

Policy Memo

To: Prague Security Studies Institute

From: Jan Hornát

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Re: Policy Recommendation for Promoting Democracy

Introduction

The US policy of promoting democracy has recently experienced backlash in the form of the expulsion of American non-governmental organizations from Egypt, Russia and even the United Arab Emirates. These countries perceived the presence of US organizations as meddling into their internal affairs, and hence labeled them as spy agencies. This development carries vast implications not only for the potential democracy in the respective countries, but also for US soft power and image in the world. In addition, the effects of democracy promotion are being increasingly disputed as Freedom House numbers indicate that in 1996 there were more electoral democracies than in 2011.

In order to avoid future backsliding of democracy and make democracy promotion more efficient, the US should be more selective in providing democratic assistance and focus on the “strategic swing states”. Washington should also rely less on elections as the primary determinant of government legitimacy and dismiss the Cold War mindset of ignoring social democracy and trade union movements.

Background and Context

Promoting democracy became a staple of US foreign policy during the Cold War – it clearly served as a weapon against the Soviet regime whose ideology was perceived as substantively antagonistic to American values and interests. The obligation to promote democracy was seen

as a part of the ideological struggle (note Ronald Reagan's "war of ideas") between individualism and collectivism (or capitalism and planned economy).

In the 1990s, democracy promotion filled the "missionary gap" left behind by the termination of the Cold War. The spread of democratic political systems faced little obstacles in the 1990s and President Bill Clinton and his administration placed great emphasis on democracy promotion. The policy was further nurtured by academic concepts such as democratic peace and modernization theory.

Currently, the democracy promotion agenda is carried out chiefly by US organizations as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), National Endowment for Democracy (NED), International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI). These organizations have offices in dozens of countries around the world and their main activities include supporting local civil society through grants and funding projects aimed to foster democratic governance. Although labeled as "non-governmental" (except for USAID, which is an agency of the State Department), the organizations receive the bulk of their funding from the federal government. Due to their strong link to the federal government, these organizations are often perceived as agents of the United States set up in a country to serve as a "Trojan horse" and push for regime change.

While a number of analysts believe that the main problem of democracy promotion is the American effort to force its values upon other nations, experience shows that fostering democracy in a country with an undeveloped civil society and without the requisites for a democratic political culture, the political model that emerges is often a so-called low-intensity democracy.

Low-intensity democracy (or minimal democracy) can be described, in short, as a political system in which governments gain legitimacy through a democratic electoral process, but all other pillars of democracy (free press, engaged civil society, active opposition) are absent. This form of democracy is mainly the consequence of its inorganic development – i.e. it had been imposed strictly in a "top-down" manner. Another cause of low-intensity democracy is perhaps



the focus of the United States on popular elections as the primary determinant of political legitimacy.

Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of a democratic political regime but are too often relied on as the first and most crucial step leading to full democratization. In the context of US domestic politics and popular demand, setting up free elections in a foreign country scores valuable political points. For this reason, the Bush administration was keen on holding elections in Iraq as soon as possible to at least partially restore the negative picture of the war.

However, a democratically elected government in a post-breakthrough country may have legitimacy in the eyes of the United States, but often may not have legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. Elections highlight social cleavages and can translate them into institutional deadlock, ethnic strife and political demagoguery. The emerging democracy may not yet have the instruments to tackle these problems and as a consequence may set out on a new path to authoritarianism.

A lucid example of how the American emphasis on holding elections can be counterproductive is the case of Côte d'Ivoire. In 1990, long-term president Félix Houphouët-Boigny surprisingly agreed to hold elections, but refused the calls of the newly formed opposition to postpone the elections in order to get organized. In a country where opposition activity was basically inexistent for nearly 30 years, the election was comfortably controlled by the president's own party. As a result, Houphouët-Boigny could claim that he was a legitimate leader, chosen on the basis popular, multiparty elections.

Options

Three separate cases can be made for the future of the democracy promotion policy. The first would be the continuation of the current approach. The argument can be made that the democracy promotion model was successful in the case of Eastern Europe in the 1990s. However, Eastern European countries had one common trait that was conducive to adapting and consolidating democracy and which seems to be lacking in many countries where the

United States aims to promote democracy. This trait is best described using John Stuart Mill's set of prerequisites for establishing representative government: "One, that the people should be willing to receive [representative government]; two, that they should be willing and able to do what is necessary for its preservation; three, that they should be willing and able to fulfill the duties and discharge the functions which it imposes on them." If society and civic organizations do not demonstrate the will to uphold these prerequisites, the prospects for democracy are very low. Promoting democracy in such countries can have negative backlash because local governments use the presence of US NGOs on their soil for purposes of anti-American propaganda – this in turn fosters anti-American sentiments and damages US soft power.

The second option would be to entirely disengage the federal government from the policy and leave democracy promotion efforts to private endeavors. NGOs operating on a similar basis as George Soros' Open Society Foundations do not carry the "burden" of being labeled as "agents" of the US government since they are funded by private money. Bringing more private capital into US foreign assistance seems to be the goal of current USAID administrator Rajiv Shah, but the results of this scheme are yet to be seen. Nevertheless, a full withdrawal of federal money from democracy promotion projects would have to be gradual and might lead to a general lack of funds for these projects.

A third option is to remodel the current approach – while the Cold War era anticipated a rather restrained approach to democracy promotion, the 1990s democracy assistance efforts faced a more open international system and the spread of liberal values seemed to be limitless (as indicated by Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis). Hence, the period after the intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan also requires a different approach to democracy promotion. Arguably, the Iraq War did great damage to America's policy of democracy promotion in the eyes of the international community and therefore the United States should attempt to restore this image by demonstrating that the primary concern of the policy is fostering democratic governance and not the pursuit of US economic interests. In applying this option thou, there exists the risk that the new approach will be even less successful than the previous one.

Recommendations

The United States should remodel its approach to democracy promotion. This should be achieved in the following manner. The bulk of resources should be devoted to the “strategic swing states”. At this point, for example, Myanmar seems to be on a path to gradual democratization and should be counted as a “strategic swing state”. If Myanmar becomes a consolidated democracy, other states in the region, such as communist Vietnam, may see the benign effects of gradual liberalization and set out on a similar path of democratization. In addition, both Myanmar and Vietnam are looking for ways to emancipate themselves from the economic and political influence of China, so their situation will be conducive to opening up to the United States. Support for civil society in Myanmar will not have such negative backlash as the support of democratic initiatives in Iran, Russia or Egypt, where the governments are explicitly hostile to US influence. The United States should also be more patient in fostering democratic political culture and civil society in target countries and it should not push for quick elections. Democracy is an organic process and thus elections should be held at the point when civil society in the given country itself demands it or is ready for it. This approach will avoid the formation of low-intensity democracy.

Democracy promotion should also be rid of a “Cold War mindset” – i.e. it should take into account and even support social democracy, trade union or “left-wing” movements, because they also represent the potential to push for democratization. In South Africa, for example, the trade union movement COSATU had major influence on the end of apartheid. Social democracy movements may in the future be a strong player in the push for democracy in China. Chinese political culture is based rather on communitarian values and perceives some aspects of liberalism as egocentric and even hedonistic – for this reason, liberal democracy would very likely have difficulty taking root and Chinese grassroots movements are expected to have social democracy/social equality demands. Ignoring the momentum of such movements in the future would mean ignoring potential struggles for democracy.

Pursuing this option of remodeling the policy approach would adapt democracy promotion to contemporary circumstances and possibly avoid potential democratic backlash.