

Serious Thinking About Democratization

Review by Thomas O. Melia

Edward R. McMahon and Thomas A.P. Sinclair, editors. *Democratic Institution Performance; Research and Policy Perspectives*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002, 267 pp. \$64.95

The promotion of democracy abroad has emerged as the conceptual lynchpin of U.S. foreign policy in the current Bush administration. Whenever the president and his senior officials cast "terror" as the principal threat to U.S. security today—whether that terror is sponsored by states or by non-state actors, using weapons of mass destruction, suicide bombers, or small arms—democracy is generally presented as the solution. The remarkable address by President Bush on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, in which he

declared a long-term national commitment to foster democracy throughout the Arab Middle East, and chided American allies in Egypt and Saudi Arabia to get with the program, may constitute the boldest expression of this ambitious strategy.¹ The military prowess, economic and financial strength, and political capital of the American superpower are now to be harnessed to the promotion of democracy, not only because it is seen to be the right thing to do, but also as the way to guarantee the long-term safety and prosperity of the United States. Despite the considerable resources at the government's disposal, the results thus far have been decidedly mixed. The question remains whether adequate know-how exists in the United States to make democracy promotion a success.

Of course, democracy promotion is nothing new to U.S. foreign policy. It has been a slowly growing theme in U.S. foreign policy since Woodrow Wilson first spoke about the "rights of small nations"

at Versailles. Sometimes, this interest has extended beyond the rhetorical. In the late 1970s, for instance, Jimmy Carter made human rights a priority for U.S. foreign relations—even to the point of alienating traditional allies and client states. Carter was reluctant, however, to go beyond individual casework and address the larger, structural problems stemming from authoritarian rule. He did not contemplate the ouster or overthrow of the repressive governments that practiced the human rights abuses he condemned.

During Ronald Reagan's presidency, the launch of the National Endowment

With the election of George W. Bush, however, it seemed that the growing U.S. enthusiasm for nation-building and democracy promotion would recede. Bush had campaigned in 2000 against what he saw as the over-extension of American military and political resources to faraway lands of no strategic consequence to the United States—places like Haiti, Kosovo, and Bosnia. His campaign's chief foreign policy advisor, Condoleezza Rice, cautioned against "attachment to largely symbolic agreements and...pursuit of, at best, illusory 'norms' of international behavior." Describing in *Foreign Affairs* how a Repub

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for Democracy (NED) and other initiatives substantially ratcheted up the U.S. rhetorical and operational devotion to democratization. The George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations then institutionalized and routinized the U.S. program for promoting democracy. In post-conflict situations, or in lands where regimes had collapsed (as in much of the formerly Communist world), pressuring and/or helping governments to improve their electoral and judiciary systems became a regular part of the foreign policy "tool kit." During the nineties, it even became commonplace for aid agencies—in the United States and elsewhere in the Western world—to provide substantial financial and technical support to civil society organizations existing mainly to monitor the quality of democratic governance.

lican foreign policy would be different from its predecessor's, Rice insisted "American policy must...separate the important from the trivial." She made it clear that the Clinton administration's efforts at nation-building belonged to the latter category.²

9/11 changed all of that. President George W. Bush has stated clearly that there is no limit to the distance he will go or the measures he will use to change the nature of foreign governments to suit U.S. interests. He has demonstrated the United States's willingness to establish democratic governments in even the most formidable of places by forcefully effecting regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq. The dramatic new approach to foreign aid contained in the president's Millennium Challenge Account bolsters the case that democracy promotion is

actually the motive behind these military operations. This promises to allocate a substantial portion of foreign aid to developing countries on the basis of demonstrated achievement of long-term institutional reform of economies and polities alike. The Middle East Partnership Initiative, a particular favorite of Secretary of State Colin Powell, focuses the global democratization and reform strategy in this most challenging and important region—and seems to indicate that, while there are differences within the Cabinet on other aspects of policy, there is unanimity on the goal of promoting democracy.

Despite the varied language that George W. Bush and his advisers employ—the president himself seems to use “freedom” and “liberty” interchangeably with “democracy”—they mince no words when they commit the United States to this audacious mission.³ National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice has underscored the depth of the commitment by declaring that the United States and its allies “must make a generational commitment to helping the people of the Middle East transform their region.”⁴

Yet, the hesitations and missteps to date in the political reconstruction of both Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that the United States has not developed fully or finely tuned its approach to fostering democracy abroad. One reason, perhaps, is that public investment in developing the country’s international democracy-building capacity pales in comparison to the investment in its war-fighting capacity. Nonetheless, a growing cadre of professionals exists at the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with practical experience in

managing nation-building efforts, both in cooperative multinational contexts and in those cases in which the United States flies solo. An even larger pool of talented political development professionals has emerged in the employ of for-profit firms and non-profit enterprises. U.S. taxpayers provide most of the funds for these endeavors, but they are sometimes funded by the United Nations or other governments. Though these are mainly U.S. organizations, the personnel actually hail from dozens of countries and bring a wide range of experience to the table.

There is also a growing community of scholars and analysts—drawn from political science, law, anthropology, sociology, and elsewhere in the academy—pondering the nature of democracy and the process of democratization. Some former government officials have written very informative documents based on their particular experiences. These include Rick Barton, formerly at USAID and the UN, who now directs the Program on Conflict and Reconstruction at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and James Dobbins, a retired diplomat and veteran of Haiti, Kosovo and Somalia, who is now at the Rand Corporation.⁵ The Office of Democracy and Governance of the USAID has produced the most comprehensive collection of publications examining programs USAID itself has sponsored, as well as some that propose ways to think about new programs.⁶

Nevertheless, there are simply not enough centers of research and policy analysis that enlist practitioners, investors, and analysts to sort through the nuts and bolts of democratization strategies. A few such venues exist, but they are still relatively few in number. Tom Carothers has been the most active con-

vener of these sorts of discussions at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP). Mike McFaul and Larry Diamond weigh in from the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. The *Journal of Democracy* published by the NED has become the leading forum for thoughtful writing on these themes. Still, there is not nearly enough serious, original thinking and writing available to inform those who want to go abroad to promote democracy—whatever their motivations. Certainly, the first few months of political reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan confirm that there are questions to be answered, or at least examined, more thoughtfully.

The Center for Democratic Performance at the State University of New York at Binghamton, established in 1999, represents an important addition to the field. Directed by Edward R. McMahon, a former U.S. diplomat and senior official at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the Center brings together practitioners and scholars in a focused and practical way in order to advance the collective understanding of these issues. *Democratic Institution Performance: Research and Policy Perspectives* is one of the valuable fruits of this endeavor. The volume begins with an excellent scene-setter on the “paradox of democracy,” written by lead editor McMahon and researcher Brian Nussbaum. They aptly describe how, though “democracy has never been more widely practiced than in our present time...our understanding of how it is practiced and perpetuated remains quite limited.”⁷ Moreover, they observe, an “inability to predict what choices are most appropriate for a particular nation at a given time continues to challenge democratic practitioners and scholars alike.”⁸

Collecting chapters from fifteen different writers and assembling them into a coherent book poses a daunting task. McMahon has nevertheless managed to do just that in this work on a potentially unwieldy topic. The resulting collection of thoughtful essays takes the reader on an intellectual tour of key factors in democratic polities—particularly the challenges inherent in efforts to foster democracy elsewhere.

Written principally by scholars of democracy at home and abroad, the work is leavened with contributions from practitioners who have been on the front lines providing advice and information around the world. Democracy promoters—agencies and organizations trying to shape elections and political parties, direct civic education projects, and professionalize governing institutions—have too often shied away from rigorous intellectual scrutiny of their premises and their programs. Academic writers, for their part, frequently appear unconcerned with the very real problems of funding cycles, recruitment and deployment challenges, and the immense difficulty of trying to help real-life political leaders improve their performance without undermining their viability in unforgiving local political environments. Bringing the two perspectives together under one roof, or between book covers, brings out the best of each.

McMahon divides the book into two major sections. One addresses the domestic aspects of democratization—the internal dynamics and tensions that give rise to (or thwart) the democratic impulse of nations. The other section looks at the external facets of the democratization process. Specifically, these chapters analyze what various actors in the international community, from gov-

ernments to privately managed non-governmental organizations, can do to facilitate democratization. Chapters discuss the interplay between political parties and civic associations; reconsider the centrality of civil society—and the individual citizen—to the functioning of democracies; review the limits to popular support for democracy in certain African countries; and assess “transitional justice” in post-conflict situations.

Perhaps the most provocative contribution in this section comes from the most famous of the distinguished authors, Ali A. Mazrui. Dr. Mazrui looks at the rise of “Shariacracy” in present-day, democratizing Nigeria. He views the enactment of strict Islamic laws in the northern states of Nigeria as a consequence of globalization—a kind of nation

donor efforts to help local actors. Bjornlund has advised election-monitoring organizations in places as diverse as Zambia, Palestine, and Indonesia, and what he has seen troubles him. The Indonesia experience, in particular, suggests that foreign donors and advisers can sometimes fail to appreciate the larger purpose of their activities: “using elections as a catalyst for the process of building democratic practices and institutions.” The result, he writes, was that the international community “inadvertently hampered the new civic organizations and the momentum for reform”—a devastating indictment.⁹

Retired U.S. diplomat Elizabeth Spiro Clark discusses the evolution of international standards in determining the political processes necessary for countries to be considered democratic. She notes

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alist reply to this region’s marginalization in the world’s economy and culture. Like the other chapters in this section, Mazrui’s essay offers a novel way to look at what might at first glance seem a familiar topic.

The external discussion begins with two solid chapters on the emergence of international actors—official and non-governmental agencies—both as agents of change and as arbiters of the quality of political processes in other countries. Eric Bjornlund, the most widely experienced practitioner of democracy-promotion programs among these authors, offers sober reflections on the bureaucratic machinations that can impair

several trends that have emerged in recent years. One is the enhancement, or “hardening,” of standards by such inter-governmental bodies such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organization of American States (OAS), where concern about the quality of member states’ elections has become part of the institutions’ mission. Another important trend has been the broadening of the focus in democracy assistance to include not only elections, but also a range of institutions and behaviors that can indicate whether a country is democratizing or not. Further, she notes that each new transition offers the prospect of new innovations in

sequencing, methods, and political architecture.

The final three chapters address the gap between theory and practice—the cultural divide between policy-makers and scholarly researchers—that drives the collection. Harry Blair, whom USAID has frequently engaged to assess the impact of its programs, offers a candid review of the USAID's efforts to demonstrate the actual impact its hundreds of millions of dollars in programs have had. Shaheen Mozaffar looks closely at the intellectual paradigms that compete for dominance among the functionaries who frame USAID's programs, and laments the limited pool of talent available to bridge the estranged communities of academia and policy-makers: "only a limited number of scholars who have developed skills combining substantive professional and area expertise, intellectual entrepreneurialism, and mastery of the bureaucratic maze are able to impact USAID democracy programs."¹⁰

The powerful final chapter, by Edward Friedman of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, brings together the various intellectual and political factors in an essay entitled "The Art of Democratic Crafting and Its Limits." His sharp-edged review of the experts' analytical errors over the years, combined with a practical-minded appreciation for the political world, leaves the reader nodding in agreement at the statement: "analysts of democratic crafting should approach their topic with great humility and self-restraint, cognizant of the limited value of general theory."¹¹

While the book might seem limited in scope because it revolves largely around the work of Americans promoting

democracy abroad—and also around the particular experience of USAID—it must be said that until very recently democratic development action in many parts of the world has been implemented mainly by Americans and funded by USAID. While the democracy movement is truly worldwide, and has increasingly been institutionalized as a feature of other nations' foreign policies—usually as a component of development assistance—the United States remains by far the most significant actor in this field. Other countries' aid programs have tended to follow where the Americans go first, and private philanthropists, other than the remarkable George Soros, have simply not involved themselves in the process of democracy promotion to any significant extent.

Ned McMahon has recently moved to the University of Vermont at Burlington and launched another new center of inquiry into democratization strategies. One hopes this means another institutional contribution will be forthcoming before long, and that the policymakers will pay ever greater attention. Meanwhile, now that the Pentagon has suddenly emerged as a better-endowed, better-armed rival to USAID and the Department of State in the democracy promotion arena, one hopes those planning the political reconstruction of Iraq at the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad brought along a few copies of *Democratic Institution Performance* to light the way forward.

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NOTES

1 George W. Bush, "Remarks at the 29th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, November 6, 2003," Internet, <http://whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/print/20031106-2.html> (Date Accessed: 12 November 2003).

2 Condoleezza Rice, "Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2000).

3 See, for instance, the President's televised address to the nation of 7 September 2003, Internet, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/09/20030907-1.html> (Date Accessed: 27 October 2003).

4 Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks to the 28th Annual Convention of the National Association of Black Journalists, Internet, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/08/20030807-1.html> (Date Accessed: 27 October 2003).

5 See, for instance, Frederick D. Barton & Bathsheba N. Crocker, "A Wiser Peace: An Action Strategy for a Post-Conflict Iraq," available online at <http://csis.org/isp/wiserpeace.pdf> and James Dobbins,

et al., "America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq," available online at <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1753/>.

6 Available online at: <http://www.usaid.gov/democracy/techpubs>.

7 Edward R. McMahon and Brian Nussbaum, "The Paradox of Democracy" in *Democratic Institution Performance; Research and Policy Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 3-4.

8 Ibid, 4.

9 Eric Bjornlund, "Lessons from Domestic Election Monitoring," in *Democratic Institution Performance; Research and Policy Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 105.

10 Shaheen Mozaffar, "The Research-Policy Nexus and U.s. Democracy Assistance," in *Democratic Institution Performance; Research and Policy Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 200.

11 Edward Friedman, "The Art of Democratic Crafting and its Limits," in *Democratic Institution Performance; Research and Policy Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 227.