

To what extent has globalization aided the spread of democracy?

Written by Mohamed Amin Maza

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MOHAMED AMIN MAZA, MAR 28 2011

This essay will examine the extent to which greater interconnectedness and integration of human society socially, economically, culturally, politically and financially has encouraged the spread of democracy around the world[1]. This paper will consider the ways in which globalization may have facilitated the spread of democracy globally and whether it has assisted its spread or actually hindered it.

Examining the literature it becomes apparent that the term 'globalization' is defined differently according to the author consulted. For Ian Clark[2], globalisation is a state of international affairs typified by a greater intensity and extent of integration of global interactions. For Ngairé Woods[3] globalisation can be defined both quantitatively and qualitatively; in that it refers to an increase in movements of people, investments and trade, as well as referring to qualitative changes in the way individuals and states identify themselves and pursue their interests. Jan Aart Scholte[4] argues that globalization is a unique phenomenon due its *supraterritorial* nature. Supraterritorial relations can be understood as social connections that substantially transcend territorial geography. It implies a change in the nature of social space and an accompanying greater ability for people to engage with each other culturally, physically, psychologically and legally. Perhaps Roland Robertson summarized this concept well when he offered that globalization is best thought of as the growing interconnectedness in the world, the result of a series of historical processes (economic, political, cultural) through which the world has become compressed, and which have led to an awareness that the world is becoming a single place.

A democracy is widely understood to be a form of representative government that is characterized by regular free and fair elections, equality, a legitimate authority set against a string of checks and balances, and guaranteed freedoms and rights. The political term that refers specifically to the *process* of the spread of democracy is democratization. We need to consider the forces at play which precipitate democratization and determine whether globalization is one of them.

The United States of America is a self-declared protagonist in the field of spreading democracy. It has launched a *global* war on terror, with a strategy that embraces the concepts of regime change creating new politically *democratic* identities and 'winning hearts and minds'. For example, the United States involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan was premised on the notion of rooting out 'terror' and replacing it with democracy. The United States has effectively campaigned to spread democracy politically, militarily and psychologically in nearly all the areas it is involved in around the globe. Certainly, great interconnectedness has meant that the reach of the United States' influence has been magnified. The United States has been able to exploit the very apparatus of globalization such as the Internet and television broadcasting to compound the reach of its influence. By these means the democratic propaganda has been able to reach areas of the world governed by dictatorships and create shifts in political awareness in favor of democratizing.

Why do countries like the United States seek to spread democracy anyway? Perhaps it is because they buy into democratic peace theory. This is a theory that purports that democracies have shared values and common norms that foster integration and connections in all spheres that preclude them from acting aggressively with one another to the extent that the result is a war[6]. This is thought to be because democracies participate in liberal democratic

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institutions such as the UN and so have multiple avenues they can exhaust in order to settle disputes nonviolently without any recourse to war. Thus the benefit of spreading democracy is arguably more peaceful international relations.

The paradox of this line of reasoning is, of course, that most of the avenues available for pro-democratic forces to exploit more readily and effectively due to globalization are available for those who seek to undermine democracy to capitalize on in retaliation. If we consider the Internet as an apparatus by which terrorists find a platform for anti-democratic propaganda we can see the forces of globalization turning into a potential threat to democracy rather than working in a way that aids the spread of democracy. Globalization has changed the nature of social space to the extent that the key factors involved in shaping global governance have also changed. Globalization has enfranchised voters in a way unforeseen; there has been a substantial rise in the power of individuals and pressure groups as a result of more avenues for them to express ideas in a way that reaches far more people, more quickly. To some extent this might assist democratic ideals by enabling citizen participation and helping the electorate to hold their elected officials to account and to take part in the decision making processes that affect them maximizing the representative quality of a democracy. In this way globalization may have helped spread *liberal* democracy, which is unique from *democracy* because it shows concern for the qualitative enhancement of democracy in these sorts of areas. However, globalization has also played into the hands of an increasingly prevalent type of actor; the non-state actor. Non-state actors in terms of terrorists and insurgencies, have greater networks and sources of funding and pools to recruit from directly due to the advancement of telecommunications and the Internet. Globalization has facilitated the spread of anti-democratic ideas supraterritorially. The United States' chief target in the 'War on Terror' has been *Al-Qaeda*; a supraterritorial phenomenon that can be loosely referred to as an organization, but more appropriately referred to as a network of individuals or cells that share an ideology that is opposed to democratic ideals and that has been spread significantly through the internet.

If globalization has aided the spread of democracy then surely there ought to be clear measures of whether this has been achieved. For instance, one could measure how many countries that were not democracies have become democracies, how much more peaceful international relations have become, how far inequalities have been eradicated globally and the extent to which liberties are guaranteed and protected by law internationally. It is necessary at this point to acknowledge the limitations imposed on this line of inquiry by the fact that globalization is a process which arguably has its roots in the industrial revolution and which continues to develop and expand in reach today. As a result, it is hard to exactly measure the affects of globalization on the spread of democracy as it is beyond this paper to separate out the process in relation to its effects chronologically. For the sake of this essay we will consider the years in the decade leading up to the millennium and following it to signify the most significant period of characterized by an intensification of globalization for the sake of contrast.

Freedom House statistics show that the number of countries declaring themselves democracies has increased substantially to the extent that almost all countries proclaim some type of democratic status for themselves. But how far these countries are truly democratic entities is dubious. For example in Singapore although there is the freedom to vote in elections yet there is no real choice for the voter at the ballot box due to perceived threats and fear of repercussions from the dominant party for the expression of opposing or alternative views. Globalization may have spread democratic apparatus since most countries have fallen under the influence of democratic propaganda and want to be written down and counted as democracies on paper and may be loosely democratic in practice. However, globalization has done little to encourage the spread of a type of democracy that is qualitatively liberal. Thus, whilst globalization may account for some of the desire to democratize globally it has not operated as an aid to the spread of liberal democracy beyond the borders of traditionally democratic countries. Ironically, globalization has aided the entrenchment of *liberal* democracy in liberal democracies, but surely this cannot be considered to equate to having spread democracy globally.

Considering the second measure we set up, it appears that international relations have not become especially peaceful with the progress of globalization. In fact although one of the conceptual bases for spreading democracy encapsulated in democratic peace theory is to achieve more peaceful international relations the pursuit of the spread of democratic influence has ironically led to more wars. The problem seems to lie with the notion that most nations claim to be democratic or in the process of democratizing but are no more peaceful as a result because they do not

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exemplify the liberal ideals that form a necessary part of what makes liberal democracies less war prone. Rather than democracies not going to war with one another, on reflection it would be more accurate to claim that *liberal* democracies do not go to war with one another. Furthermore, it is in the process of spreading democracy that liberal democracies enter into conflict to a greater extent with non-democracies or insurgency forces within democratizing or non-democratic countries, as was the case with the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Let us now consider the last two measures by which we can judge whether democracy has been spread by globalization. These are eradication of inequalities and the guarantee of liberties and rights globally. Greater interconnectedness has brought the inequalities and the plight of those suffering to a world-wide audience through multiple avenues, particularly the multimedia. This has influenced democracies via pressure groups and the notion of shared responsibility to attend to concerns with respect to inequalities and guaranteeing liberties through international relief and forums of a supraterritorial nature. Indeed, guaranteeing liberties and rights beyond one's own borders were even one of the pretences for the United States invasion of Iraq. In this case a democratic ideal held by one country spilled over into imposing democratization on another country, but this case has only been replicated in few other instances and cannot be considered as evidence that globalization has spread democracy. Skeptics would argue that the United States political strategists had realist interests of security and balances of power at the front of their mind when purporting to be bringing democracy to Iraq. It was not globalization that caused or aided the spread of democracy, but the idea of democracy for all became globally important and meaningful during this period.

In conclusion, this essay has shown that globalization has not been significantly instrumental in the spread of democracy. This essay has considered whether with the intensification of globalization in the last two decades democracy and its trappings has spread. Three measures were identified and examined; a numerical change in the actual incidence of democracies globally, a change in the nature of international relations with respect to being more peaceful, and finally the extent to which inequalities have been eradicated and liberties and rights have been guaranteed. It was found that although the numbers of democracies have increased this is not uniquely attributable to globalization and that the term democracy has been employed so loosely in application to some countries that the amount of true or liberal democracies has not changed greatly. What globalization has been found responsible for more notably is creating shifts in awareness and building a desire through networks of influence to democratize globally, but how far this equates with spreading democracy is questionable. It was also found that international relations are no more peaceful due to globalization because in real politics what counts in preventing aggression between democracies is that they are *liberal*, not democratizing or anything else. Again, given that there have not been huge increases in the number of liberal democracies globally any affect expected as a result of democratic peace theory[7] in operation has been over rated. Additionally, this essay argued that although globalization had made democracies more active in working to eradicate inequalities and guarantee liberties and rights, it did not aid the spread of democracy in this sphere but rather made the notion of democratizing popular globally. Most interesting was the finding that globalization may have actually hindered the spread of democracy by clearly aiding anti-democratic forces such as terrorists. Overall on reflection, globalization has entrenched and encouraged liberal democracy where it resides but in isolation can take little credit for spreading democracy globally. Moreover, globalization has been found to have a more pivotal and detrimental role in undermining democracy by providing networks and resources for anti-democratic forces.

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