
BUILDING A WORLDWIDE MOVEMENT FOR DEMOCRACY: THE ROLE OF NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

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The National Endowment for Democracy [NED] supports hundreds of groups throughout the world that are engaged in “virtually all of the areas of work that contribute to the promotion of democracy,” says Carl Gershman, President of the NED since 1984. The Endowment is a private, nonprofit organization created in 1983 to strengthen democratic institutions around the world through nongovernmental efforts. The Endowment is governed by an independent, nonpartisan board of directors. With its annual congressional appropriation, it makes hundreds of grants each year to support pro-democracy groups in Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and the former Soviet Union.

In recent years, it has become fashionable to bemoan the setbacks to the process of democratization, the persistence of dictatorial regimes in the world, and the growing strength of anti-democratic ideologies and political movements, most prominent among them being Islamic radicalism. But this new pessimism overlooks an extremely significant, if also unexpected, development that contains a hopeful message about the state of democratization in the world and the possibilities for further progress in the years ahead. Like the dog that did not bark in the Sherlock Holmes mystery, this unexpected development is not something that has happened, but rather something that has not happened — namely the absence of a “reverse wave” of authoritarian resurgence following what the political scientist Samuel Huntington dubbed democracy’s “third wave.”

The third wave refers to the two decades of global democratic expansion that followed the Portuguese revolution in 1974, a period when the number of democracies in the world increased exponentially, from 41 to anywhere from 76 to 117, depending on how one counts. After each of the preceding two waves of democratic expansion, the first starting with the American Revolution and running through World War I, and the second following World War II, democracy suffered a significant retreat. The first retreat occurred during the 1920s and 1930s with the rise of fascism and communism, and the second came

during the 1960s and early 1970s when fragile new democracies in Africa and Latin America succumbed to party and military dictatorships.

Something similar was supposed to have happened over the last decade in the wake of the third wave, but it didn’t. Larry Diamond, relying upon data compiled by Freedom House in its annual Freedom in the World survey, has written that “only 14 of the 125 democracies that have existed during the third wave have become authoritarian, and in nine of these, democracy has since been restored.” The picture is not all bright, since progress toward democracy has stalled in many post-authoritarian countries, leading scholars to speak of the emergence of hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes that combine illiberal features, such as a dominant executive authority that largely controls the media and the judiciary, with democratic (or pseudo-democratic) elections. But a standoff is a far cry from a roll-back, and the fact that so many emerging democracies have not collapsed bespeaks a new reality that bears the seeds of hope.

Certainly one factor that accounts for the resilience of democracy today is the absence of an antidemocratic ideology with universal aspirations, as communism and fascism were in the past, that offers a rival alternative to democratic universalism. But there is an even more important factor, one that animates the principle of democratic universalism in the everyday life of people around the world and, by

so doing, also validates its authenticity. This factor is the presence in every culture and region of the world where democracy is weak or nonexistent of grassroots democratic movements composed of ordinary people who are struggling and sacrificing, often at great risk to their own safety, to build societies that respect the right of all people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Such movements represent a new agent of change in the world, and also a powerful pressure against the return of dictatorship. Just a quarter of a century ago they hardly existed at all, except for small enclaves of dissidents in communist countries or isolated “third world democrats” who defied the conventional wisdom in their insistence that developing countries needed and could achieve democracy. But by the 1980s the Solidarity movement had emerged in Poland, and throughout Central Europe and even in the Soviet Union independent cultural and media groups started springing up, along with groups pressing for human and minority rights. As the third wave gathered momentum, a wide variety of civic and democratic reform groups also became active in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, among them the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) in the Philippines, the Institute for a Democratic Alternative (IDASA) in South Africa, the Human Rights Activists in Uganda, the women’s organization *Conciencia* in Argentina, *Radio Nanduti* in Paraguay, the National Civic Crusade in Panama, and the Movement for Free Elections in Chile. Such groups soon began to proliferate by the hundreds and even thousands.

Today these groups exist throughout East and South Asia, Latin America, Africa, Central Europe, the Eurasian region of the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East. The National Endowment for Democracy alone supports hundreds of them engaged in virtually all of the areas of work that contribute to the promotion of democracy. Many work on human rights issues, not just monitoring and investigating violations and alerting the international community to abuses, but providing legal aid, educating the public, and advocating for legislative and institutional reforms. Others focus on educating and involving young people in the political process, or motivating and empowering women by training them in the new communications technologies, informing them of

their rights, and also protecting them against both domestic violence and socioeconomic discrimination.

Civic education is a large area of work, both in the formal school system and in the community, as are conflict resolution and peace education, especially in deeply divided societies. The promotion of independent media is also a priority, involving everything from sustaining independent publications and radios to training groups in the use of desktop publishing, connecting them to the Internet, training investigative reporters and also developing support systems to protect them from intimidation and violence.

Political party development is a critically important area of work, as are election monitoring by trained domestic observers and get-out-the-vote drives. There are think tanks and business groups that encourage good corporate governance, fight corruption, and aid the development of a legislative and political environment that will encourage economic investment and growth. And there are also trade unions that defend the rights of workers and give them a voice in shaping the governmental and international financial policies that affect their well-being. There are groups that work to strengthen local government and to make government accountable at all levels; while others train civilians in issues of national defense to enable them to monitor security policy and discourage the involvement of the military in politics.

This by no means exhausts the areas of work or types of activities carried out by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the world. It is especially important to note that these activities are developed and initiated by the groups themselves and are therefore tailored to address the specific problems in each country and local situation. Thus, in countries ruled by dictatorships, the programs focus on defending human rights and promoting the free flow of information, which are the most relevant and feasible kinds of activities in closed systems. In semi-authoritarian countries, programs tend to focus on defending the political space available to independent NGOs and media, empowering civil society and linking it more closely to democratic political groups and parties, thereby developing a more united opposition as a counterweight to the

dominant state. In emerging democracies the emphasis is on fighting corruption, monitoring the performance of public officials and making government accountable to the society, and strengthening the rule of law. And in war-torn and post-conflict societies, NGOs focus on curbing violence, fostering reconciliation, and building a culture of tolerance and respect for pluralism and minority rights. In Muslim countries in the Middle East and other regions, many programs focus on promoting women's rights and liberal ideas that reconcile Islam with modern concepts of pluralism, citizenship, and democracy.

As this vast constellation of NGOs has developed over the past decade-and-a-half, a corresponding system of donor and support agencies has come into being in the established democracies. Government development agencies now provide democracy assistance, as do embassies and even foreign ministries. Multilateral agencies have also become involved, including the United Nations Development Program and other parts of the U.N. system, as well as regional bodies such as the Organization of American States, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. These governmental and multilateral agencies work primarily on issues of governmental reform, though they also provide help to NGOs. But governments often find it difficult to support independent NGOs, so this function is increasingly being performed by a growing array of publicly funded democracy and party foundations like the NED and its four core institutes, which represent the two major U.S. political parties, the trade union movement and the business community. Such foundations now exist in most European countries and in Canada, and the first Asian foundation has just been established in Taiwan. In addition, there are many privately funded foundations that play an important role in this field, especially the Ford Foundation and the foundations established by the philanthropist George Soros.

The growth of democracy organizations in the post-communist and developing countries and of support agencies in the established democracies is an entirely new feature of the architecture of contemporary politics. It is still too early to judge the impact of these new structures of cooperation, though it is probably safe to say that they have increased the democratic pressure from below on governments in both authoritarian and post-authoritarian societies, thereby forcing reforms that might not have otherwise been implemented and also restraining governments from taking regressive measures. But much more needs to be done, in particular in two broad areas.

First, the established democracies must find new ways to exercise their collective weight in all aspects of democracy promotion, from developing coordinated strategies to influence the behavior of recalcitrant and corrupt governments to defending and empowering groups working nonviolently for democratic change. The Community of Democracies (CD) offers a new forum where such strategies can be developed, though it remains at a nascent stage. Second, the nongovernmental groups themselves must strengthen their capacity to network and aid each other, share experience, defend those who face persecution and danger, and forge a deeper sense of common purpose regionally and internationally. Here, too, there is a new global initiative, the World Movement for Democracy (WMD), which is only beginning to develop its structures and potential.

Taken together, the CD and the WMD can be mutually reinforcing, creating the governmental pressures from above and the nongovernmental pressures below that will help new democracies consolidate their institutions and also stimulate further democratic gains. Whether this will lead to a fourth wave of democratization is anyone's guess, but even progress short of that will make the world a much safer and more peaceful place. ●

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