Review - Democracy Promotion and Conflict-based Reconstruction

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/10/23/review-democracy-promotion-and-conflict-based-reconstruction/

LOUIE WOODALL, OCT 23 2011

An analytical survey of America's recent democratisation missions is a rarity in a market flooded with repeated diatribes against the United States government's attempts at democracy promotion. In***Democracy Promotion and Conflict-based Reconstruction*****,** Matthew Alan Hill adopts a theoretical approach to US foreign policy, choosing to look beyond personalities and politics to the underlying ideas and processes that determined the outcome of American democratisation missions in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Hill begins by summarising the set of theories that underpin his analysis: 'the American Mission', 'democratisation' and 'democratic peace theory'. These take the reader on a historical as much as a theoretical journey which reaches right back to the republic's founding to explore the reasons why America identifies itself as 'destined' to spread democracy across the globe, before scrutinising the recent past to unearth why successive US governments have embraced democratisation as the primary tool in post-conflict reconstruction scenarios.

Crucial here is Hill's differentiation between 'structural' theories of democratisation and 'transition' theories. It is the latter model that he identifies as being practised by the US in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Throughout the book, Hill deconstructs transition theory and exposes its shortcomings as a means of democratising conflict-ravaged states,

accusing it of being a top-down, inflexible, one-size-fits all approach to democratisation. What the reader gains is a sure understanding of both *why* the US used this approach to democracy promotion and *how* it failed to lead to the building of liberal democratic states. Hill remains neutral throughout this particular discussion, but the overwhelming impression is of a foreign policy based on fantasy, rather than reality. It seems incredible that both the Clinton and Bush administrations could adhere to a policy of democratisation that imposed blueprint-designed projects on countries without due consideration of their cultural and historical contexts. Yet this is the picture that emerges.

In 'setting the scene' Hill draws on a broad range of evidence citing a number of key commentators drawn from twenty years of literature. The sheer volume of citations has encouraged the author to use lists when outlining the specific arguments relating to the discussed theories, which while useful, may prove off-putting to the casual reader. In addition, the dense use of referencing detracts from the books readability, as the author's own voice often gets lost in the deluge of quotations.

However, once the theory is taken care of the reader is immersed in a very readable survey of the attitudes towards democracy promotion held by the Clinton and Bush administrations. Hill pays particular attention to how American foreign policy shifted post-Cold War from one that endorsed undemocratic states that opposed communism, to one that promoted democratic states as the sole guarantors of world peace and security. What comes across is an appreciation that Clinton and Bush were operating in unknown territory, trying to reposition America in an era in which it stood as an unchallenged hegemon. Hill is careful not to sound too judgemental on the direction each of these president's took in their attempts to address this problem. On the Bush administration in particular, he proves refreshing by providing a balanced review of the government's foreign policy. He refuses to pander to the view that a neo-conservative agenda was always on the cards, and forwards an alternate view of events in which the Bush White House is depicted as an enforcer of realist policy.

What is also welcome is a proper survey of how idealism and realism play a part in formulating US policy. Leaders' speeches on America's foreign adventures often feature grandiose references to the ideal of a liberal world, united by a shared affinity for democracy and open markets. These values, however, are placed in tension with much narrower American security interests. Hill demonstrates later on that idealism provides the sugar coating for the pursuit of realist goals – a factor that explains why the US proved so ready to claim success in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq even when it was clear that democracy was a long way from reaching fruition.

Bosnia and Afghanistan

With the background taken care of, Hill gets down to the substantive part of his analysis- a discussion of how the US approached democratisation in Bosnia and Afghanistan. The reader is taken on a tour of Bosnia and Afghanistan post-conflict, one which demonstrates the huge size of the task confronting the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In arguably the books most readable section, we learn that post-war Bosnia was essentially a state in tatters, where 250,000 were killed and 2 million internally or externally displaced. Hill paints an even worse picture of Afghanistan. The country is described as "less a state and more a geographical space",(67) a pre-industrial developing country where USAID was required not simply to reconstruct state infrastructure, but in many places build it for the first time.

The author explains how, in these nightmare scenarios, USAID was tasked with building a democratic state out of (quite literally) the ashes of war. The way in which the agency approached these missions is described as crucial for an overall understanding of why they seemed to fail so spectacularly. As his analysis bears out, USAID adopted a so-called 'cookie cutter' approach to its democratisation missions, believing that democracy could be imposed from above. Hill demonstrates that the agency subscribed to the idea that maximising separate democracy programme areas (such as an independent media, political pluralism and civil society) would result in a democracy flourishing almost spontaneously. This misguided view is what gave USAID the confidence that "encourages [it] to think that it can do the same thing in all countries, whether it is Afghanistan or whether it is Bosnia". (70)

The author's analysis then works up to its damning conclusion. Namely, that the US-sponsored democratisation of Bosnia and Afghanistan did not produce liberal democracies in these countries, but a hybrid system that operates in

the grey area between democracy and dictatorship. Here, Hill leans on the criteria for measuring democratic consolidation offered by Power and Gasiorowski as well as Roland Paris' three negative criteria for gauging the success of a state's transition to democracy. The former dictate that a democracy can only be considered to have been consolidated in a country if: 1) successful elections are held after the first inaugural elections, 2) there has been an unambiguous change of executive power through democratic means, 3) democracy has been the dominant political system in the country for at least twelve years. The latter criteria, meanwhile, determine whether or not a country has successfully made the transition from post-conflict to liberal democracy by asking: 1) if democratisation has "developed new dynamics in the country that could be responsible for future violent conflict, 2) if democratisation has contributed to a resurgence of intra-state fighting, 3) if democratisation "has been responsible for recreating or exacerbating conditions 'that had historically been the cause of civil violence in the host states' (Paris 2004:152)." (97) These frameworks reveal not only that the products of USAID democratisation were "restricted", "illiberal" and "feckless" political systems, but that USAID's implementation of a transition-inspired strategy actually hampered these nations' ability to achieve liberal democracy in the first place. (90)

Yes, the six criteria he analyses leads to a rather pedantic and theory-heavy section, but the detail he goes into more than makes up for it. In particular, the reader receives the message that it was USAID's preoccupation with constructing the institutional elements of democracy, rather than the cultural and normative elements, that caused these nations to falter on the road to democracy. The Clinton and Bush administrations' obsession with the idea that elections would provide the panacea that would heal the rifts caused by years of conflict and allow real democracy to flourish is but one example of this. The rush to hold elections in Bosnia, for example, is held responsible for entrenching "extremist ethnic nationalism" (94), while the low-turnout and allegations of corruption surrounding the 2009 re-election of Chairman Karzai in Afghanistan is portrayed as evidence that the US led international community caused "more harm than good to the stabilising of democracy"(94).

Furthermore, in both countries what is made clear is that the quasi-democracy inaugurated was not internally driven by a broad cross-section of the population, but externally by the international community. This harmed the chances of democracy flourishing in either country, as US sponsors did not implement grassroots, bottom-up projects but top-down, blueprint programmes that did not chime with local peoples or circumstances. The end result is that Afghanistan and Bosnia have become trapped in a "feckless plural system" where political elites are severed from the population they serve.

Hill ends this section by forwarding an interesting theory on why the Clinton and Bush administrations put their faith in transition theory in Bosnia and Afghanistan. He relates that both Presidents and their inner circles believed that liberal cultural norms constituted the "fountain of all people's political desires" and that the people of Bosnia and Afghanistan would thus automatically associate with a democratic system, even "tailoring" their behaviour to suit it (122). Hill is essentially stating that the reason why USAID and transition theory is so set on creating democratic institutions rather than supporting the emergence of a liberal culture is because of an underlying belief that such a culture will arise naturally and spontaneously in any environment conducive to its growth. Such faith seems misplaced from an objective standpoint, but works well as an explanatory factor for the actions taken during democratisation.

This leads on to a discussion on how American values and interests were served in the process of democratisation. Hill suggests that the former are essentially employed in democratisation scenarios in order to provide cover for the fulfilment of narrow security interests. As proof, the author lists the concrete benefits that the US accrued from its democratisation missions and places these in sharp contrast with the list of unfulfilled American values. The end conclusion reveals that democratisation was only pursued in so far as it met US national interests. This explains both why Clinton and Bush so readily claimed success in Bosnia and Afghanistan respectively even when it was clear that democracy had not yet emerged, and why the international response to the practice of democracy promotion was so hostile. Hill quotes Kiely by summarising that "many of the world's population" viewed democratisation "not as the promotion of human rights but as the imperialist exercise of power." (142)

Iraq

Building on his analysis, Hill transfers his findings on Bosnia and Afghanistan and applies them to US democracy promotion in Iraq. What is not made clear is why the author chose to partition Iraq off into a separate chapter, condensing all the analytical criteria spaced out across the preceding five chapters into one dense section. Yes, there are differences between the democratisation missions that took place in Bosnia and Afghanistan and the one that took place in Iraq, and perhaps evidence on the Iraq mission was not readily available to the author at the time of writing. Whatever the reason, what persists is a sense that this chapter was 'tacked on' to broaden the scope of the book's research. Yet, despite the former comment, the drama of the Iraqi mission makes this one of the most enjoyable chapters.

Hill makes it clear that while USAID conformed to the previous pattern of top-down, blueprint approach democratisation implementation in Iraq, lessons *had* been learnt from previous missions. He accepts that "sub-programmes and projects did at times respond to local conditions", citing the achievements of the Local Governance Programme, which utilised local consultation rather than predefined models to achieve its aims (153). However, the widespread instances of corruption and misgovernment tacitly supported by the US in Iraq once again lead Hill to argue that here, as in Bosnia and Afghanistan, the supposed bringers of democracy turned out to be the very same actors who impeded its ability to take root and flourish.

Looking Ahead

Hill concludes his research with a look into the future, and the Obama administration's approach to the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan. The author restates his view that the US failed in the past because of its reliance on transition theory and its inability to foster a liberal culture supportive of democratic norms. He explains that both the Clinton and Bush administrations fell into the trap of exhibiting "imperial" style behaviour in assuming control of sovereign nations in transition, and thus gave the appearance of being occupying powers who were forcing democratic reforms on an unwilling local populace (180). Hill suggests that in order for future democratisation projects to be successful, the US needs to ensure the speedy construction of democratic institutions as it has done in the past; BUT appreciate that this alone is not enough to guarantee the flourishing of a democratic state. The author argues that the US needs to understand that a liberal culture takes time to develop. He also suggests that democratisation would prove more successful if the US acted according to its values as well as its interests, as this would ensure the government remained involved in the process until real democracy was firmly entrenched.

Yet, Hill reveals that the Obama administration is far from taking this advice. He notes that the current White House has distanced itself from the language of democracy promotion entirely, instead favouring the term *development*. The new US policy in Afghanistan is summarised as: "mobilising and supporting the Afghan people" and empowering the locals to attain self-directed modernisation (185). Hill likens this new policy to the Vietnamization strategy practiced by the Nixon administration, and cautions against any change in direction that allows for mass troop withdrawals under the guise of devolving power to the local people. He insists that Afghanization "requires a lot more than just giving control of security to the Afghans" and is "contingent on supporting the growth of Afghan decision-making capacity through government ownership of policy-making" (188). However, he closes with an admission that this sort of policy is unlikely to take hold, instead appreciating that the overwhelmingly realist framework that US administrations operate within means that the long-term goal of the US will remain "to utilise the language and product of democracy promotion to fulfil its narrowly defined national interests" (190)

—

Hill's survey of America's democratisation missions takes the reader on a journey through the horrors of post-conflict states, the cut-and-thrust of policy debate and the ever evolving idea of democracy. As an academic treatise, it will undoubtedly prove a valuable resource to any student or researcher engaged in the field. For the casual reader there is also much to gain, not least a crash-course through democratisation theory and a comprehensive understanding of the current situations in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq. If the author's voice occasionally gets lost in the frequent references to commentators and interviewees, it is only because of his determination to fill the work with the greatest range of authoritative opinion. For that, readers should be most thankful.

Louie Woodall *is a member of the e-IR editorial team and an undergraduate student taking Modern History and Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London.*

About the author:

Louie is an undergraduate student taking Modern History and Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London.