



Assisting Democracy Abroad

American Values, American Interests

KENNETH WOLLACK is president of the National Democratic Institute.

US efforts to support human rights and democracy worldwide have long been seen as serving American interests and reflecting our values. In recent years, however, a debate has emerged among those who view democracy promotion either as too soft and idealistic as a response to threats facing the nation or as too bellicose, conflated with regime change and the use of military force in Iraq and Afghanistan. Others even view democracy support as a combination of the two: Wilsonian idealism propagated through the barrel of a gun.

The real issue is not whether democracy promotion is “hard” or “soft” or whether it fits neatly into either “realism” or “idealism” paradigms. Instead, the issue is simply whether democracy assistance continues to advance US interests in pursuit of a more peaceful, prosperous, and humane world. Too often, this debate centers on a false choice in foreign policy. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who was NDI’s founding Vice Chair in 1983 and its Chairman since 2001, has drawn an analogy between foreign policy and a hot air balloon, with idealism being the heat required to lift policy and realism being the ballast required to give the policy stability and direction.

As the Obama administration devises its own distinctive approach on this issue, it has taken steps to demonstrate a continued commitment to democracy promotion. It has done so rhetorically through a series of policy speeches delivered

by the President and the Secretary of State in the United States and in capitals in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The administration has also enshrined democracy and human rights in the new National Security Strategy, which mentions democracy and related concepts more than 160 times, and it has requested increased funding for global democracy assistance through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of State, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

Given past controversies and the ongoing debate over where democracy assistance fits into overall US foreign policy, it may be helpful to push a new reset button. This may help clarify misunderstandings and mischaracterizations about democracy promotion efforts, which have muddled what has historically been a long-standing and strongly bipartisan ambition of US foreign policy.

Democracy Assistance in US Foreign Policy

In the years since the United States became a superpower, the country has viewed the world through an ever changing series of foreign policy optics. Seen through the lens of the Cold War, US policy was focused on the containment of communism. During the 1970s and 1980s, as the so-called “third wave” of democracy was in its infancy, the United States began another change, viewing the global advance of democracy as serving US and global interests. The focus on democratization in foreign policy drew on a range of historical antecedents from the Atlantic Charter, the Marshall Plan, and

the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to the creation of the Helsinki process under President Gerald Ford and President Jimmy Carter's determination that international human rights be a cornerstone of his foreign policy.

In a 1983 speech at Westminster, President Ronald Reagan broadened the emphasis from a concern for individual victims of governmental abuse to a commitment to foster and develop democratic systems. This promise led to the establishment by Congress of the National Endowment for Democracy and its four affiliated institutes—the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), and the Solidarity Center. President Bill Clinton's administration identified the promotion of democracy as a principal pillar of its national security doctrine, and under the leadership of then-Secretary of State Albright and Polish Foreign Minister Bronislaw Geremek, a Community of Democracies, comprised of more than 100 countries, was convened in 2000.

US efforts helped stimulate and were themselves fostered by profound global changes that began in the late 1970s with the dramatic increase in the number of democracies worldwide. Certainly, the postwar recovery of major democracies in Europe and Japan contributed to a wider worldwide appreciation for the democratic form of social development. The return of democracy in Spain and Portugal, aided externally by German political party-affiliated foundations, and the 1986 Philippine "people power" revolution that brought Corazon Aquino to power following a "snap" presidential election, influenced democratic changes in Latin America. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union stimulated calls for national conferences that would usher in political transitions in a number of African countries.

A turning point in forging a US bipartisan consensus for democracy support came during the 1980s when the country learned an important lesson about political transformations in Chile, Nicaragua, and the Philippines. Dictatorships and their radical, often violent opposition actually enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, drawing strength from each other and in the process marginalizing a democratic center, or "third way." Prospects for peace and stability only emerged when democratic political parties and civic movements were able to offer a viable alternative to the two extremes. In doing so, these parties and movements benefitted from international solidarity and support. Together with colleagues in many other countries, Republicans and Democrats in the United States joined forces to champion their cause.

During this period, political reform and democratic governance emerged as new development aid priorities, as it became evident that traditional economic assistance alone could not achieve sustained economic growth and social stability. Political systems that lacked accountability mechanisms or sufficient political and social inclusion were plagued by corruption or conflict, both of which undermined the efforts of economic development aid to achieve self-sustaining growth and poverty reduction. Deforestation,

environmental degradation, and agricultural policies that led to famine all traced to political systems in which government institutions had few incentives to answer to people, and in which a narrow political elite felt free to exploit resources, land, and people without the need to account.

Democracy on the Global Agenda

Democratic advances, from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, coincided with globalization and ushered in a period in which democracy was viewed as a priority on the global agenda. Increased travel, educational and cultural exchanges and trade, along with the revolution in communications and technology, propelled citizen demand for a political voice.

Although the German political party foundations were a precursor to the creation of the NED and its affiliated institutes, European bilateral aid agencies, building on the early work done by USAID to include democracy assistance in its development mission, began to focus increasingly on the role of democratic governance in their poverty reduction missions. Sweden's development cooperation policy asserts that, "poverty is not only about inadequate socioeconomic development and material security; it is also about lack of political power at the individual level and the inability of citizens to influence decisions that affect their lives." And 10 years of research funded by Britain's aid agency, the Department for International Development, now shows that political inclusion is the best means to reduce poverty and conflict in developing countries.

The benefits of democratization also became more apparent as countries sought to address the rise in shared



Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and US President Barack Obama engage in a lively conversation during Medvedev's visit to Washington, D.C.

cross-border challenges. In addition to Amartya Sen's work on the absence of famines in democratic countries, the idea that democracies do not wage war against each other also gained more mainstream recognition. Within societies, too, democracy was viewed in terms of its ability to resolve conflicts nonviolently and through compromise.

International organizations also delved more deeply on democracy issues. In its landmark 2002 Human Development Report, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) asserted that democratic participation is a critical end of human development, as well as a means of achieving it. The report argued that democratic politics are as important to successful development as economics. The percentage of the UNDP's annual budget dedicated to democracy and governance rose steadily during the past decade to nearly 40 percent, while the UN's Electoral Assistance Bureau (EAB) and the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) were established to promote and strengthen democratic practices.

Regional intergovernmental organizations, from the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to the Organization of American States (OAS) and the African Union (AU), sought to advance regional democratic standards. NGOs in Africa, Asia, and Europe joined their US counterparts in supporting civil society, democratic political parties, women's empowerment, independent judiciaries and media, and free and fair elections. Inter-parliamentary organizations and international groupings of political parties, ranging from social democrats to conservatives, continued to bolster these institutions of representative democracy. Even the World Bank, despite mandating restrictions on engaging in political issues, began articulating a "new development framework" in which parliaments and civil society were identified as

development partners.

By the turn of the century, even the most autocratic regimes often felt it necessary to speak the democratic idiom and engage in elections, albeit manipulated ones. Many observers, from the economist Sen to politicians like Geremek, the late Polish foreign minister and Solidarity leader, hailed democracy as one of the most important developments of the 20th century.

Democracy assistance, while inherently a long-term endeavor, made progress in a variety of places around the globe. It supported the world's most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, in moving from dictatorship to democracy with a thriving economy, as well as helping move many countries of Central and Eastern Europe toward greater economic development and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Democracy Aid and Double-Standardism

It is sadly ironic that just as democracy and liberal principles were increasingly shaping the discourse within and between nations, the linkage between democracy assistance and military intervention in Iraq caused democracy promotion to become a hotly debated topic.

Historically, the Middle East had been largely immune from the democratization foreign policy lens, given the US regional interests in diplomacy and oil. The September 11 terrorist attacks, however, brought a new set of political and policy dynamics. Repression and lack of political freedom in much of the Middle East and larger Islamic world helped breed extremists willing to abuse religion to help export their version of a new political order. Nondemocratic countries in these places were caught in a destabilizing cycle of authoritarianism and the radicalism it helped breed. Political life was polarized and marked by sharp cleavages, both

between secular and religious forces and between ruling elites and civil society.

President Bush's use of the bully pulpit provided an important measure of political space and protection for democratic reformers in the Middle East. And in the years immediately preceding the 2003 war in Iraq, democratic norms and freedoms became part of the public discourse in the Arab world, where the language of debate was changing. For the first time, a new generation of democrats pushed national leaders for more freedoms and accountability.

Acting as a Middle Eastern "third way" between autocrats and religious extremists, these reformers became active in newly-elected legislatures, within political parties, in women's organizations, and among election monitoring organizations and other



Migrant workers in Mumbai, India ride to work on the back of a truck. Increasingly, international development agencies are recognizing that democratic politics are as important to successful development as economics.

nongovernmental groups. Assistance from the international community has helped them to develop the organizational skills, knowledge, and institutional networks necessary to recruit and sustain broad constituencies. And when offered and provided in appropriate ways and in a spirit of cooperation, these reformers welcomed such assistance.

Despite this growing indigenous demand for change, democracy assistance practitioners were often asked whether the recipients of such assistance had “asked” for help or whether external aid was an attempt to “impose” Western-style institutions. The imposition accusation became more common after the Iraq war—understandably, as the war was, in one of its many policy incarnations, defended as part of an effort to build Iraqi democracy and drive democratization in the region. This situation left the US public and policymakers understandably confused about the purpose and means of democracy promotion.

Irrespective of arguments over the wisdom of waging an unpopular war, political progress in Iraq has at times been uncertain, but overall it has been remarkable. While the war and violence have taken a terrible toll, and the outcome is

“Bad” Results from “Good” Elections

Critics argued that Bush’s freedom agenda was also too closely associated with pressing for early or premature elections, which could, in their view, exacerbate tensions particularly in the absence of longer-term institutional development during conflict and post-conflict situations. From this perspective, Iraq’s 2005 polls and Palestine’s 2006 elections were presented as exhibits A and B. But upon closer examination, this charge was simply wrong.

In late 2003, confronted with a growing insurgency and Iraqi criticism that their political leaders had been appointed by occupation officials and not legitimately elected, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) announced a plan for transferring sovereignty to Iraqis through a series of appointed caucuses. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani objected, repeating his oft-stated demand for elections to choose national leaders. A political crisis ensued, and the CPA enlisted the help of United Nations envoy Lakhdar Brahimi to defuse tensions. Brahimi brokered a compromise whereby elections would be held in January 2005.

Resisting local demand for a legitimately elected Iraqi

“Some viewed democracy support as a Trojan horse for the advancement of geostrategic objectives.”

not assured, Iraqis more than any of their neighbors are in control of their own destiny. The country’s potential wealth and educated population make it a formidable regional force. Highly competitive elections, the emergence of a vibrant civil society, a representative parliament that reconciles political differences peacefully, and a movement away from sectarian politics all represent positive trends over the past seven years.

Other doubts about US democracy promotion arose from the gap between President Bush’s freedom agenda and inconsistencies in its application, as evident in the handling of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Inconsistencies could also be observed in the differential treatment of US allies and adversaries. Democracy appeared to be a club used against autocratic regimes unfriendly to the United States, such as Zimbabwe, Iran, and Belarus, but not against friendly regimes, such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, where President Pervez Musharraf was described as our indispensable ally.

Policymakers cited Pakistan as an example of where other US interests—the War on Terrorism—justified support for an autocratic regime. But the narrowness of this approach exacted a high price. The United States faced growing anti-US sentiment as the Pakistani people rose up against US-backed military rule. We pursued stability at the expense of democracy and achieved neither. As a result, some viewed democracy support as a Trojan horse for the advancement of geostrategic objectives.

government would surely have alienated political groups when escalating pressures from insurgents and violence against civilians was making life worse for Iraqis, not better. The failure of governance in Iraq could be traced much more directly to the lack of security than to elections. Moreover, subsequent elections have led to the rise and popularity of more secular parties and coalitions.

The success of Hamas in Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections occurred exactly one year later. Although the elections were used by critics of democracy assistance to argue against “early” elections, the irony is that the Hamas victory in 2006 was the result of elections that actually occurred too late. The 1993 Oslo agreements, which led to 1996 polls for the PLC, envisioned an interim body that would be reelected in 1999 and every four years thereafter. But Yasser Arafat, president of the Palestinian National Authority, continually postponed the elections, fueling public frustration. Regularly scheduled PLC elections in 1999 and 2003 would likely have led to less radical outcomes and convinced the Palestinian public that democracy was a viable means of pursuing political change.

The Democratic Recession

The debate regarding democracy promotion has coincided with a worldwide democratic recession. Freedom House, which annually measures levels of freedom worldwide, reports declines in political rights and civil liberties for the fourth consecutive year. While global democratic trends over the past three decades are overwhelmingly posi-

tive, authoritarian states became more repressive in 2009, and declines in freedom occurred in a number of countries that had experienced progress in recent years. This negative development can be traced to authoritarian governments that—through intimidation, the adoption of new laws and regulations, or sophisticated propaganda—have suppressed journalists, independent civic groups, and political rivals. They are increasingly communicating with and learning from each other. A law restricting civic groups, once adopted in one country, may soon surface in another. These regimes, fearing a loss of power, also restrict or ban the activities of international organizations and foreign governments that assist the efforts of democracy and human rights activists. These autocracies exist alongside increasingly resilient semi-authoritarian states in which strong centralization of power is hidden behind a quasi-democratic façade.

In addition to the deepening authoritarian rule over the past several years, new democracies are struggling to meet voters' expectations, particularly with regard to improving standards of living. This situation has raised citizens' discon-

to help them fulfill this function more effectively. In Haiti, since 1998, NDI has helped establish and develop 179 local Initiative Committees (ICs) involving 3,580 civic groups and approximately 35,000 people. They organized communities around the country to cooperate with municipal governments to respond to local needs and priorities. Projects have ranged from the construction of health clinics, schools, and roads, to reforestation and watershed conservation, potable water, HIV/AIDS education, tourism, and ant infestation. Following the tragic earthquake earlier this year, the ICs have formed a network of information centers to assist humanitarian and reconstruction efforts.

All around the world, NDI draws on its relationships with political leaders to help them strengthen their own democratic institutions and link them with policy information and experts. NDI and its partners created the online resource iKNOW Politics (www.iknowpolitics.org) to encourage women's participation and effectiveness in political life by providing them with expertise and access to resources. A joint project of NDI, the UNDP, the United Nations

“All around the world, NDI draws on its relationships with political leaders to help them strengthen their own democratic institutions and link them with policy information and experts.”

tent with the performance of democratic institutions.

Many who were caught up in the euphoria of democracy's “third wave” assumed that democratic rule would encourage the development and delivery of policies and programs that reflect the popular will and address the social and economic issues that affect citizens' daily lives. Often, however, a new democratic regime inherits the legacies of its non-democratic predecessor—poverty, disease, and corruption. Even when reform-minded governments are elected, they frequently gain control of a governing structure with few channels of public access, particularly for poorer segments of the population. In many cases this situation is exacerbated when years of political exclusion harden into resignation, apathy, or fatalism. Overcoming this legacy requires the development of skills for citizen participation and advocacy—what the World Bank calls “social accountability”—along with structural changes in political parties and parliaments that are necessary to make the levers of democracy accessible to all segments of society. In short, making “democracy deliver” represents the next generation of challenges for democracy promotion.

For NDI, helping democracy deliver takes on a wide variety of programmatic forms. In Afghanistan, NDI works with many of the 420 councilors who serve on 34 provincial councils (PCs) around the country. Their role is to ensure that citizen views are reflected in provincial development planning and to oversee programs and spending, such as infrastructure projects. NDI has provided day-to-day training

Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), it is a virtual forum in English, Spanish, French, and Arabic where women can share experiences, access information, and build a supportive online community. Since its inception in 2007, iKNOW Politics has averaged 1.5 million hits a month, and serves elected women officials, candidates, decision-makers, political leaders, and civic groups, as well as academics, students, and practitioners worldwide.

The answer to the challenge of democracy delivering is, to paraphrase Jane Addams and Al Smith, better, rather than less, democracy. If nascent institutions fail to fulfill their democratic role, the sense of powerlessness among the poor will only grow. As economist Joseph Stiglitz points out, left with no way to express their concerns and desire for change, people can turn to the street to protest. Another possible outcome is the rise of populist leaders who can take advantage of failing political institutions by repressing political opponents and eventually civil society, the press, and other democratic institutions.

Building upon a Recovered Foundation

The United States and its partners are at a crossroads in recalibrating their approach to democracy support. To some, the path of least resistance may involve policy drift, weak but sustained rhetorical commitment to democratic ideals, and token support that exists uncomfortably along-

side a more “realpolitik” foreign policy. Another pathway requires renewed leadership to develop new and, whenever possible, multilateral approaches and strategies to meet current challenges. It must also be driven by the demands of local partners and the desire to improve quality of life for all citizens. New strategies to support democracy are concerned not only with promoting democratic transitions but also with addressing a broader host of democratic deficits that exist at different stages of democratization: from state capture and corruption to the election of kleptocratic or nondemocratic elites, to the use of identity politics to enflame ethnic or religious tension.

While the US government can set the tone and provide needed diplomatic backing for democracy, much of the work can and should be carried out by US nongovernmental groups. Efforts to support civil society, judicial and parliamentary reform, media freedom, and political parties are based on people-to-people interaction. And NGOs have the pre-existing relationships, skills, and knowledge to achieve these ends.

At the same time, knowledge, professionalism, and capacity of the international democracy community continue to grow. Major democracies, such as Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa, have consolidated in recent years and they, together with newly-democratic countries in Central and Eastern Europe, have important roles to play in sharing their transition experience with others. In this regard, the Indonesian government has established the Bali Democracy Forum to nurture democratic movement in the region.

Most important, the foundation for building a reinvigorated democracy assistance policy remains as fundamentally sound today as ever. It is more than capable of withstanding democratic recessions, unpopular wars, or specific election results because it is based on the people’s call for dignity and representation. A 2008 WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 19 countries worldwide found that on average 85 percent of those surveyed agreed that “the will of the people should be the basis for the authority of government.” A 2010 survey of 19 sub-Saharan African countries by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life revealed that 75 percent believed that democracy is preferable to other forms of government. A global survey by Gallup found that eight out of 10 people want to live in a democracy. In seven Arab countries surveyed by the Arab Barometer, agreement that democracy is the best system of government ranged from a high of 92 percent in Morocco to a low of 63 percent in Yemen.

Critics of democracy assistance often talk about the incompatibility of democracy with a particular culture, although few would argue that cultural

identities exempt countries from the universal human rights on which democracy is based.

In the Middle East, they may make assertions about the incompatibility of Islam and democracy, a supposed Arab preference for autocracy, or an Oriental aversion to democratic principles. But as with previous claims about Asian values or African tribalism, these arguments have proved to be incorrect but durable. Shortly after the onset of the Iraq war, a study by the Pew Research Center pointed to a dramatic drop in support for the United States in the Muslim world; but it also showed that people in Muslim countries highly value “freedom of expression, freedom of the press, multiparty political systems and equality under the law.” These findings, which tend to be consistent year after year and across countries and regions, should put to rest the claim made by critics at home and by autocrats abroad that democracy is a Western or US export.

As the United States determines how to move its democracy assistance policy forward, it will do so in the context of influential international events. This situation is particularly true in places where there is growing citizen demand for democratic expression. When a more democratic transition occurs in these contexts, the United States has sometimes been caught off-balance, most recently in Kyrgyzstan. Foreign policy is often at its best when it finds itself on the right side of history; a robust democracy assistance policy better positions US policy in this regard.

The question of basing US foreign policy on either values or interests has become a false dichotomy, particularly in a growing, interdependent world where individuals are increasingly demanding to have a voice in how they are governed. A more meaningful debate is the one about how best to support indigenous democratic movements and nurture democratic impulses that exist within all societies. ■



Iraqi women in Baghdad cast votes in a parliamentary election. Survey research data consistently show people in Muslim countries highly value freedom of expression, freedom of the press, multiparty political systems, and equality under the law.