

## **American approach to democracy support**

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A joke during the Bush years went something like this: *'don't get us angry or we will democratize you'*. The Bush administration's take on democratization, known as the Freedom Agenda, was roundly criticized as hubristic, politically selective, lacking self-awareness, and—perhaps worst of all—grossly naive.

Tom Carothers, an American scholar of democracy assistance, went so far as to say that, in the wake of the Bush administration, democracy promotion must be *'decontaminated'*—detached from military intervention and regime change, *'disinfected'* by cleaning up perceived shortcomings in U.S. rule of law (Guantanamo, for example), and *'repositioned'* to be more multilateral in character and multidisciplinary in substance.

Under Obama, Carothers argues, this repositioning has largely occurred. He has talked about charity beginning at home on such critical matters as government transparency and human rights for all, notably including the LGBT community. Yet in several critical instances, not least a massive government surveillance program of U.S. citizens and foreign powers alike, the Obama administration has continued, if not extended less than transparent policies deemed essential to national security, and yet highly controversial from a democracy perspective. Basic rights, especially the right to privacy, appear trampled by government.

Many in the world are consequently unconvinced about reinvigorated American leadership on global democracy. As have all his predecessors dating back to Jimmy Carter, who introduced human rights as an explicit foreign policy goal, to Ronald Reagan, who brought forward the promotion of democracy as a complementary foreign policy objective, to George W. Bush, Obama confronts complex trade-offs between geopolitical/national security interests on the one hand and democracy and human rights promotion on the other—most tellingly in response to the Arab Spring. Where national security interests are less obvious, for example in Zimbabwe, the administration response has been more forthright on democracy issues. In Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, and Turkey, however, where security interests pre-dominate, the response is more mixed, and the democracy message more muted.

Seen from U.S. shores, democratization is a proposition that is paradoxically steadfast and questioned. Steadfast in that democracy assistance enjoys bipartisan support, is underwritten by official foreign policy, and indeed extends throughout the globe and into areas once seen as

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impervious to such assistance, such as active conflict zones. But while its effectiveness on the ground, in such areas as election monitoring and civil society promotion, is lauded by U.S. officials and members of Congress, its larger-scale impact is often questioned, owing to an increasingly distracted, competitive, and even hostile global environment. International terrorism, climate change and natural resource scarcity, and ethnic/sectarian conflict frustrate democratic advancement and, in turn, democratization seems to carry little effect in dealing with these problems, at least from a short-term perspective. More broadly, there is second-guessing, on both sides of the Atlantic, that the ‘tried-and true’ western liberal system of government may no longer guarantee political stability or economic growth, and related concerns that new entrants, not least so-called China model—frayed as it may yet turn out to be—are challenging the supposed universality of democracy as the most effective form of government. If 1989 marked the ‘end of history’, 2013 feels as if the great powers—state, non-state, more diverse and numerous than before, and with more tools in their arsenals—are back with a vengeance.

If global geo-politics presents rocky terrain for democratization, the view from on the ground, in contrast, provides greater impetus. We need to listen to people around the world and, from the bottom-up, we see a global affirmation of and claim to democratic rights on a scale not seen before. Hundreds of thousands of people are asserting their demands to democratic government—in Tahrir Square, on Bourghiba Avenue, in Gezi Park, in the center of Sofia, on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro, in towns and cities in India and China and elsewhere, in ways that are pure and clear and compelling. “*Merci Facebook*”, graffiti’d on the outside wall of a building in Tunis, signals a new, 21st century e-architecture for democratic aspiration, expression, communication, organization, and activism.

The global appeal of democracy is arguably as clear and universal as it’s ever been. Yet, as noted above, the political, economic, and social environments into which democratic aspirations must struggle is perhaps as complex and challenging as it’s ever been. There seems to be a tradeoff—a false one in my view—between stability on the one hand and democracy on the other, as if they’re mutually exclusive, when, in point of fact, democracy can really be the only basis for durable stability.

How then, should we consider and approach democracy support? ‘With dexterity’ would be the short answer. By ‘dexterity’ I mean recognition of and the ability to work through the tensions that democracy support engenders: providing external support to movements that must be ‘home-grown’ to endure and have legitimacy; seeking long-term institutional reform, social change, and even cultural adaptation through the often narrow prism of political process; grafting universally recognized human rights onto indigenous political systems evolved through history and culture and geography and social norm; and bringing more people with more ideas about more things into governing systems which seem to have more fiscal and other policy constraints than ever before.

Here I will turn again to Tom Carothers, who offered two paradigms—by no means mutually exclusive and indeed, when combined, offer some form of dexterity—in an essay entitled *Democracy Assistance: Political vs. Developmental?* (Journal of Democracy, 2009).

The political approach to democracy development is rights/value-based. It sees democracy as an end unto itself, exercised through political competition in fair elections, independent media, and the full exercise of public rights to freedom of expression and government petition. This approach is often seen as catalytic in that it pursues democratic outcomes through political events, for example by assisting political parties to compete in elections, citizens to monitor elections, and independent media and legislatures to scrutinize the work of government.

The development approach to democracy eschews adversarial politics as the venue for democratic development, relying instead on institutional change of government at an incremental level. It promotes good governance, public service delivery, an independent judiciary—essentially an enlightened executive power and political and civic elite—to guide societies through a democratic transition process that is not per se an end unto itself, but in service of other socio-economic goals, such as reducing poverty or stabilizing and deepening a middle-class.

Naturally, both approaches are not mutually exclusive. As Carothers points out, there is complementarity in these two approaches. They need each other. Democratic change through politics needs a population whose social and economic needs are sufficiently met in order to feel secure in exercising their political rights. Sustained and equitable socioeconomic development, in turn, requires accountable government, and this comes about through political competition and robust public oversight.

A dexterous approach to democracy development recognizes the comparative advantages and shortcomings in both approaches and seeks some form of interwoven combination. The U.S. approach has in fact been largely developmental, with a minority if higher-profile stake in the political approach. The newly issued USAID democratization strategy includes a political approach but its core is essentially developmental, leveraging democracy assistance in service of socioeconomic outcomes, such as poverty reduction. For its part, the European Union is also mostly developmental in its democracy support, with as well a minority stake in the political approach. Democracy rhetoric in the U.S. tends to evoke the political approach; EU rhetoric, in contrast, tends to defer to the developmental model.

Political parties become central in the welding together of these two approaches. Parties are of course political. They lie at the heart of political competition. They are also developmental. Parties supply the leaders of government, the public policymakers, the decision-makers, and through independent and affiliated think-tanks, among other sources, the policy ideas that are used to govern. Parties hold political and developmental power. Too often they struggle, prevaricate, and countries and societies consequently drift or regress. Too often they don't

produce or otherwise champion the ideas and policies that can reform governing systems and produce growth and stability. That is their task, their obligation. NDI recognizes this. That is why we support the development of political parties, as well as political think-tanks and foundations, so that democratic transitions—from both the political and developmental perspectives—can ultimately succeed.