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Aiding Democracy Abroad: Lessons from the late 1980s-90s
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The US government was spending \$700 million a year on democracy assistance abroad by the end of the 1990s. The essential elements and evolution of this unprecedented wave of democracy aid represents a learning curve along which democracy programmes have moved over the past decade. The verdict is mixed. The design of democracy aid programmes has been informed by experience and has been modified accordingly. But the endpoint model and the exclusively political focus of unconditional democracy aid has limited adaptability. A new phase of democracy assistance is required that is based on a process model that synthesises political and economic constraints.

The promotion of democracy abroad as a goal of American foreign policy is not new. However, the importance of democracy assistance in aid programmes and as an explicit foreign policy objective, has reached an unprecedented high over the last decade. The rising importance of democracy assistance can be attributed to three factors. First, events on the ground, in particular, the wave of democracy that began in Latin America and continued into other parts of the world, prompted democratic countries to respond to these political changes with advice and financial assistance. Second, the end of the Cold War reduced the sinister connotations of terms such as 'political assistance' and rendered the promotion of democracy a more legitimate international objective. Third, the African experience with structural adjustment in the 1980s demonstrated that economic reform could not be achieved without political change. As a result, it was assumed, if somewhat simplistically, that market reform and democracy go together, while the end of the Cold War and trends towards democratisation provided favourable conditions to promote such political reform.

Irrespective of the missionary zeal with which the democratisation agenda is being pursued, American foreign policy can best be described as 'semi-realist'. In other words, US democracy aid is selective and geared to suit American economic and security interests. However, the noteworthy point, is that the policy context today is less uneven and selective than it used to be during the Cold War period. This is illustrated by the fact that at the end of the 1990s, the US government's expenditure of \$700 million in democracy aid, was spread over approximately 100 countries.

The rise in democratisation and the accompanying euphoria that guided American policy-makers, resulted in somewhat simplistic democracy aid project design. Even today project design is based on an n-point analysis: a checklist of institutional endpoints driven by assumptions of a natural, orderly sequence along which democratisation proceeds. The three categories of endpoints are typically elections, state institutions and civil society, although the relative emphasis between these categories has shifted as a result of a learning process. The focus of democracy aid in the 1980s was elections. The 1992-96 period attention was directed mainly towards

state institutions. Today aid programmes emphasise the role of civil society in operationalising democracy.

Changes have also been incorporated within each category. The agenda and strategies of democracy aid in relation to elections have undergone substantive change. 'Election surfing' has been replaced by serious election observing with sophisticated and specialised techniques. However, democracy promoters have come to realise that elections do not equal democracy. Elections are only effective in redistributing political power if the existing power structures have already been overturned. If power is still concentrated, election results generally legitimise existing power distributions. Further, elections are a culmination of a process. Fair but bad elections result when autocratic leaders are able to restrict access to media or are able to intimidate candidates and so curb the democratic process early on. Even as democracy promoters move along their own learning curve, they must realise that there is also a learning curve of manipulation that non-democratic leaders are developing simultaneously.

Recognition that elections do not equal democracy led to the concentration on the reform of state institutions. Institutional reform was initially based on an assumption of a virtuous cycle of elected governments promoting institutional reform. Institutional reform, however, can be painstakingly slow, can have huge short-run costs and may disrupt the existing patronage system. Newly elected governments are often ill equipped to finance such costs. The design of democracy aid programme design has only slowly absorbed the idea that institutional reform requires deeper changes in the balances of power among various political and economic interest groups.

The attempt to go beyond electoral and state institutional reform has led to a recent emphasis on civil society. Much of this emphasis has resulted in aid to NGOs devoted to public interest advocacy on socio-political issues. But even here there are problems. The most important of these is how far NGOs that successfully attract democracy aid, actually represent the populace. NGOs frequently conform to donor needs and are creations of foreign funding with little sustainability or popular support.

These limitations are not merely theoretical ones but are substantiated by the reality of experience. The mood of the mid-1990s was considerably different from the euphoric wave of democratic transitions of the late 1980s. Except for a small group of affluent countries in East Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, there has been retrenchment or stagnation of initially promising democratic transitions. It is clear that the 1990s model of aid for democracy has not worked.

A critical feature of the failure of the democracy aid model has been the failure to recognise that political change is impossible if adequate consideration is not given to issues such as concentration of wealth, education, balance of power among political groups and levels of development. A new phase of democracy assistance is needed to amend these inadequacies. In this phase, an effort must be made to synthesise political and economic considerations. The checklist approach with a stress on pre-defined ends needs to be replaced by a more process-oriented approach.

Discussion

A participant asked if much of the assistance to democracy had been a waste and might have actually had adverse consequences on the democratising country by legitimising corrupt governments? The speaker admitted that the aid programmes have failed on their own terms. But important lessons had been learned from these failures and the responsiveness of the programmes themselves to the imperatives of change indicate the utility of the experiment. Further, even though aid programmes perform an important legitimisation function, governments are unlikely to survive simply on the strength of such legitimisation if they do not provide the necessary services to their citizens.

A second question concerned evaluation of democracy aid. The leading new method of evaluation is that of the USAID. It was not unlike the endpoint analysis of the democracy aid model. A set of mechanisms has been devised for 'performance monitoring' that is largely quantitative in nature. However, if the lessons of the past decade are to be heeded, it is clear that both democracy aid project design and effective project evaluation need to be based in-depth qualitative analysis more suitable to the needs of the individual democratising countries.

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