

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum: July 13, 2004

Democracy Promotion and US Foreign Policy

Notes from the comments of Marina Ottaway and Patrick Merloe

Marina Ottaway began her remarks by emphasizing the challenge facing the US government to make democracy promotion part of its foreign policy on a substantive and consistent basis. She argued that there is a tendency by the administration to support democracy promotion rhetorically, but without substantial actions. For example, while President Bush announced the doubling of funding for the National Endowment for Democracy in his 2004 State of the Union address, Congress only voted a \$ 1 million increase.

Dr. Ottaway outlined a number of unique conditions that challenge democracy promotion as a US foreign policy goal in the Middle East:

First, the US is trying to bring change to regimes that are not collapsing and could continue as they are. Dr. Ottaway argued that many Middle Eastern regimes believe they only need to make small changes in governance to satisfy the international community and particularly the United States.

Second, the US has no credibility in the Middle East. The historical relationship of mistrust and suspicion between the US government and Middle Eastern countries has created a disconnect between what the US says and what the Arab world hears. For example, the mentality of “who is next?” on the US list of countries to be targeted for regime change persists in many Arab countries. While the US talks about “democracy promotion”, the Arab world hears “regime change”. Dr. Ottaway argued that the Bush administration is aware of this disconnect, but doesn’t factor it into policy decisions.

Third, proponents of democracy in the Middle East (particularly Arab intellectuals) are reluctant to support the US and look to the West for help. Whereas in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, the West was seen as a beacon of hope for democratic insurgents in communist countries, democrats in the Middle East do not want to identify themselves as pro-West due to the West’s colonial legacy in the region and Arab anger about US policy toward Israel.

Fourth, Islamist groups have superior support and organization in comparison to democracy-building groups. One of the major reasons for this advantage is that Islamist groups work through mosques and Islamic charity organizations, and this prevents to some extent the intrusive government role that democracy-promoting organizations encounter.

Fifth, US conflicting interests in the Middle East pose another challenge to democracy promotion. For example, efforts to promote democracy in the short run may affect US oil interests in Saudi Arabia. In addition, coordination with Middle Eastern governments’ security organizations in the war on terrorism means the US has to cooperate with the same organizations that limit democratic activities by repressing dissident movements.

And despite efforts to promote democracy by establishing elections, the fear exists that the US may not necessarily like the outcome, particularly if elections yield a conservative Islamic government.

The result of these problems is that the US democracy promotion agenda is fairly empty in practice. The US has taken limited measures to promote democracy thus far, there are relatively few new initiatives, and only a few of these programs initiated by the US have reached the core of problems surrounding Middle East regimes. Dr. Ottaway described issues such as women's empowerment, economic reform, and education as "soft issues" that have taken precedence in democracy promotion programs over the "hard Issues" of power allocation.

Dr. Ottaway posed the question, are US efforts having an impact? She stated that Arab governments are introducing some reforms, but challenged whether these steps are truly democratic. For example, Arab governments face pressure to appoint women to high-level decision-making roles and reform family status law, but this has largely resulted in tokenism and no change in the character of regimes. She then went on to say that reform from the "top-down," as most Arab governments seem to prefer, is historically a response to demands from the bottom. However, Arab governments continue to hold back constituencies for reform and without sustained demands from organized constituencies, there cannot be sustained change made from the top.

Dr. Ottaway concluded by emphasizing the importance of dialogue between the US and Islamist leaders who, despite professing anti-American ideology, will be crucial to promoting stability and democracy in the Middle East in the long term because they enjoy considerable public support.

Patrick Merloe began by affirming that democracy promotion fulfills US strategic interests because it promotes peace and stability, both within countries and internationally. Building international peace and security is reliant on building democratic processes that support societal development and allow for the redress of grievances. He noted that to succeed the war against terrorism needs a robust investment in democracy.

Threats to peace and security most often come from countries where governments are anti-democratic. Those holding power in such countries have no accountability to their citizenry, and their victims have no voice. Investing in democracy by giving people a voice and establishing economic and political processes is the best way to ensure security and stability in the long run. But what about in the short run? Mr. Merloe argued that efforts to achieve stability should not come at the expense of democratic political development and human rights. It is important that democracy building be a multi-lateral endeavor, so that countries transitioning out of authoritarian regimes feel they are joining a partnership of democratic nations, rather than making a concession to the Western world and particularly the United States.

Mr. Merloe described the need for a proper ethical construct regarding international intervention:

1. Establish a legal basis for intervention using international law and national constitutional human rights doctrines.
2. Address the question of agency and conduct interventions on behalf of the people of the country in question.
3. Use effective techniques to intervene, and address both national and international concerns depending on the type of post-conflict or other environment that exists in the particular country.

Mr. Merloe emphasized that the idea of a fundamental right to democracy fits within the human rights construct. An individual's right to security and citizens' right to participate in government is stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and many other international instruments.

Mr. Merloe stressed that democratic elections are fundamental to democracy building but are an insufficient condition for democracy. Just as democracy is larger than elections, holding elections in conflict-prone countries without consideration of accompanying mechanisms for conflict management that are shaped to fit the country's specific needs can lead to conflict.

Elections should resolve peacefully internal struggles for political power and should provide an avenue for populations to express their will about who should have the authority and legitimacy to govern. In conflict-prone countries, elections must be approached in a comprehensive manner that includes sustained and robust commitments to helping build sustainable peace. Mr. Merloe described the need to look particularly to using the tools of diplomacy in this respect, the military dimension for peacemaking and peacekeeping and the appropriate roles for non-governmental organizations in conflict mitigation.

Regarding Afghanistan and Iraq, Mr. Merloe stated that the method by which elections are forged will set the mold for post-election governance and political processes. To the degree the international community gives a pass to bad practices and allows elections that are not conducted democratically to go forward unchallenged, we will be contributing to the creation of a number of future ominous problems. Mr. Merloe emphasized the importance to get it right. Elections are not an end game, and there is a need for robust post-electoral democracy promotion activities to support sustained democratic endeavors by societies transitioning to democratic rule.

Mr. Merloe emphasized that democracy building is not a matter of partisan politics but rather of U.S. credibility in setting priorities and sustaining commitments. Democracy should not be viewed as an export commodity or as a unilateral undertaking, but as a mutual endeavor with equal commitment from both those within and outside the target societies. He concluded that the protection of liberties in the U.S. and other democracies

is not only linked to the success of those working to expand democracy in their countries, it may well be dependent upon it.