



Democracy-support: from recession to innovation

Submitted by Anonymous on 05th August 2009

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The sense that democracy is in retreat worldwide has become widespread. But the emergence of citizen-centred, governance-focused and development-oriented approaches suggests that a more complex and hopeful shift is also taking place, say Nicholas Benequista & John Gaventa.

(This article was first published on 3 August 2009)

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What has been [described](#) [14] as the "democratic recession" around the world is prompting some serious reflection by the "stewards" of democracy - among them civic forces, agencies, think-tanks, pressure-groups and media in a host of countries. The evidence that democracy is in trouble is by no means overwhelming, as peaceful elections in [Indonesia](#) [15] and [Lebanon](#) [16] in mid-2009 alone indicate. But the trends often cited for the "recession" - the resurgence of authoritarian rule, populism, corruption, and even (as in [Mauritania](#) [17] and [Honduras](#) [18]) military involvement - are clear enough.

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This article draws on discussions at a conference on [Promoting Political Freedom and Deepening Democracy](#) [19] at Wilton Park on 22-25 June 2009. There is an even deeper concern, that the effect of George W Bush's "[freedom agenda](#) [20]" and the way it was pursued has been to discredit the very ideas of democracy and democracy-support in the eyes of many around the world. This makes the change of rhetoric and outlook under Bush's successor as United States president all the more welcome. Indeed, there are signs that [Barack Obama](#) [21] is [breaking](#) [22] with the approach of his predecessor in a more than rhetorical way.

His speech on 11 July 2009 [in Ghana](#) [23] - where the December 2008 election is another positive entry in democracy's global balance-sheet - was significant in this respect. "America will not seek to



impose any system of government on any other nation - the essential truth of democracy is that each nation determines its own destiny", he said then. The words are deceptively simple, for they might finally mark a break from a much longer tradition of treating democracy as an exportable commodity.

This new understanding at the heart of the power echoes developments taking place at grassroots level in many countries.

An ebbing tide

True, this understanding has only come on account of democracy becoming a tougher sale. Freedom House has marked a third continuous year of decline for global freedom; the countries that spend approximately \$9 billion every year to [promote](#) [24] fair elections, government transparency and public participation find themselves on the defensive for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. That wave of democratisation has now begun to [recede](#) [25], most notably in [Russia](#) [26] itself, but also in several African nations that have adopted democratic procedures in merely theatrical ways.

"It is, I think, fair to say that the heady optimism of the early 1990s seems to have ebbed", says [Anwar Choudhury](#) [27], the director of international institutions at Britain's foreign office. "The belief in the inevitable march of democracy has been shaken. The 21st century has seen the emergence of a different, altogether more complex, dynamic around democracy."

The ebbing tide of democracy has left a few dispirited - but it has also inspired new thinking. Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace ([CEIP](#) [28]) writes in the [Journal of Democracy](#) [29] that democracy-support is diversifying away from a one-size-fits-all strategy, with approaches that can be grouped into two camps: the political and the developmental (see "[Democracy Assistance: Political vs Developmental?](#) [30]", *Journal of Democracy*, January 2009).

President Obama's speech confirms Carothers's hypothesis, but it also raises a question of whether democracy-support might need a third perspective - a societal approach - if it is to truly allow each nation to determine its own destiny.

[Thomas Carothers](#) [31] says:

"The political approach proceeds from a relatively narrow conception of democracy - focused, above all, on elections and political liberties - and a view of democratization as a process of political struggle in which democrats work to gain the upper hand in society over nondemocrats. It directs aid at core political processes and institutions - especially elections, political parties, and politically oriented civil society groups - often at important conjunctural moments and with the hope of catalytic effects".

He [contrasts](#) [30] this with a developmental approach, which tends to measure the quality of a democracy based on how well it delivers equality, welfare, justice and other socioeconomic outcomes:

"The developmental approach rests on a broader notion of democracy, one that encompasses concerns about equality and justice and the concept of democratization as a slow, iterative process of change involving an interrelated set of political and socioeconomic developments. It favors democracy aid that pursues incremental, long-term change in a wide range of political and socioeconomic sectors, frequently emphasizing governance and the building of a well-functioning state."

President Obama's [speech](#) [32] in Ghana clearly expounds a developmental approach to democracy-promotion in Africa, emphasising the instrumental role of good governance in delivering socio-economic development in the continent:

"(We) must first recognise a fundamental truth that you have given life to in Ghana: development depends upon good governance. That is the ingredient which has been missing in far too many



places, for far too long. That is the change that can unlock Africa's potential. And that is a responsibility that can only be met by Africans."

The European Union too is moving toward a more developmental approach to promoting democracy, with a concerted push emanating from [Sweden](#) [33] to better integrate the work carried out by the agencies of international development and institutions that have traditionally been tasked with spreading democracy. There appears to be a consensus in Sweden between its development organisation, the [Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency](#) [34] (Sida), and its [foreign office](#) [35]. Both organisations are now working to influence the EU's policy of democracy-promotion under its [six-month presidency](#) [36] of the EU (July-December 2009).

A rare opportunity

In this rare opportunity for a paradigm-shift, advocates of democracy may also want to consider how they might better support the ways that collective action contribute to strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic institutions.

None of this suggests that the Washington-based [National Endowment for Democracy](#) [37] or the [European Partnership for Democracy](#) [38] will (or should) stop funding electoral processes or sending electoral observers. But especially in countries where leaders have been able to imitate the form of democratic institutions, while avoiding any of the substance of democracy, a more nuanced approach is clearly necessary. It is unclear, however, that there is enough innovation to be had in developmental approach to democracy-promotion.

Barack Obama, as a former [community organiser](#) [39] in Chicago, should understand why. Indeed, his speech in Accra again suggests that he might:

"Across Africa, we have seen countless examples of people taking control of their destiny, and making change from the bottom up. We saw it in Kenya, where civil society and business came together to help stop post-election violence. We saw it in South Africa, where over three quarters of the country voted in the recent election - the fourth since the end of apartheid. We saw it in Zimbabwe, where the Election Support Network braved brutal repression to stand up for the principle that a person's vote is their sacred right."

These cases highlight that states are not built through institutions alone. Organised citizens also play a critical role by articulating demands for new rights, mobilising pressure for policy change and monitoring government performance. A societal approach to promoting political freedom recognises the limits of institution-building with [support](#) [40] for intensive, long-term, organised collective action (see Andrea Cornwall ed., [Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas](#) [40] [Zed, 2006]).

An end to promises

Two researchers, [Vera Schattan P Coelho](#) [41] and [Bettina Von Lieres](#) [42], have collected examples of when citizens mobilise around democracy itself (see the project on "[Deepening Democracies in States and Localities](#) [43]", Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability [[DRC](#) [11]]). One of the cases included in their work is Nigeria, Africa's largest democracy, where huge amounts of funding have gone into government-appointed commissions to oversee "fair" elections (a strategy seen by some as "paying the fox to guard the chicken-coop"). Little external money went to support civil-society organisations, which mobilised members across the country to monitor the election process themselves, with many risking their lives to do so.

Two years since the election, the public uproar has become both vociferous and well organised. Two organisations are at the helm: [Coalitions for Change](#) [44], a programme that helps civil-society organisations come together with a coherent platform, and the [Nigeria Labour Congress](#) [45], the national umbrella group for Nigeria's trade unions, boasting 4 million members. While Coalitions for Change has enabled the cacophony of civil-society groups to articulate a more coherent voice, the National Labour Congress has mobilised its members in massive rallies across the country; the [largest](#) [46] to date, in Kano, attracted tens of thousands.



These organisations hope to force the congress to adopt reforms such as a much-needed law to make electoral fraud a criminal offence, rather than merely an issue for civil litigation.

"The key question is: why would the parliament accept this if they rigged themselves into office?" says Jibrin Ibrahim, director of Nigeria's [Centre for Democracy and Development](#) [47]. "We have a political class that is complicit in the history of electoral fraud. Given this context, our position in civil society is that at the end of the day, it is direct citizen action that can make the difference."

The power of grassroots campaigning of this kind, allied to principled encouragement from democracy-support practitioners and wise political leaders, could yet make the coming era one of democratic innovation rather than recession.

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openDemocracy, "[American democracy promotion: an open letter to Barack Obama](#) [56]" (11 March 2009) - a document hosted by the [Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy](#) [57] (CSID) and the [Project on Middle East Democracy](#) [58] (POMED)

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