

SECTION ONE

Introduction

DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IS much in the news these days. The strenuous effort by the United States and its coalition partners to carry off a democratic transformation of Iraq has provoked a fierce, global debate over the legitimacy and limits of Western democracy promotion. The broader U.S. and European commitment to supporting a democratic transformation of the Middle East—rooted in the hope that positive political change in that region can be an antidote to radical Islamist terrorism—has stirred up vivid emotions in the Arab world and many other quarters. Democracy promotion has in a short time become fused with “high policy” on the world stage, with the result that it is receiving an unprecedented level of public attention, as well as substantial new resources. This is of course hardly the first time Washington has invoked the idea of a democratic mission as a response to a crisis of American security. But the seriousness of the September 11, 2001, attacks against America, the spread of Islamist terrorism to Europe, and the threat of future attacks give this new push on democracy promotion a special intensity.

Democracy promotion is at a critical juncture not only because of the new attention to the Middle East. In many parts of the developing and postcommunist worlds, where political freedom and pluralism made notable gains during democracy’s recent “third wave,” political blockage, malaise, and backsliding are now common. Complete lapses back to outright authoritarianism are, fortunately, relatively rare. But many attempted transitions have sputtered to a stop as strongmen leaders in the former Soviet Union, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere have

consolidated semi-authoritarian regimes in which they obey some of the formal niceties of democracy but keep a firm grip on the main levers of power. In other places, including much of Latin America, but also in parts of South and Southeast Asia, Southeastern Europe, and Africa, real political pluralism has been achieved but is falling into or teetering on the edge of dysfunctional patterns of corruption, fecklessness, and shallowness that produce poor socioeconomic performance and deeply disillusioned, alienated citizens. Very generally speaking, it is remarkably difficult to travel to any of the dozens of “new democracies” around the world today without being met by a chorus of negativism from ordinary citizens about the grievous shortcomings of the politicians who rule the country and the lack of perceived tangible benefits of democracy.

These enormous challenges—trying to help initiate a democratic trend in the Middle East and supporting the embattled trend in the rest of the developing and postcommunist worlds—throw into sharp relief a disjunction that has long afflicted the democracy promotion domain. The array of organizations involved in democracy building around the world, public and private, multilateral and bilateral, specialized and generalist, continues to grow. Approximately \$2 billion per year (roughly half from public and private sources in North America and half from largely public sources in Europe) now goes for democracy-related aid projects. And at the diplomatic level, the governments of many established democracies, as well as various multilateral organizations, devote ever-increasing attention to democracy-building challenges. Yet even though democracy promotion activities keep multiplying, the amount of distilled, accumulated, and organized knowledge about this domain remains quite limited.

Many reasons for the gap between ambition and know-how can be identified. Democracy promoters tend to be activists who focus intently on the challenges at hand and are often impatient with backward-looking, learning exercises, especially ones with a critical bent. Most of the institutions for which they work are under much pressure to show quick, impressive results and have few incentives to invest heavily in research and reflection. Moreover, some of the persons who have in the past several years rushed to embrace the cause of democracy promotion out of the perceived connection with the war on terrorism give short shrift to the complexities of the endeavor and to the fact that there is now a long record of experience in diverse regions on which it is important to draw.

The academic world has not stepped up to the plate to fill this gap. Democracy promotion is only weakly present in scholarly research circles. It sits awkwardly in between the disciplines of international relations, comparative politics, development studies, and law—related to all four but not finding a home in any one. And being a practical domain, carried out in distant countries where

easily obtainable numerical research data are scarce, the subject is not a tempting target for the many academic researchers who are either preoccupied by theoretical concerns or rely primarily on quantitative methods.

All this is not to say that learning about democracy promotion is nonexistent. It does exist, especially in the organizations that specialize in the subject and have been at it for years. But the bulk of this learning resides in the minds of practitioners and is not committed to paper. A small flow of reflective writing on the topic has started appearing in recent years. The Office of Democracy and Governance at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has set a valuable example for all aid organizations in producing a series of well-researched overview studies of different areas of democracy aid. Various public and private institutes, including for example the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), have published practitioner-friendly handbooks on electoral issues and other core elements of democracy building. A growing number of young political scientists, often persons who worked in democracy promotion organizations before going back to graduate school, are starting to produce valuable work on the subject, above all, on the topic of civil society development. Yet overall, democracy promotion remains remarkably understudied, and the gap between what we want to accomplish and what we really know about how to accomplish it remains dauntingly wide.

When I joined the Carnegie Endowment in 1993, democracy-building work was mushrooming. Aid providers were hurriedly setting up camp all over Central and Eastern Europe, grappling with the challenge of starting up in the former Soviet republics, responding to the unexpected wave of transitions away from one-party rule in Africa, finding new opportunities in East and Southeast Asia, and continuing to operate in many parts of Latin America. I had worked in the second half of the 1980s on U.S. democracy programs in Latin America, written a book analyzing the effects on Latin American democracy of the Reagan administration's policies there, and participated as a consultant for NDI in some of the new democracy aid initiatives in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. The time seemed ripe for an effort to engage in some reflection on what was being learned about this burgeoning field and to do so from the standpoint of someone sympathetic to the task yet willing to be critical. I set about to do so. A decade later I find myself still at that task, with the demand and need for such work only growing. Along the way I wrote two more books and co-edited another, all aimed at constructing an analytic framework for democracy promotion and drawing together at least a first layer of accumulated knowledge about such work. In the same years I have also written various essays, articles, and

papers, sometimes trying to go deeper into a specific area of democracy aid and sometimes venturing into related topics, particularly the place of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy and the state of democracy worldwide. Though written and published one by one, these writings nevertheless represent several continuous lines of inquiry, and so prompted by my ten-year anniversary at Carnegie I decided to gather some of them together in a book in the hope that they can be useful to persons looking for insights into the pressing challenges of democracy promotion at hand today.

The essays herein are connected to each other not only by several subject themes but also by some common elements of my basic outlook on the subject. Perhaps most striking to many readers will be the consistent tone of critical caution, some would probably say skepticism, that colors these writings. I have always been deeply wary of the overstated claims that seem endemic in the democracy promotion domain, whether it is rose-tinted triumphalism about the tide of democracy in the world, inflated declarations by U.S. officials about America's unbending commitment to supporting democracy worldwide, or unrealistically grand claims of impact by democracy promoters. I believe it is quite possible, in fact preferable, to be fully committed to the cause of democracy yet also be relentlessly realistic about democracy's difficulties in many countries, the often partial or conflicted place of democracy in America's foreign policy, and the generally modest impact of most externally sponsored democracy-building efforts. Put differently, I have pursued my work in the belief that the critical mission for the United States and other established democracies of promoting democracy abroad can be facilitated by tough but constructive criticism of such efforts as they unfold.

Moreover, I am often struck how democracy promotion is hurt by the habitual tendency of its practitioners toward overstatement. One of the fundamental challenges that democracy promotion faces as an organized endeavor is credibility—credibility on the part of people both in countries that are the recipients or targets of such activity and in countries that sponsor such work. Most people on the receiving end have an instinctive and wholly understandable suspicion about anyone who comes to their country claiming to be sincerely dedicated to helping build democracy there. This is glaringly evident in the Middle East today but has been and often still is the case in many other parts of the world. And within the United States and other established democracies, most people outside that small world of democracy promoters know little about the issue and tend to be dubious about it. Convincing people that democracy promotion is a credible enterprise is a slow, incremental task. It requires consistency and seriousness of purpose, skill, and capability in execution, and sobriety in evaluation and credit taking. Some progress has been made on the

credibility front, both within established democracies and recipient societies, but it is at best only a start.

I also harbor an admittedly prickly antipathy toward fads in the democracy domain. As is common in the broader development aid world, many democracy aid organizations have a weakness for fads. Every few years some new idea is embraced as the key to unlocking the democracy puzzle. Since the late 1980s, one enthusiasm after another has enjoyed a brief, intense run—including elections, civil society, rule of law, decentralization, and anticorruption. As a fad takes hold, aid groups rush to create programs in that area, often shifting resources from other work and investing the new activities with great expectations. In parallel fashion, enterprising people in recipient countries demonstrate a newfound interest in the topic and quickly start up work on it, or strategically re-label what they were already doing to fit the new fashion. A boom period follows, but then within a few years the hoped-for dramatic results do not appear and cracks in the edifice start to show. Restless aid providers move on in search of a new romance.

Each fad rests on some degree of insight. Elections are indeed an irreplaceable element of democracy; civil society development can bring big benefits for pluralism and participation; the rule of law is vital; and so forth. But the urge to embrace fads reflects an unhelpful attachment to the idea that democratization is amenable to magic bullets and the lack of a well-grounded and well-accepted base of knowledge about the process.

A third fiber in the connective tissue of these essays is a focus on local realities. Every set of “lessons learned” on democracy-building programs includes the admonition to “be sensitive to local realities.” But no golden rule of aid work is more frequently practiced in the breach, and I have discovered that there often seems to be something intrinsically subversive about conveying to Western aid providers or policy makers critical accounts and insights directly gathered from recipients of democracy aid. I have tried hard to understand democracy promotion work from “the other end of the telescope,” primarily by basing my research on a core method of listening as carefully and systematically as possible to what a wide range of people in developing and postcommunist countries say about the experience of being on the receiving end of democracy promotion policies and programs. Much of this research has been, by necessity, exploratory and highly qualitative. Even the basic concepts and terms that practitioners use still represent a rather tenuous projection of frameworks and expectations on unruly foreign realities. Precisely defined operational hypotheses and fine-grain empirical research are only starting to come along. For now we are still largely groping in the semi-darkness, bumping into a lot of things, gradually discerning the outlines of

the major pieces of furniture in the room, and hoping to do more good than harm.

I am extraordinarily fortunate to have had the Carnegie Endowment as my professional home for the last ten years, and I wrote all the essays in this volume while working here. Under its current president Jessica Mathews, and its former president Morton Abramowitz, who originally hired me, the Endowment has embodied the key values of what I believe a think tank should be: analytically rigorous, policy relevant, stubbornly independent, willing to take risks, and able to give close attention to the crises of the day without losing sight of crucial long-term trends and problems. It has been an honor and a pleasure to try to live up to these high standards, and I thank both Jessica and Mort for having given me the chance. I also thank two invaluable colleagues at the Endowment, Paul Balaran and Marina Ottaway, for having helped so much along the way.