International Regimes and the Prospects for Global Democracy

by Nayef H. Samhat

INTRODUCTION

Studies of democratization focus on two levels: the territorial state and, increasingly, the global system. Interest in the latter process follows from several well-recognized historical trends in international relations such as the growing role of non-state actors and the expansion of global governance institutions. However, the growth of democracy at the state level, while enhancing the rule of law, has not been sufficiently translated into political practice at the global level. The significance of this gap resides in the reduced efficacy of state-based democracy when addressing the constellation of social, economic, and political challenges in world politics. As Daniele Archibugi suggests, the key question that follows is, what kind of institutional structures at the global level will permit various political communities to deliberate in a democratic fashion on matters of shared interest?

This essay posits a response, conceptual in nature, arguing that the international regime, characterized as a global public sphere, provides a space for the practice of democracy above the state and therefore contains the potential for the transformation of world order. That is not to suggest global democratization will assume a form similar to democracy within the state; rather, global democracy is grounded in principles of consensual debate and public accountability within international institutions. The democratization of global politics is an ideal, yet processes of inclusion and openness foster opportunities to expand deliberation and accountability, which, in turn, strengthen the legitimacy of governance institutions. Hence, the potential of the international regime as a mechanism for democratic governance is that it can accommodate forces of pluralization in the contemporary international system. Regimes provide channels for participation and advocacy, thereby creating a normative framework for the obligations on and expectations of states. Furthermore, as a site for global democratization, the regime concept does not fall prey to criticisms often levied against advocates of cosmopolitanism in world politics that such a transformation as global democracy necessarily entails the construction of new institutions and the consequent erosion of state authority. Rather, the argument insists that states remain integral actors, whose authority is an essential attribute of effective and meaningful

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global governance. It is both the design of international regimes and their capacity to accommodate and reconcile diverse perspectives, interests, and needs that the gap between the fairness of obligations and benefits and the practices of states can be overcome. In this manner, the normative ends of global governance institutions and the potential for reconstituting new forms of political community may be realized in an inclusive and legitimate fashion.

**International regimes facilitate a form of global citizenship that is an essential requirement of global democracy.**

The argument proceeds in several steps. First, I conceptualize the international regime as a global public sphere which embodies an alternative form of political community to that which is provided by the territorial state. This essay uses Stephen Krasner's now standard definition of international regimes as "sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations." International regimes appear in numerous issue areas in world politics, ranging from formal agreements to structure relations among states or procedures within international organizations, to the less formal sets of understandings that arise from shared purpose among actors. Increasingly, international regimes are the means through which state and non-state actors regulate areas of global life that have transboundary consequences. Their character, as a public sphere, derives from both the opportunities they provide for dialogic engagement on the one hand, and the way in which they order particular spheres of international relations, reconfiguring the anarchy traditionally associated with the practice of world politics. It is within this public sphere that interests and identities are constituted, permitting the formation of new transboundary political communities to emerge within specific issue areas of world politics.

The next section examines three dimensions of international regimes that manifest their potential as sites for the practice of global democracy. First, regimes are increasingly incorporating publicity norms of participation and transparency that broaden the scope and depth of affected actors and their dialogue. More information is available and more non-state actors are participating in certain regimes that serve to enhance the legitimacy of these governance mechanisms. Secondly, regimes facilitate a form of global citizenship that is an essential requirement of global democracy. In effect, citizenship requirements at the global level are voluntaristic and group oriented rather than the legalistic and individualistic requirements at the domestic level. Insisting on similar requirements for citizenship at the global level, as practiced at the domestic level, raises the standard for global democracy to an unreasonable level. Third, international regimes possess transformative potential. That is to suggest that while regimes accommodate a pluralist global order, they also contain the potential for the emergence of a more solidarist order in which sovereign authority is reconfigured. Finally, I conclude with some observations on the state, international regimes and order in world politics.

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The practice of citizenship necessarily occurs within a specific space or sphere of action that offers opportunities for inclusive participation and representation in open debate. At the domestic level, this space is anchored in territoriality, ascribing rights, privileges, and obligations to those within. Although a similar kind of boundedness is lacking in world politics, for any single issue the international regime is one potential institutional form of this space. The regime can acquire the characteristics of an international political community by virtue of the dialogic and participatory processes it makes possible within the boundaries of a particular issue area. In other words, international regimes may be considered as public spheres, depending upon the norms that constitute them.7

According to Marc Lynch, "a public sphere approach builds on a conception of action in which a public claim on identity or an argument made in the public sphere is an action."8 The public sphere, itself, is "that site of interaction in which actors routinely reach understandings about norms, identities, and interests through the public exchange of discourse."9 For James Bohman, the modern public sphere is distinguished by its role as a site for social and cultural criticism, and as a unique form of communication across a diverse audience.10 This audience, according to Bohman, need not be individuals, but can instead be participants of representative institutions or transnational civil society. The nature of the audience is significant because participation at the global level and the character of democratic practice cannot be expected to have the same form as a domestic practice of one person, one vote. Lynch further identifies a difference between a public sphere for deliberation and a political subsystem for decisions and administering their enforcement. In the international realm no structure exists to impose decisions, so public spheres serve "as locations for norm formation, and for deliberation over the shared interests of international communities."11 Thus, the weight of the public sphere follows not from enforcement mechanisms, but from its creation and maintenance through deliberation of consensual norms. Lynch notes that not all deliberation will be free of strategic interests, but as he argues,

The point is not to find interest-free, power-free behavior but rather to identify the conditions under which the need for public justification oriented toward shared norms, goals or identity produces behavior different from behavior absent such demands... The more that a public sphere provides the expectation of ongoing deliberation, and the greater the sense of belonging to shared identity and institutions, the more that states must justify their behavior with reference to shared norms.12

The transformative potential of the public sphere is thus found in its capacity to build solidarity amongst a diverse group of actors. This sense of community, forged through public deliberation, reconfigures authority in world politics. Accountability in a global public sphere, indeed its inclusive and democratic character, is achieved through direct and mediated publicity. The former entails traditional state-to-state...
interaction, while the latter expands the critical audience for decision making. Patterns of mediated publicity facilitate the participation of global civil society actors such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements in processes of global governance in a variety of forms, including agenda setting, articulating ideas and knowledge about goals and practices, representing segments of the global polity, or monitoring and revealing compliance (and noncompliance). Thus, in world politics, institutions and the ideas that inform their development have the capacity to foster loyalties to and identities with emerging normative principles of global life consistent with new boundaries of political community.

The possibility of constructing political communities different from those of the sovereign state, that are anchored in moral and ethical principles, that recognize and account for diversity, and that give voice to those on the margins within and across territorial units, is found in commitments to the “ideal of a universal communication community.” This emphasis on dialogue and communicative action is an essential quality of the “thin universalism” of political community that exists across governance regimes in world politics. This kind of universalism is not about inscribing absolute ethics or morals onto the practices and principles of what might constitute the “good life.” Rather, it is about insisting on the condition whereby all voices have the opportunity to be heard and where dialogic engagement permits an expanding range of difference to be incorporated into discussions “to determine the principles of inclusion and exclusion which govern global politics.”

Indeed, it is in the observable patterns of contemporary global politics that new forms of community consistent with a “thin universalism” may be taking shape. As a global public sphere, the international regime is a reflection of the kind of dialogic potential inherent in the practice of world politics. This is because many significant international regimes have their origins in the discursive and ideational interaction among state and non-state actors that provide the rationales for the need to regulate spheres of global life with legitimacy. The regime, in other words, may be a viable international political community within which higher principles are defined, expressed, and defended by members of global society.

The realization of these transformations in the character of global governance is manifest in several dimensions of international regimes. First, the incorporation of publicity norms enables non-state actors, in particular, to have greater access to decision making processes. Second, this participation is a reflection of a form of global citizenship integral to redefining notions of community in world politics. Such a redefinition of community through the regime is the essence of what may be referred to as a solidarist international society in the making.

**Publicity Norms and Global Democracy**

Historically, international politics were viewed as the near-exclusive domain of nation-states. Theories of international relations have not been particularly concerned with the transformative role of institutions, regarding them instead, in instrumental...
terms as solutions to the failure of political markets. By contrast, the incorporation of publicity norms of participation and transparency into international regimes ensures special consideration is given to the role of non-state actors in deliberations and decision making. Furthermore, these norms are an essential prerequisite to the emergence of meaningful notions of global citizenship and democracy and the promotion of solidarism in world politics.

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In fact, on any given issue, a wide array of social and political actors are concerned about whatever happens in global politics and want to have some say in these matters. Neglecting and silencing the diverse array of actors affected by a decision not only perpetuates structures of domination, but also renders such decisions as illegitimate and potentially unsustainable over the long haul. Yet, the expansion of NGO activity, often aggregated under the term “global civil society,” now extends widely across the gamut of regime and norm-building processes, ranging from lobbying and protesting efforts in the agenda-setting stage, to information gathering, and monitoring treaty compliance. Moreover, participation norms legitimize the activities of NGOs in the implementation of regime goals—humanitarian efforts, local human rights representation, and sustainable development tasks—are all undertaken by literally thousands of nongovernmental actors throughout the world. It is also important that there has been a boom in recent years in the number and variety of NGOs that have formed in the Global South. The use of new information technologies, especially by groups headquartered in the Global South, allow NGOs to stretch their scarce material resources much further than they were previously capable. It is through this kind of broad participation that regime legitimacy is secured.

Participation cannot be fully realized without transparency. Ann Florini defines it simply as the “opposite of secrecy.” Specifically, transparency conditions focus on information requirements that facilitate decision making and the management of a regime, as well as, opening institutions and regime processes to outside inspection. The notion of transparency not only requires that various actors have access to information about regime effectiveness, but also that they are able to observe—if not participate in a strict sense—political and decision-making processes. This is a much more direct and inclusive form of scrutiny, which is crucial for assuring public accountability, an essential element of global democratic practice. Thus, the growing international norm of transparency has an impressive scope, encompassing both deep and broad information disclosure requirements for institutions and regimes on the one hand, and on the other, an expectation that at least some actors who are not parties to a given international institution or regime should be able to monitor its decision-making processes.
These obligations are not merely felt by states. International organizations like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and European Union also face similar kinds of reporting requirements. In fact, even private transnational corporations are increasingly required to disclose information about their pollution emissions or labor practices. Virtually all new international regimes require parties to disclose important information about their behavior in the relevant issue area. In practice, this shift is perhaps most evident in the growing role of nongovernmental actors as observers of global governance. Also, institutions are often required to make important decision documents and meeting notes available to NGO observers or others who might request them. Whether in the daily deliberations at the United Nations and its specialized agencies, at major world conferences, or even within relatively isolated decision-making arenas, NGOs are now typically present as informed observers. Indeed, because of NGO inclusion, coupled with document disclosure, there is now an expectation of openness at many international proceedings. The cumulative effect of these requirements is quite remarkable as world politics is experiencing a movement away from secrecy toward transparency. In other words, a transparency norm has been constructed and is becoming more pervasive in global governance.

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The emergence of publicity norms of participation and transparency are significant for advancing the prospects for global democracy within international regimes, making the policies and practices of global governance actors and institutions far more accountable to affected and sometimes weaker political actors. By contrast, when information and access is tightly controlled, states and international institutions can freely pursue policies that have significant and perhaps even adverse effects on specific individuals and groups. This democratic potential does not emerge merely from the fact of international cooperation through a regime. Rather, this potential follows when regimes stimulate political activity at a variety of levels to create new locations for public accountability. The degree to which these various centers of accountability are monitored, how information is provided and applied, and the effectiveness of these processes largely depends on the extent to which norms of participation and transparency are upheld within the regime. Absent these norms, a regime can become a vehicle for exclusion and privilege.

Skeptics, of course, might point out that publicity norms in regimes fail to fulfill ideal conditions for global democracy. Perhaps this is so if the goal is to replicate at the global level democracy as it is practiced within states. However, the most that can be expected is the broadest form of inclusion permitted by contemporary
circumstances in world politics. In this regard, norms of participation and transparency are a necessary precondition for enabling a new participatory mode of citizenship at the global level that enhances the legitimacy of governance regimes.

**Citizenship, Actors, and Accountability**

It is because of the state-centeredness of existing institutions for governance and the theoretical commitments to explaining them that cosmopolitan theories of international relations have garnered increasing interest. These cosmopolitan theories posit the individual as an alternative focus of concern and the subject of legitimacy appeals. Here, legitimacy of governance must be satisfied either by addressing the needs of the community of humankind or by permitting sufficient access to decision-making procedures to accord individuals authoritative input.

Genuinely democratic decision making provides the foundation of a cosmopolitan commitment that is, as Janna Thompson notes, "the notion that there are values which everyone in the world ought to accept, whatever their personal interests or community loyalties." Indeed, the purpose of constituting the public sphere at the level of the individual is to preserve the commitment to individual autonomy and security that is central to cosmopolitan democracy. But, in a diverse and complex global polity, the ethical aspiration for inclusion and individual autonomy, and the practical realization of participation in authoritative decision-making processes, are complementary, though distinct ends. They should be treated as such because their reconciliation is problematic in the contemporary international state system.

The paradox of cosmopolitan democracy then, is to match global citizenship with institutional context. As Nigel Dower argues, there are two components of global citizenship: a moral definition, which relies on a commitment to a global ethic, and an institutional definition, which calls for some form of world government or a new set of institutions to accommodate global citizenship goals. The former, he contends, is inadequate to realize cosmopolitan ends, while the latter is unrealistic. Instead, Dower offers a more pragmatic prescription whereby "we are world citizens = 'because of the nature of our global situation, we ought to work for global goals, and this involves using existing institutions to the same end.'" Notably, in this conception, citizenship follows from the recognition of a need to work toward some shared end. From this, democracy demands individual participation within the context of groups where group membership is self-selected and is a mirror of values and aspirations held in common with other members. As Robert Talisse notes, this kind of participation is crucial to human flourishing because it embodies "a certain set of habits which both reflect common interests and enable individuals to act for the sake of the common good."

This moral component is integral to democracy at the national level, but it is instructive for notions of global citizenship. There is a less demanding requirement for global citizenship and perhaps a less demanding standard for global democracy. The act of becoming a global citizen and the shift toward a mode of global democratic
practice is voluntary and ideational, and manifest in the mobilization of persons and
groups whose shared values and concerns reflect the need to resolve collectively
recognized challenges to human security.

The protection of the individual at the heart of the cosmopolitan project does
not necessarily translate into an absolute requirement for individualized participation
and electoral democracy at the global level. Any claim that it must, brings a rather
hasty and unfortunate conclusion to the cosmopolitan endeavor. Rather, the practice
of global citizenship is exercised through networks of global civil society that are
now a constituent element of any description of global democracy; they are at the
heart of the transformation of political community in international relations. The
crucial point here is that NGOs and social movements can be representative agents or
what James Rosenau refers to as “functional equivalents” in world politics,
implementing tasks and aggregating interests and voices for segments of the global
polity that, while often too small to express themselves within a single state, are more
significant in numbers and influence across borderlines. Thus, short of developing
alternative institutions that are able to accommodate transnational and individualized
citizen participation, the population of NGOs in world politics is the most effective
means of advancing toward the kinds of goals envisioned by cosmopolitan citizenship:
these NGOs become citizen-representatives. It is precisely because individuals lack
direct access to decision making processes at the global level and are represented
instead by global citizenship-oriented NGOs, that the institutional structures of decision
making and norm formation in world politics are so vital to the realization of global
democracy in the present.

The international regime, as a global public sphere incorporating publicity norms,
is a site for dialogic encounters that provide channels for the expression of civil
society concerns and mechanisms to respond to these concerns. In broader terms,
the democratic potential of international regimes is found in their potential to widen
the range of political actors with access to influence and decision processes at both
the global level and within states. In this manner, the regime provides for degrees
of accountability and legitimacy for those affected, thereby strengthening a mode of
global citizenship bounded neither by culture nor language, but instead by shared
experience, desire, and consequence. Through this democratization of global politics,
the transformation of international society becomes immanent within the international
regime.

**Order, Society, and Governance: Solidarism Versus Pluralism**

One of the more difficult questions concerning the form of global democracy
guiding this discussion relates to the particular vision of implied international order.
Different kinds of orders necessarily entail different kinds of institutional
arrangements and obligations of members. For example, cosmopolitan democracy
reduces to a minimum obligations and loyalty to existing territorial states, while
envisioning the construction of international institutions that give primacy to the

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individual qua individual. Andrew Linklater describes at length three ideal types of order available to states committed to reconfiguring the boundaries of political and moral community for the purpose of promoting inclusionary practices and enhancing human security. A pluralist society reflects a world in which states have dissimilar political and economic systems reflecting cultural and moral differences, thus, preserving the freedom and equality of independent political communities. By contrast, a solidarist international society reflects “some consensus about the substantive moral purposes which the whole society of states has a duty to uphold.” Finally, a post-Westphalian order advances beyond a solidarist society by virtue of closer forms of cooperation in which states relinquish many of their sovereign powers entirely.

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These visions reflect the potential redrawing of community in global life. The first two are suggestive of degrees of moral community, from weak to strong, while the latter is a more concrete reconfiguration of political community. Of particular concern in formulating a practical account of global democracy is the tension or, relation, between pluralism and solidarism. A post-Westphalian society demands a level and extensiveness of political and moral transformation unlikely to be broadly realized in a system of states bound by sovereignty. On the other hand, the concept of pluralism has wide appeal, for it mirrors sovereignty as the one common organizing principle around the world. Hence, Chris Brown suggests that international society should be “founded on ‘the morality of states’ and on an ethic of coexistence rather than upon those superficially more modern approaches which stress the rights and duties of individuals or the international struggle of classes.” And Fiona Roberston-Snape concludes, a pluralist society of states is “a practical rather than purposive association because there are no shared ends and there is no moral community.” By emphasizing the moral and cultural diversity of states, shared principles as they relate to, for example human rights, are necessarily thin. Moral priority, in other words, is placed on the state rather than the individual. Solidarism, by contrast, seeks to address an important weakness in a pluralist order by shifting moral priority to the individual; sovereignty is no longer absolute, but conditioned on the character of domestic arrangements that promote the well-being of individuals. It is a more cosmopolitan orientation that raises several issues, in particular, the basis on which solidarist principles are founded. If there are common moral and ethical standards, what are they and how are they reconciled?

This “moral complexity” points to the important role institutional forms might have in the ordering of international society. Whether thick conceptions of morality
associated with solidarism or thinner conceptions found in a pluralist framework.
prevail in the first instance is less significant than establishing appropriate institutions
which can accommodate these considerations and ultimately offer procedures to
implement agreed upon norms over time. In this sense, institutions must not inhibit
the critical reflection upon and inquiry into those norms and their constitutive practices,
which must be subject to scrutiny and revision as needed. International regimes, by
expanding opportunities for broader participation and enhanced transparency for
non-state actors, offer the institutionalized framework in which either, or both, pluralist
or solidarist principles can be accommodated and expressed. Indeed, international
norms may be considered contingent social facts, always subject to reassessment and
revision. For example, human rights and environmental conventions both contain
provisions that embrace foundationalist and communitarian ethics, yet they also
provide for new principles reflecting what everyone agrees upon at a particular
moment. Regular meetings of human rights commissions or the establishment of
framework conventions and associated protocols in environmental regimes are
indicative of flexible regime-organizing principles that can accord with the preferences
of members of international society. They are preferences that vary along issue
areas rather than as absolute standards. And, although there is no predetermined
direction of preferences, the growing intensity of global interactions across issue
areas increasingly seems to be the basis for “new moral growth,” fostering “a kind of
sociability, which promotes ethical behavior and establishes moral practice, not in
response to philosophical imperatives, but to practical needs.”

This approach to global order suggests a view of international regimes developed
as frameworks for the practical and progressive management of global affairs which,
in turn, become the foundation for a solidarist international society in the making.
The moral complexity and tension between solidarism and pluralism will be resolved
only incrementally, on an issue by issue basis, amongst actors in world politics who
coalesce into a public sphere. The precise reason why regimes are constructed in
the first place is that actors respond to particular problems and situations at specific
moments in historical time. In their construction, then, regimes accommodate this
debate by offering principles which are subject to scrutiny and revision, typically in
fact expanding to a more solidarist stance, as has been the case in many humanitarian
situations.

Conclusions on Global Democracy, the State, and International Regimes

The contemporary global condition suggests that at the moment prospects for
global democracy, defined by individual representation and deliberation, are not good.
A global demos is lacking in the face of entrenched, particularistic identities and
loyalties bound to ethnicity, religion, or territory. However, given contemporary
economic and social globalization, the opportunities to promote fundamental
transformations are real, though it may require more institutional hardware than is
currently available. Yet, it seems self-evident that existing institutional forms, such as the international regime, can serve as the institutional hardware of global democracy. By incorporating norms of transparency and participation, regimes provide a channel for the exercise of a meaningful form of global citizenship by NGOs, thus advancing moral and ethical progress in the relations among states and reconstituting global order, albeit in incremental ways.

Of course, one aspect of this transformative potential resides in the redefinition of the boundaries of political community, a task that looks past the state as an illegitimate or irrelevant form of authority to attain the ethical ends of cosmopolitanism. But, as Chris Brown suggests, strong state authority is a necessary ingredient in an era of globalization in order to regulate the effects of economic processes. These types of states exist as effective administrative and bureaucratic entities which have the capacity to enhance public welfare and protect individuals from the worst consequences of unregulated market forces. While the presence of a strong state may pose unique challenges to the advancement of universalism and the transformation of community, when all is said and done, the mechanisms of global governance demand effective measures to administer agreed upon rules, norms, and principles that protect the person and enhance human welfare.

What this suggests is that the formation of fundamentally new institutions is not a necessary condition for realizing global democracy. True, there exists great tension between governance institutions structured along statist lines and those structured according to global imperatives. This tension, though, offers an opportunity to fashion the kind of global governance institutions that accommodate the pluralism of the global system while advancing solidarist principles. The human rights regime offers a powerful example because the formulation and institutionalization of principles in this issue typically confronts the cultural diversity of the global system. Yet, those human rights principles are increasingly the basis for legitimate claims on the behavior of states by individuals and NGOs. In a similar vein, the expanding scale of humanitarian intervention is redefining the limits of sovereign authority in world politics. Human rights, humanitarian intervention, and democratic government are just some of the broader concepts of proper state conduct that are progressively more integrated into notions of "good governance" in world politics and follow from principles and expectations expressed in international regimes. Hence, the international regime, as a global public sphere, by incorporating publicity norms that expand the scope of meaningful global citizenship, becomes a potential site of transformation wherein global democratic practices can anchor themselves in the present moment.

Notes

1 The phrase "global governance" describes the "increasingly regulated character of transnational and international relations." See Elke Krahmann, "National, Regional, and Global Governance: One Phenomenon or Many?" Global Governance, 9, no. 3 (July-September 2003): 329.


See, for example, the essays in John Boli and George M. Thomas, eds., *Constructing World Culture: International Nongovernmental Organizations Since 1875* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Leon Gordenker and Thomas G. Weiss, eds., *NGOs, the United Nations, and Global Governance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996).


28 The challenge is evident in attempts by cosmopolitan oriented thinkers to offer new global democratic assemblies that are elected by and represent individuals rather than governments. See, for example, David Held, Democracy and the Global Order (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995); Daniele Archibugi and David Held, eds., Cosmopolitan Democracy: an Agenda for a New World Order (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).


38 Robertson-Snape, “Moral Complexity,” 520


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