

Does Democratization Equal Peace?

Written by Joely Denkinger

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JOELY DENKINGER, JUN 22 2010

We live in what many call an age of democratization, for the number of countries governed by democratic systems has increased dramatically since the end of the second World War and the Cold War. For the most part, this growing phenomena of democratization is considered a good thing that will ultimately lead to a more peaceful world, vis-a-vis the democratic peace thesis. In short, the democratic peace thesis states that in the modern international system, democracies have almost never fought each other; therefore, the more democracies there are in the world, the fewer potential adversaries democracies will have and the wider the zone of peace will be[1]. Often, the absence of war between democracies has been invoked as justification for promoting democratization around the globe.[2] However, democracy does not happen instantly. What happens when countries are democratizing but are not yet 'democratic enough' for this condition of peace to be true?

This essay will show that those mechanisms and processes which cause countries to remain in the transitional zone between an autocratic regime and a fully consolidated democratic government do not facilitate the development of peaceful domestic and international relations. Those mechanisms and processes are twofold: limited definitions or conceptualizations of the transition process or of democracy itself, and actual processes that are generally considered to be democratizing but don't always lead to the consolidation of democracy, particularly elections. This essay does not seek to disprove the democratic peace theory. If anything, it seeks to support it by showing that it does not work when the condition of democracy is not fully met. This essay will first address why and how being in the transitional zone does not facilitate peace at both a domestic and international level, and then discuss why and how the processes mentioned above can sometimes hinder the development of a true democracy.

The transitional zone is not strictly defined and is different for every country. Thomas Carothers uses the term 'gray zone' to describe a country that is neither clearly dictatorial nor headed towards democracy. Some civil society and institutions of democracy exist, and elections may be held, but there are major domestic deficits such as: poor representation of citizens' interests, low levels of political participation beyond voting, frequent abuse of the law by government officials, elections of uncertain legitimacy, low public confidence in state institutions, and persistently poor institutional performance by the state.[3] Another useful conceptualization of a transitional country is one that has not reached the "consolidation phase where new democracy is further developed and democratic practices eventually become an established part of the political culture." [4] Being in this transitional condition makes peace at both a domestic and international level a difficult to achieve.

Domestically, the turmoil is multi-factorial. The process of democratization exerts pressures on states, for they must be able to enforce the rule of law, promote economic growth, ensure voluntary compliance from their population, and shape the allocation of societal resources[5]. Often, in non-consolidated democracies, leaders pursue nationalising state policies aimed at cultural homogeneity which are not necessarily in line with democratic policies that ensure broad inclusive citizenship and equal rights[6]. Additionally, if institutions of democracy are established, but the government remains essentially autocratic behind a democratic facade, 'competitive authoritarianism' results. This is a source of instability because these governments must choose between allowing serious opposition challenges to proceed, at the cost of possible defeat, and egregiously violating democratic rules to maintain power, at the cost of potential international isolation[7]. Indeed, poor and institutionally feeble states in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced violent domestic conflict as a result of democratic openings because it means better possibilities for formulating demands and openly discussing disagreements, which can lead to sharper confrontations and conflicts

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that can undermine frail democratic openings.[8]

Countries caught in the precarious 'gray zone' have negative implications for the establishment of peaceful international relations as well. For a number of reasons, "in this transitional phase of democratization, countries become more aggressive and war-prone, not less, and they do fight wars with democratic states.[9]" It is probable that the norms of a democratic culture for the peaceful resolution of conflict have not yet become characteristics of the new democracies, and that although this democratic culture is beginning to emerge, it has not grown strong enough to constitute the domestic basis for peaceful relations between democracies.[10] Another factor called 'prestige strategy' is related to the domestic situation, and has international consequences: "one of the simplest but most risky strategies for a hard-pressed regime in a democratizing country is to shore up its prestige at home by seeking victories abroad.[11]" These risky wars clearly do not facilitate peaceful international relations, and are an example of how countries in transition have not reached a level of democratization sufficient for the democratic peace thesis to be valid. Being in the 'gray zone' presents challenges to peace at a domestic and international level, and being in this zone results from the collapse of an old regime combined with an inability to reach a state of true democracy.

There is no single cause that can explain why particular countries are unable to complete the process of democratization, and it would be impossible to discuss them all here. However, it is important to first consider the effect of certain conceptualizations and frameworks upon the process and its outcome. The way in which the international community thinks about the transition process and what it means to be fully democratized inevitably affects its actions and policies towards democratizing states, and can have a profound impact on their ability to break out of the transition phase. Limited definitions of the process include the use of a 'transition paradigm' that characterises the transition from autocracy to democracy as a linear one that moves through the set stages of opening, breakthrough, and consolidation, with all of a country's options cast in terms of movement along that path in some way.[12] Therefore, a state's political life is immediately analyzed in terms of its movement toward or from democracy, and held up to the implicit expectations of the paradigm, which prevents a more nuanced and accurate understanding of what is happening politically.[13] An incorrect understanding of a country's situation cannot lead states or other international actors to pursue policies for the establishment of meaningful democracy in a country. Another problematic assumption of the paradigm is the "no preconditions" outlook that "when it comes to democracy, anyone can do it.[14]" This assumption is flawed because underlying structural conditions clearly affect the success of democracy, especially relative economic wealth, and past experience with political pluralism.[15] There are indeed conditions necessary for the success of a new democracy, and "in some parts of the world the presumption that the modern representative democratic republic is a regime form capable of creating the conditions for its own success is a cruel mockery.[16]"

Limited definitions of democracy itself are similarly problematic. A minimalist definition that includes the holding of elections and the introduction of basic norms that make elections possible is limited because it does not take seriously the issue of power, or the importance of structural obstacles to participation.[17] It would be a mistake to label countries as 'democratic' when democracy is not well established, for that label recognises a country as having moved out of the tumultuous transition phase when it in fact has not done so. Recognising a country as having completed its democratic development prevents it from continuing to develop into a stable democracy, a dilemma which will be addressed in more depth below with regards to elections. Conversely, a reluctance to label anything apart from a western-style democracy as a democracy can be just as problematic. In the current global context, most who advocate democracy still do not recognise it as an essentially contested concept. They view people with different interpretations of democracy as "perverse and lunatic" and thus are open to the perils of underestimating the strength of the alternatives.[18] Perhaps the reluctance of the international community – namely the US, the EU and other western powers – to grant states the status of 'democratic' can hinder progress towards true democracy almost as much as giving that label too soon can. After all, democracy is the most difficult type of government. We cannot hope therefore, to export the 'complete' western type.[19]

Having addressed some mechanisms of conceptualization which can cause states to remain trapped in the transition phase, it remains to be discussed one of the key processes of democratization – elections – and how they can hinder the deepening of democratization within country rather than help it. Take, for example, the situation in Zimbabwe:

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There is considerable disquiet within Zimbabwe, and amongst outside observers, that the staging of elections may itself be undermining 'real democracy.' Poor voter turnouts, an extremely weak opposition and increasing levels of irregularity and corruption have become common features of elections which are nonetheless accepted as legitimate, both officially and internationally. The electoral system of "winner takes all" is itself thought by many Zimbabwean observers to undermine a multi-party or democratic culture.[20]

This example is meant to serve not as a case study, but as an illustration of a growing trend worldwide that elections in very new democracies and under the wrong conditions do not strengthen democracy but instead legitimize the very regimes they were meant to replace. The "winner takes all" system is also known as "delegative democracy," where he who wins the election is enabled to govern the country as they see fit, for the term to which he has been elected, whether or not that government bears any resemblance to what was promised during campaign.[21] Fareed Zakaria uses the term "illiberal democracy" to describe the phenomena wherein democratically elected regimes routinely ignore constitutional limits on their power and deprive their citizens of basic rights.[22] In many cases elections can lead to the state of "competitive authoritarianism" common to countries in the transitional zone because many autocrats learn that they can maintain their international standing by holding multiparty elections without democratizing.[23] Since the conventional definition of democracy places such emphasis on elections, there exists an incentive to hold some kind of election in order to demonstrate an element of democratic responsibility. Yet elections do not always function as an indicator of democratization; they can take place in mixed or hybrid regimes that may retain authoritarian elements.[24] Finally, those who wish to promote democracy through elections need to worry about the affordability and long-term sustainability of their projects. Democracy assistance cannot be approached like economic assistance, that is, a heroic short-term effort to get countries through a sudden takeoff to democracy.[25] Expensive elections that are not easily reproducible on a regular basis by local officials do not really further democracy, because they are unlikely to be successful, or even occur, more than once. It is impractical to altogether abandon elections as part of the democratization process. But, if they are treated as the central goal or even endpoint of democratization, countries will not undergo the larger and more comprehensive transition that is required to become a stable, consolidated democracy.

The unstable phase somewhere between autocracy and well-established democracy presents the most challenges to peace at home and abroad. Limited definitions of the transition process and its endpoint are counterproductive for democratizing countries, as is bestowing the label of "democracy" when it is inaccurate, and relying on elections to complete the process. We cannot hope for the democratic peace thesis to be realized until countries move out of the transition phase and become truly established democracies.

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[8] Op. Cit. Sorenson p 142.

[9] Op. Cit. Mansfield p 5.

[10] Op. Cit. Sorenson p 142.

[11] Op. Cit. Mansfield p 33.

[12] Op. Cit. Carothers p 8.

[13] Ibid p 7.

[14] Ibid p 8.

[15] Ibid p 16.

[16] Dunn, John. "How Democracies Succeed" *Economy and Society*. 25, 4 (1996) p 514.

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