regime wants to increase trade or bring in foreign investment, and inevitably they undergo a process of decay as leaders age and the ruling elite becomes increasingly corrupt.

China itself is a more open society than it was when Mao died three decades ago, which is another way to understand different degrees of authoritarianism. Cuba, too, has changed. Just a little over a decade ago, the only visible dissent in Cuba came from a small number of intellectuals in Havana. Today, demonstrations of civic resistance have spread across the island and involve workers and other people from the mainstream of society.³⁸ Dictatorships are not static systems. They can open up somewhat if a particular regime wants to increase trade or bring in foreign investment, and inevitably they undergo a process of decay as leaders age and the ruling elite becomes increasingly corrupt.

As small cracks open up in a dictatorial system, it becomes possible for international democracy supporters to find practical ways to promote increased openness and liberalization. In the early stages of the process of change, the most realistic forms of support are the defense of human rights and the provision of independent information. In closed systems, much of this work would have to be done by groups based in exile which can provide some protection for people inside, perhaps leading to a small expansion of social or political space. The emergence of dissidents within a dictatorship is a sign of progress even if they are arrested, as is often the case, since it means that there is the beginning of internal dissent and that some people are not afraid to speak out. Dissidents do not yet exist in North Korea, where even small infractions can lead to the imprisonment in the gulag not just of the accused individual but of three generations of his or her family. Burma is also an

extremely tough dictatorship, but the democracy movement there is led by a Nobel Laureate, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest, but is still a visible symbol of resistance for the society and for the supporters of Burmese democracy in the international community. It is thus well ahead of North Korea in the process of change.

As dictatorships evolve and decay, independent groups can emerge, often of a nonpolitical character, such as community, women's, and ecological groups. In some cases, it is possible for international human rights and democracy supporters to establish contact with such groups and to help them. Eventually the doors of the country might open sufficiently to allow some democracy promoters to conduct training and education programs inside the country. Such programs already exist on a large scale in China where the leadership, while determined to maintain a monopoly of political power, is nonetheless prepared to consider political reforms that will reduce crime and corruption and promote economic growth.

A strategy for aiding democracy in dictatorships thus has to be driven by what is feasible. In North Korea, the current priority is documenting human rights abuses and building international pressure for human rights. In Burma, it is possible to provide training, education, and information to Burmese groups in exile to strengthen their institutional capacity as well as their ability to communicate internally and with the international community. In Cuba, assistance can be provided both internally to independent journalists, libraries, and workers organizations, and externally for initiatives that defend human rights, provide uncensored information to people on the island, and encourage dialogue within Cuba and in the diaspora about the political future of the country. As we have seen, an even more diversified approach is possible in China where external efforts that defend human rights and provide access to independent information and ideas can be supplemented by training and conference programs conducted by international groups that are able to maintain a presence inside the country.

Finally, a democracy strategy for dictatorships should also involve efforts to build international pressure for democratic openings. With respect to Burma, for example, democratic trade unions have defended the rights of Burmese workers in the International Labor Organization, while political activists have recruited more than 3,000 parliamentarians in a campaign of international solidarity. Over the past five years, Korean, American, and European activists have built an international coalition for human rights in North Korea that has resulted in, among other things, two resolutions of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Similar campaigns are also underway to aid human rights in other dictatorships.

The fourth challenge to democracy comes from the proliferation during the last decade-and-a-half of many failed and war-torn countries. Some of the worst crises faced by the international community during this period derive from the conflicts and breakdowns in such countries, which can also become spawning grounds for terrorism. The list of such countries includes Somalia, Haiti, Cambodia, Bosnia,

Kosovo, Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo, East Timor, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The crises are a product of the breakdown of old political structures, a process fueled by the rise of ethnic and religious violence in the aftermath of the Cold War and by the inability of many poor countries to adapt to the pressures of globalization. The international community has focused on two goals in such countries, conflict resolution and state building, but in each case it has run up against enormous difficulties.

Efforts by the international community to end conflicts are generally limited to holding talks among leaders of warring factions. But peace agreements will not last unless civil society is brought into the process and becomes invested in negotiated solutions through an inclusive democratic process. Including groups from civil society can have the effect of diluting the influence of the armed factions and their leaders, who have little understanding of inclusive solutions that try to protect the legitimate interests of all segments of the population.

In the Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and other war-torn countries, civil society groups perform a number of vital functions. They defend human rights, educate about democracy, and provide training in conflict resolution. Often, they use innovative techniques, including popular theater, concerts, and soccer tournaments to build trust and nurture a culture of tolerance. In effect, they establish enclaves of democratic values and inter-ethnic dialogue that become centers of grassroots pressure for peace and reconciliation. They also help marshal international support for democracy assistance and the defense of human rights. In peace negotiations or constitutional talks, they can give voice and representation to civil society in the process of reaching a peace agreement. And in a post-war setting, they can also help the process of healing and offer an alternative model and vision of democratic social and political organization.

The involvement of the local society is also needed in addressing the second objective of the international community, which is state-building. The task of rebuilding governing institutions in failed or post-conflict states is vastly more complex than rebuilding the physical infrastructure of the country. An institution cannot function on its own if there is not the indigenous capacity to make it work. But as Francis Fukuyama has pointed out, “the rhetoric of the international community stresses ‘capacity-building’ while the reality has been rather a kind of ‘capacity sucking out’” as international bureaucrats and NGOs often prefer to perform functions themselves and crowd out less qualified local practitioners.³⁹ The result is a form of “progress imposed from above” that bears a distinct resemblance to the 19th century governing style of “an imperial power over its colonial possessions,” according to an analysis of the experience in Bosnia.⁴⁰ The international community is still in the early stages of understanding the art of state building which, according to Fukuyama, “will be a key component of national power, as important as the ability to deploy traditional military force to the maintenance of world order.”⁴¹ If it is to succeed in meeting this challenge, it will have to learn to find the proper balance between efficiency and local ownership, which will often involve ceding control to the local society and its indigenous practitioners and civil society organizations.

Since its founding more than two centuries ago, the United States has been identified around the world with the idea of democracy and the efforts to spread democratic institutions and processes. This has been especially true since the fall of the Berlin Wall when activists rallied to the banner of democracy and expected, and in many cases received, help from this country. The connection between the United States and international democracy is such that the forces that resist the spread of democracy—Islamic extremists, semi-authoritarian autocrats, dictators, and warlords in failed states—are also invariably anti-American. Since these real and would-be despots find it difficult to argue directly against democracy, which is so hugely popular around the world, they are increasingly using anti-Americanism to advance their cause. The Bulgarian writer Ivan Krastev has called attention to this new practice, noting that “anti-Americanism is a stalking horse and platform for antidemocratic and anti-market forces.”⁴² America’s best strategic option in responding to this challenge, Krastev writes, is quite simple. It is to reaffirm its support for democracy and to help in every way possible the people around the world who are fighting to defend democratic values. These are America’s best friends, and we dare not underestimate the stake we have in the success of their struggle.

Notes

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