

Export of democracy: preliminary considerations

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Democracy is not only a political system of the West, but also its export item. Over the last two decades in particular, Western states, organisations and individuals have sought to advance democracy in the countries of the former Soviet block, the Middle East and East Asia. Democracy has, however, proven to be a troublesome franchise. It is now widely, and solemnly, acknowledged in the policy-making and academic circles that the drive to promote democracy around the globe since the 1990s has rarely resulted in little more than superficial and often unsustainable imitation of democratic institutions in formerly authoritarian countries¹ (Carothers 2002), so that between one third and one quarter of all regimes in the early 2000s were classified as ‘elected authoritarian’, or ‘hybrid’ regimes, combining elements of democracy and authoritarianism (Diamond 2002). Academics got busy inventing ‘adjectives’ to describe such ‘democracies’ (Collier and Levitsky 1996) and arranging them into bulky tables. This marked the end of ‘democratic teleology’ and the presumption that any transition away from authoritarianism inexorably leads towards democracy. Does it mean that hybrid regimes, which do not challenge democracy as such, but often refute its principles in practice, are the best people can get the non-Western context?

Furthermore, if only half a decade ago democracy was unquestionably ‘the only legitimate political system in the world’ (Nodia 2002), today it is not uncommon to hear that authoritarian political regimes are better suited for economic growth. On that premise, it is argued that the absence of democracy, and of liberalism, can actually be beneficial for economic development.

In the light of these facts and these debates, two questions become salient:

1. Is democracy relevant in a non-Western context? and if yes,
2. What is an effective and sustainable way to export it?

Our answer to the first question is that democracy does have universal currency. It is the only known political system to accommodate group and individual interests in a non-violent way. Democracy is also most conducive to human development, since democratic regimes offer people maximum opportunities to make and pursue their life choices freely and without fear or impediment². At the same time, macro-economic growth in authoritarian states per se does not by definition reflect or guarantee human development, and as such cannot serve as a justification for oppression or by-passing of democratic rules. Hence, the capacity to advance and protect individual development makes democracy relevant and applicable to all humanity. This understanding drives our answer to the second question.

¹ The only example of genuine democratic consolidation has so far been served by the new EU member states, which have had centuries-long experience of development within the European political, economic and cultural space.

² Although one may argue that democratic regimes have also been oppressive towards certain ideas or movements, it is hardly disputable that the degree of such oppression is significantly smaller than that in authoritarian regimes.

We believe that export of democracy has by large failed across the world so far because it was premised on the imperative to replicate democratic institutional arrangements, such as the separation of powers within the branches of government, without much emphasis on the value of democratic principles. The expectation of the Western democracy-promoters appears to have been that institutions were the fundamental blocks upon which, with time, democratic political culture should grow. In practice, as we know, many democracy 'importers' either rejected democratic institutions and democracy as alien, or easily manipulated them. We propose, therefore, that democratic development is sustainable when it grows organically within the social culture and traditions. In other words, democratic principles should be rooted first, and then organizational and institutional structures would develop on their basis. This means that democracy-promoting methods should focus not so much on the enforcement of democratic constitutions, as on social entrenching and fostering few clear democratic principles, such as individual and group empowerment, and non-violent ways of conflict resolution.

These two arguments: that democracy is most conducive to human development and therefore is universally applicable, and that democracy promotion should be based on the entrenchment of principles rather than replication of institutions, is the premise for further investigation of the theme of 'export of democracy'.

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