

I Say Democracy Promotion, You Say Democracy-Development, Let's Call the Whole Thing Off?

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, MAY 24 2013

Since I joined the democracy promotion field in 2004 the language has changed dramatically. Real-world experiences such as the US missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, their failures to develop stable democracy, responses to these missions, and conceptual understandings of local and international power relations have all shaped how we, as researchers in the field, see what is going on. In this piece I want to map-out a few of these changes and underscore an important problem that I think we are perpetuating in our analysis.

Initially when I started examining democracy promotion I did not make a distinction between the strategy of democracy promotion and the implementation of programmes designed to create democracy. Through making this distinction I was then able to identify a disconnection between what the US strategy was claiming and what was being delivered by the programmes implemented. It also helped me identify a disconnection between the explanation for promoting democracy and the national interest reasons for promoting democracy; demonstrated through understanding that the promotion and not consolidation of democracy was the goal of the US. Then, after the failures of the US democratising missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, academics, think tank experts, practitioners and policy-makers all began, at varying speeds and depths, recognising, rhetorically at least, that externally imposing democracy on a state and society through a violent conflict is not the best way to ensure stable democracy. People in these groups, including myself, started to talk about democracy assistance or democracy support and not democracy promotion. Around the same time I started to consider the conceptual questions raised by Oliver Richmond, Roger Mac Ginty et al. on the way in which local actors (power elites, civil society organisations, population etc.) and international actors interact with each other. In particular, the presumption held by many, whether implicit or explicit through the language employed, that international actors should determine how recipient governments and people should behave without fully considering the domestic political, social or economic context, or their wants for that matter!

All these developments I have described are useful as they help better understand the nuances of what is going on. Even the conceptual framing of democracy promotion has its uses, for example, in explaining the drive behind donor organisations in seeing success through technocratic tinkering of programme design.

I was recently in Washington, DC interviewing people for a new research project and I heard a new term employed; democracy-development. Now that I have been engaged in the field for a few years, hearing this term for the first time got me thinking about the reasons behind employing new terminology. It seems as if this term could acknowledge the limits to what implemented programmes can achieve within their operational lives, question whether democracy will ever develop, and the long-time frame, if successful, that consolidation will likely take. If my assumptions are accurate then this term can reduce the gap between rhetoric and reality regarding what is likely to be achieved.

The danger, as I see it, is that the think tank and academic communities end-up providing a theoretical reframing to legitimise what international donors such as the US are doing but not actually altering the substance of what they are doing. The questions to ask are whose doing this redefinition, why, are they questioning the conceptual framework behind programmes implemented and does it actually help the people in the recipient country. We only need to look at the details of changes in international donor approaches such as those initiated under USAIDForward to

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understand that they may not be as dramatic as they appear on the surface; are, for example, programme design changes significantly impacting the power relations between local and international actors?

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Read more from Matthew A. Hill in his e-IR blog, Reflections on American Politics from an Outsider

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.