

Can Externally Driven Democracy Promotion Strategies Bring Liberal Democracy?

Written by Louise Tucker

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LOUISE TUCKER, AUG 5 2009

Democracy promotion is a US foreign policy tool which synthesises its interests and values.[1] Germany and Japan being turned into successful liberal democracies following WWII, supported the belief that the US could 'successfully export liberal democracy at gunpoint'[2] The 'War on Terror' has led to an increased emphasis on military occupation[3] and reconstruction as a vehicle to export liberal democracy.[4] Liberal democracy not only means elections, but also the protection of individual rights, the rule of law[5], free press and a market economy. The Polity IV Project codifies the authority characteristics of states[6] on a scale from plus 10= full democracy to minus 10 for full autocracy.[7] Iraq scored minus 9 under Saddam Hussein, Afghanistan scored minus 7 under the Taliban, whilst Bosnia scored plus 5 since the earliest entry in 91.[8] A score of plus 7 warrants a country to be considered a mature and internally coherent democracy.[9] However, the Polity scores for the respective countries show no change from before US led democratisation until 2007. [10]As Richard Haas succinctly explained, democracy can be encouraged from outside but is best built from within. [11]

This essay discusses whether externally driven democracy promotion strategies can bring liberal democracy, referring to Iraq, Afghanistan and Bosnia. This essay argues that whilst democracy can be encouraged from outside, the success of a liberal democracy depends on internal characteristics of a given country and the way in which democracy is promoted. The issues discussed are:

1. Timeframe to establish democracy
2. Practical limits to applying democratisation theory
3. Legitimacy
4. Local context/actors
5. May be counterproductive
6. Internal characteristics- institutions, civil society, fragmentation, culture
7. Conclusion

1. Timeframe to Establish Democracy

There is debate among political scientists regarding the timeframe necessary for a democracy to become established or 'consolidated'. Consolidation is when a newly established democracy becomes sufficiently durable that it surpasses the risk of breaking down. [12] A timeframe of 10-25 years is often suggested, but there is no consensus.[13] Rustow suggests that one generation is the minimum period of transition to democracy[14] as sufficient time is needed to develop institutions and for a deeper change in popular attitudes to take effect. As Diamond points out, 'success requires a very substantial commitment of human and financial resources, delivered in timely and effective fashion, and sustained over an extended period of time ... for a minimum of five to ten years.'[15] Democracy promotion cannot achieve success overnight and sufficient time is needed for a new democracy to become a liberal democracy.

2. Practical Limits to Applying Democratisation Theory

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There are practical limits to applying democratisation theory, as each country is unique and generic theories do not take into account the unique political and cultural landscape of a given country, and possible effects of democracy promotion. The main theories of democratisation are modernisation, structural and transition. Modernisation theory focuses on economic development, and democratisation as a result of the capitalist system, but was unable to account for third wave democracies in Latin America. Structural theory focuses on the structure of society and relationships between different groups or classes. Structural factors include 'interrelated socioeconomic variables' such as economic development, urbanization, the middle class and education, politico-cultural traits such as homogeneity and tolerance, and the contagion effect. [16] Cultural obstacles to democratisation are seen in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, where there is a conservative Islamic tradition. Also, there is statistical evidence for the contagion effect[17] as geographical proximity 'increases the number of interactions that can promote democracy or authoritarianism between countries'. [18]

The most popular theory in contemporary democracy promotion is transition theory but there is too much focus on individual actors and elections. Transition is when a democratic regime replaces a nondemocratic authoritarian regime. [19] Transition theory assumes that countries moving away from authoritarianism are on the path to democracy, following three stages of democratization; opening, breakthrough, and consolidation.[20] However, democracies don't always follow this linear path and many get stuck at the beginning of the consolidation phase[21], or even revert to authoritarianism. Carothers argues that 'the political trajectories of most third-wave countries call into serious doubt the transition paradigm'[22]

Carothers criticises the transition paradigm's focus on elections. He argues that in many transitional countries, 'regular, genuine elections are held but political participation beyond voting remains shallow and governmental accountability is weak'. Elections do not overcome structural conditions, such as certain socio-cultural traditions.[23] However, Peceny argues that elections may strengthen centralist and moderate reformist groups, encourage acceptance of democratic rules[24] and that elections held in even hostile conditions can energise civil society, promote free speech, and have a democratising effect[25]. Elections are necessary but not sufficient for liberal democracy.

In Bosnia, the first state elections were held in 96, but 10 years after the Dayton agreement, it was claimed that external authorities maintained control, with 'not one piece of substantial legislation' by local politicians.[26] In Afghanistan and Iraq, despite peaceful elections, there needs to be a deep shift in the culture for successful liberal democracy. As Carothers points out, the transition paradigm was a product of the third wave but it is time for democracy activists to move on to new frameworks suited to the current political landscape.[27] With democracy promotion in the middle-east, a top-down elitist approach is a recipe for disaster, and democracy promotion strategies need to consider cultural factors, especially the role of religion in society.

Further difficulties of applying democratisation theory are that, as with other political science theories, it is difficult to replicate a given situation elsewhere. In a multivariate system, it is implausible to formulate a 'complete theory of necessary and sufficient conditions for democracy'. [28] Democracy has existed in a variety of conditions[29] and may be 'a mixture of law and chance'[30] Democracy promotion strategies should not just follow a 'template' of reform,[31] but should consider the unique political landscape of a country.

3. Legitimacy

A big challenge to democracy promotion is credibility, and foreigners going into a country to promote democracy will naturally be regarded with suspicion.[32] Democracy promotion by the US risks being perceived as neo-imperialism.[33] There is suspicion that the US uses democracy promotion as a vehicle to promote its own agenda; to secure oil and to promote US hegemony[34] Indeed, the defence of democratic values is second to the defence of US interests.[35] Distrust of the US is widespread in Arab countries[36] As Pei and Karper point out, if the local population perceives the occupying foreign power as advancing its own interests or those of domestic elites, it stymies popular acceptance of foreign intervention and nation building.[37] It is also argued that the US has no right to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries[38]. It is a breach of sovereignty, on which the whole Westphalian system is based on. As Diamond points out, successful post conflict reconstruction requires broad international

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legitimacy and cooperation. This means greater human and financial resources, and the intervention is less likely to be perceived as an imperial project. Diamond refers to the RAND study, which concludes: "Multilateral nation-building can produce more thoroughgoing transformations and greater regional reconciliation than can unilateral efforts." [39] In the case of Afghanistan, U.N. resolutions gave the United States international legitimacy.[40] It was also assisted by indigenous rebel forces. [41] But the lack of international support for the US-led Iraq invasion undermined its legitimacy[42] and it was not supported by indigenous rebel forces. [43] Furthermore, Diamond points out that by failing to establish order following the 2003 invasion, the US undermined Iraqi trust.[44] Agencies such as USAID may foster some support, as local populations associate foreign forces with a drive to promote literacy and employment skills.[45] In externally driven democratisations, legitimacy must be ensured, through international support, but above all popular acceptance in the target country.

4. Local Context, Actors, and Ownership

The success of an intervention depends on acceptance and cooperation from the country's population.[46] Constitution-making, according to Diamond, must therefore be 'broadly participatory', and include a wide range of stakeholders in its development[47] People must have a sense of participation and ownership. Mary Kaldor argued that policies should be based on bottom-up demands of 'freedom-loving subjects'[48] Bottom-up demands need to be incorporated into the blueprints of democracy in order to achieve sustainability. For instance, in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is a difficult task to balance religious fundamental demands with the demand for women's rights. So perhaps the most acceptable solution is to consider the demands of local grassroots organisations such as Iraqi Women's Will, who wish to promote women's rights within an acceptable cultural and religious framework. Broad participation of local actors is a necessary step on the path to liberal democracy

5. May be Counterproductive – Unforeseen Consequences and Backlash

Coyne points out that reconstruction efforts and foreign occupiers can cause more harm than good.[49] Diamond points out that the intervention can become the target of popular wrath, which can lead to insurgency.[50] The occupying forces will then need to devote more effort to defending themselves than rebuilding the country and its political and social order.[51] Backlash means there is insecurity which undermines the ability to participate in society in Afghanistan and Iraq.[52] There are many agencies involved in reconstruction efforts, often associated in the eyes of the local inhabitants. There are the US agencies but also international forces such as NATO. In Afghanistan, new tactics to minimise risk to civilians and giving offense to Afghans include not making any uninvited entry into an Afghan house, mosque, historical or religious site unless there is an urgent and valid reason to do so.[53] Measures such as this may improve relations with civilians on a daily basis, but if the foreign occupiers are seen as neo-imperialist bullies imposing their form of government on other states, any ideas they promote will be rejected. There may be more insurgencies or retreat to traditional identities in the form of new religious conservatism such as in Iraq, where women are under new pressures to wear the veil.[54] There may also be unforeseen future consequences from intervening in other countries' affairs. For instance, in the 1980s, the U.S. supplied arms to Afghani rebels to fight Soviet forces, which were later used against U.S. forces in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.[55] Backlash or unforeseen consequences of externally driven democracy promotion may render such efforts counter-productive, undermining progress to liberal democracy.

6. Internal Characteristic – Institutions, Civil Society, Fragmentation, Culture

A country's internal characteristics affect the success of democracy promotion. Effective institutions and civil society are necessary for liberal democracy. If not already present, they need to be bolstered. Coyne 2006 points out that 'in the absence of constitutional liberalism, democracy will not necessarily yield the desired results as defined by US foreign policy objectives'[56] Roland Paris argues that it is necessary to have 'institutionalisation before liberalization', focusing on strong institutions, rule of law and human rights protection before holding elections in post-conflict societies. Competition leads to conflict and societies must have legal, social, and economic mechanisms to deal with it. He argues that elections are important but a shared sense of political community should precede competitive elections. [57] First, civil society needs to be built including free media and education. [58] Constructing civil society involves 'profound social and political changes...at the foundational level of society'(Ish Shalom)[59]

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Coyne points out that formal rules can be changed quickly, but they must be grounded in the everyday practices of society in order to function effectively.[60] Also, the state capacity of the target nation is important, including the organizational effectiveness of the military, bureaucracy, and judiciary.[61] According to Rose and Shin, third wave democracies introduced competitive elections before establishing basic institutions of a modern state such as rule of law and institutions. Because they have 'democratized backwards' most third-wave countries are currently incomplete democracies.[62]

Afghanistan has inadequate institutions, rule of law and civil society.[63] According to Peceny, domestic structural impediments to democratization may be insurmountable in Afghanistan.[64] As the NATO report points out 'Helping to build good governance and effective institutions has proven challenging. The Afghan Government's capacity is limited because of inadequately educated, trained and paid staff that have limited capabilities and who are vulnerable to corruption'.[65] In Afghanistan, the opium trade is a further obstacle to democracy promotion. According to NATO, 'opium production and insurgent violence are correlated geographically and opium remains a major source of revenue for both the insurgency and organized crime'. The drugs trade also fuels corruption and undermines the rule of law. [66] The Afghan Government, is supported by international agencies such as USAID in implementing its *National Drug Control Strategy*, which includes institutional capacity building, law enforcement and supporting alternative livelihoods. USAID's Alternative Development programme aims to create alternatives to poppy production by promoting rural economic development, focusing on agriculture[67]

Furthermore, the level of internal cohesion in a country may also affect democratization. According to Pei and Kasper, in fractionalised countries, foreign forces risk being 'dragged into domestic power struggles' by duelling groups.[68] Barro shows in his study that more ethnically diverse countries are less likely to sustain democracy.[69] Iraq is divided by deep antagonisms between members of different ethnic, tribal and/or religious groups.[70] According to Peceny, a multiethnic coalition was seen as necessary for long-term stability. U.S. officials did not emphasize building a liberal democratic regime. The nature of the coalition was considered more important than the nature of the institutional structures within which that coalition would operate.[71] The legislative quota for minority groups may be a pragmatic way to avoid tyranny of the majority, and ensure no ethnic group feels excluded from the democratic process. Encouraging tensions to be channelled through appropriate political channels is necessary to avoid an explosion into violence.

Moreover, deep cultural attitudes may be difficult to overcome. For instance, in Afghanistan, the CRS Report states that in April 2008, the Ministry of Information and Culture banned five Indian-produced soap operas for being too risqué. Furthermore, conservative parliamentarians have attempted to pass legislation banning loud music, and men and women mixing in public.[72] On the grassroots level, girls are discouraged from going to school in Afghanistan and face pressure from conservative groups, sometimes their own families. [73] One argument against external democracy promotion is that people need to struggle for democracy in order to appreciate its value. In imposed democracies, there is no sense of hard-won democracy to be valued. Military occupation can not result in a quick transition to democracy.[74] The deeper structures of society need to be addressed including institutions and above all, civil society.

7. Conclusion

Democracy may be encouraged from outside but a top-down approach is insufficient and needs bottom-up support for liberal democracy to be sustainable. Democracy promotion strategies must consider the internal characteristics of a country and focus on fostering a fundamental shift in the foundations of society. There is not a set timeframe to establish democracy but sufficient time needs to be allowed for the normalisation of democratic practices. Practical limits to applying democratisation theory are mainly that theory is too reductive and generic laws cannot be applied to individual situations. Transition theory, which maintains popularity, focuses too much on elite actors, and doesn't account for the structural issues that are apparent in contemporary democratisations, especially in the Middle East. Rather, democracy promotion should consider the unique cultural and political landscape of individual cases. The internal characteristics of a country are likely to affect the likelihood of achieving a successful liberal democracy. Fractionalisation needs to be managed, whilst institutions and civil society need to be bolstered. Legitimacy is necessary to establish a sustainable liberal democracy, and may be gained through international and local support.

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Democracy promotion may be counterproductive if seen as neo-imperialism, and measures to secure support may reduce insurgency and backlash. Local context should be considered in democracy promotion strategy and local actors included in the democratisation process for a sense of ownership, and sustainability. Without the support of the people, there can be no liberal democracy.

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*Written by: Louise Tucker
Written at: Cardiff University
Written for: Dr. Matthew Hill
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