

World Movement for Democracy on The Current Challenges to Democracy

Introduction

The euphoria about the spread of democracy following dramatic political events of the mid-eighties and early nineties -- the overthrow of authoritarian military regimes in countries of Latin America, the dismantling of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the fall of the communist system and the Berlin Wall -- is over. Democracy has proven more difficult to achieve than many assumed. The initial steps towards democracy with the organization of competitive elections, as undertaken in many countries, proved not to be enough to deliver on the high expectations among people for an improvement in their lives. Yet, eight out of ten citizens said in a worldwide Gallup poll in 2005 that despite its problems, democracy is the best system of government.

The Steering Committee of the World Movement for Democracy (WMD) reviewed the state of democracy at its meeting in The Hague on October 23rd, 2006. It resolved that the current threats to democracy present a great challenge to the World Movement, increasing the need to bolster democratic forces through direct aid and greater international solidarity.

Democracy does not come by itself and it cannot be imported from abroad, let alone be implanted by military means. It has to grow from within countries by gradually institutionalizing and constructing political processes and spreading the universal values that are intrinsic to democracy. Values such as respect for diversity and pluralism, tolerance, justice, freedom, human rights, and non-violence are universal core values that are embedded in the rich cultural diversity around the globe. As the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan stated on October 30th, 2006: "...*democracy is a universal right that does not belong to any country or region, and that participatory governance, based on the will of the people, is the best path to freedom, growth and development.*"

Transforming these values into the practice of democratic governance takes time, which is in short supply because of people's high expectations for democratic government to deliver. Yet, to quote Kofi Annan once more: "*No nation is born a democracy.*" It requires effort and time to build while it requires permanent maintenance as well. To manage the process of democracy building and the expectations of people, governments need to ensure a 'social contract' with their people that provides those governments the legitimacy to govern.

The advancement of democracy is not only an essential goal in its own right, but it is also linked

- 1) to peace building, by practicing the resolution of conflicts non-violently,
- 2) to the consolidation of all human rights, through the application of the rule of law and social justice, and
- 3) to economic growth and development, through government that invests in human capital because it is accountable to its people.

Lessons learned in advancing democracy

The process of learning to practice democracy meets challenges of various kinds. The first challenge lies in the fact that democratization takes place in often still authoritarian environments that resist change, in countries with weak states that provide insufficient security to their citizens, in countries with incomplete processes of nation-building, and in countries with poorly developed

or skewed economies. Transitions to democracy do not move forward across straight lines and are bound to encounter backlashes. Democracy activists, therefore, and the international organizations that support them, must prepare for the long haul and adopt comprehensive approaches.

The second challenge lies in the inadequate and inappropriate international approaches in supporting democratic development. The delivery of international support is not always compatible with the intrinsic values of democracy itself. Does the process through which international support is delivered have as its ultimate goal a democratic outcome? Are the instruments used and procedures followed democratic? When they are not, democracy support is likely to become counterproductive. The premise of “economic development first, democracy later” still holds for much of international assistance. It results, for example, in the promotion of liberal market reforms while reinforcing systems of autocracy in the process. That countries become economically as well as politically fit through democracy – as argued by the Nobel laureate Armatya Sen - requires a comprehensive rethinking of how international assistance is delivered.

Confusing democracy promotion with regime change, and even with the use of military force to remove a regime, is also counter-productive and often inconsistent with the values of democracy. Such an approach has played into the hands of autocrats who are resisting necessary democratic reforms by playing up sentiments against perceived foreign intrusion in violation of the sovereignty of their countries. It also is often accompanied by ‘double standards’ since only unfriendly regimes are targeted while “friendly tyrants” are treated much more leniently. Such practices - real or perceived - in the conduct of international cooperation by established democracies are giving democracy and democracy support, unfortunately, a bad name.

Furthermore, in countries moving out of violent conflict, often the emphasis lies on stability and reconstruction first, democracy later. This approach frequently entrenches the very political-economic interests which are the causes of conflict in the first place. Rather than sequencing approaches, successful international cooperation ought to be comprehensive by balancing the three interlinked objectives of democracy, security and development.

These trends in the international context make the advancement of democracy more difficult but also more necessary. *In order not to lose the hard-won momentum of the most recent democratic wave, support for democracy and for the activists struggling to advance democracy needs to remain a core objective of international cooperation and become an integral dimension of security and economic cooperation.*

Responding to the backlash against democracy and democracy promotion

The past few years have witnessed a “backlash” against democracy on the part of countries that seek to frustrate, undermine, or prohibit the activities of democratic and civil society groups and individual activists. Russia is a prominent example of this trend, where nationalism, the cold war legacy of irrational fear of and hostility to “foreign enemies,” reaction to protests against unfair redistribution of property and the growing gap between rich and poor in early post-Communist years, and the use of non-democratic means by democratically-elected leaders have all worked to revive autocracy and centralized authority.

But Russia is only one of a number of “semi-authoritarian” or “hybrid” regimes that have stepped up measures to prevent democratic activities they regard as threatening. Democratic space in these countries has been increasingly eroded by curtailing fundamental freedoms, openly disregarding the rule of law, suppressing civil society organizations, and stifling independence of the media. Autocratic populist rulers tell the public that there are other ways to make people happy besides providing them with the mechanisms of democratic participation and self-government.

Today, many regimes across the world impose tight control over civil society under the pretexts of ensuring security, political stability and non-interference in the country's "internal affairs." These governments place unlawful restrictions on NGO activities, constrain and silence their work, and harass and intimidate civil society activists. Particularly targeted are those NGOs that advocate human rights and democracy and work in conflict zones. Often these regimes justify their actions by accusing independent NGOs of treason, espionage, subversion, foreign interference or terrorism. These are rationalizations; the real motivation is political. This is not about defending citizens from harm but of protecting positions of power.

Semi-authoritarian governments feel threatened by the work of NGOs and are developing tools to suppress and silence these organizations. They create restrictive laws and regulations, impose burdensome registration and tax requirements. Charges are vague, such as "disturbing social order" and "undermining security", and implementation and enforcement are arbitrary, fostering a climate of self-censorship and fear. NGOs face serious legal and political challenges in countries such as Russia, Venezuela, Uzbekistan, Eritrea, Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Algeria, where new restrictive NGO legislation has been adopted or is in the making.

In addition to the threat posed by semi-authoritarian regimes that close off political space to independent NGOs and political oppositions, there is the continuing problem of authoritarian countries that were left virtually unaffected by the third wave of democracy and that repress **all** forms of independent democratic activity. The recent events in Burma remind us of the millions of inhabitants of closed societies in East Asia and elsewhere who lack the most basic of human rights. Despite economic advances, China maintains its political controls over its citizens and has become a model for rulers who believe that they can have both the benefits of economic openness and a monopoly of political power. Whether that combination can be maintained in the face of the growing anger of the populations in countries such as China, Burma, Belarus, and Zimbabwe is an open question. In an age of global communications authoritarian regimes are vulnerable to the spread of information and therefore offer opportunities as well as challenges.

Making Democracy Deliver

For many emerging democracies in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and elsewhere, the biggest challenge is to institutionalize the newly chosen multiparty democracy systems and to help democracy deliver in terms of reducing poverty and improving the quality of life. These processes are slow and tedious, but today there is greater acceptance that security and economic development need to go hand in hand with improving democratic governance. Better governance means better conditions for foreign investments. Hence, governments that are genuinely interested in economic development tend to be more interested in democratic development as well.

In addition there are many weak or failed states, with fragmented national identities and prone to violent conflict. Conditions in these countries, many of them in Africa, not only threaten their own populations but also risk destabilizing neighboring democratizing countries. Stronger regional cooperation can provide the framework for containing the violence and assisting democratic state- and nation- building processes.

In the year 2006 in Latin America, democratic elections were held in more than 10 countries. However, the democratic experience over two decades has shown that political reforms did not go deep enough. Market reforms produced limited economic growth with low inflation, but they have not significantly reduced poverty or corruption or enhanced the capacity of the state to improve the lives of the poor. As a result, in certain countries an anti-democratic populism has gained strength, leading to the dismantling of core features of a democratic system, such as the separation of powers and the rule of law, and causing deep rifts within the population. At the same time, in some countries this instability has opened up the political system to the

marginalized indigenous population, prompting new and sometimes controversial proposals to revise the constitutional architecture. Meanwhile, a few Latin American countries have made great progress in consolidating democracy, and they can play an important role as reference for the peaceful evolution of democracy and economic development in the region.

Strengthening moderate democratic elements

While the objective of democratic reform in the Middle East has received rhetorical support from the international community, real support has not come close to matching the rhetoric. The absence of democracy and governmental accountability, along with poverty and economic stagnation in many countries in the region, have bred pervasive popular frustration. Democrats in the Middle East are outflanked by autocrats and also by extremist oppositions that act under the guise of religious ideas and are able to attract popular support with their social agenda.

Moderate democratic voices seek to be heard, but they have been repressed by autocratic regimes and drowned out by Islamist radicals who dominate the street and have exclusive access to the mosque as an arena for political mobilization. Support must be given to democratic movements, including moderate religious groups that can challenge extremists who misuse Islam to promote anti-democratic political agendas.

Intensive international dialogue is also needed with responsible political and social actors in the region about ways in which political reform can be supported in harmony with social, religious and economic reform processes taking place in the region. For such a dialogue to gain momentum, progress will have to be made in ending the principal conflicts that plague the region, including the war in Iraq, which threatens regional stability, the Israel-Palestine conflict, which continues to be an excuse for the incumbent autocratic regimes to block democratic openings, and the continuing crisis in Lebanon.

The problems of political extremism in the Middle East and elsewhere are exacerbated by great inequalities in the distribution and consumption of global resources between wealthy and poor countries, as well as by corrupt rulers who steal national wealth and international assistance in many developing countries. A vicious cycle of permanent poverty, political exclusion, and massive health crises fosters feelings of hopelessness and encourages some to conclude that violence is the only way to redress grievances. Democracy coupled with economic development and the equitable distribution of resources is the only effective long-term antidote to these alarming developments.

The changing international context

The global environment for the advancement of democracy has become more complex. The desire for democratic governance by people of all cultures needs to be reinforced by a re-invigorated multilateral system, which is essential for the strengthening of the international rule of law, and by developing multifaceted responses to religious and other forms of extremism which pose threats to the advancement of democracy.

The competition for scarce energy resources, in particular oil and gas, to sustain the levels of economic growth, is providing added pressure to the primacy of national economic interests over the advancement of democracy, including respect for the rule of law and human rights.

The globalizing market economy has also had a sizeable political impact, including in Western established democracies. The impersonal forces of globalization, seemingly so beyond peoples' control and comprehension, have often resulted in nationalistic and even xenophobic responses. The faster the world integrates, the more people appear to huddle in their religious or ethnic or tribal enclaves. Integration and disintegration feed on each other.

The forces of technology and capitalism with their global outreach and driven onward by self-generated momentum also create challenges to democracy by loosening the bonds of popular sovereignty through which democracy has traditionally flourished. Is there sufficient awareness and concern within established democracies that the dynamics that drive globalization also challenge the functioning of their own democracy?

Democracy should thus not be taken for granted, even in established democracies. The adagio 'government by the will of the people' requires an active discourse to ensure that the political system maintains its validity in the globalizing setting in which it has to function.

A plan of action

As the World Movement for Democracy, a network of organizations and activists from all continents engaged in building democracy, we are seriously concerned about the growing complacency about the value of spreading democracy; we are concerned about the backlash against democratic transitions in a number of countries around the globe; and we are concerned about the stalling of democratic reform processes in other countries.

We have begun to address the problems of "backlash" through drafting and issuing the report "Defending Civil Society," which has been the result not only of extensive empirical research but also widespread consultation with democracy activists from around the world. That report will articulate the long-standing, widely recognized principles that ought to inform proper government-civil society relations, such as the right to associate, advocate, and receive cross-border assistance. With the publication of this report, the World Movement will spearhead a campaign to promote the adoption of those principles by governments and multi-lateral organizations.

The problem of making democracy work more effectively to serve the needs of people will be highlighted at the upcoming Fifth World Assembly in Kyiv in April 2008. Workshops will be devoted to the question of how democracy can broaden its reach beyond the political realm to encompass critical social and economic policies that can improve the daily lives of citizens.

The challenge of developing alternatives to jihadist and other forms of extremism pose a unique set of questions for the Movement. One approach might be to encourage the global networking of Muslim and other democrats so that they can more effectively oppose those who misuse religion for political purposes.

Conclusion

The alternative to democracy is autocracy and dictatorship. This means more conflict and less peace in the world. With more conflict, economic development and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals will be compromised. No single country can fix the world on its own. We need to invest in strong multilateral cooperation based on the values of democracy. *The World Movement Steering Committee, therefore, urges that support for those struggling for democracy against dictatorship and working to consolidate democratic transitions will receive the highest priority on the agendas of international cooperation in coherence with security and development objectives.*

The World Movement has come a long way since its founding nearly nine years ago. It remains an important catalyst for democratic activity worldwide, bringing together activists in solidarity to support one another's work. The challenging environment for democracy in which the world now finds itself only serves to reinforce our commitment to the founding principles under which the Movement originally came together.

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