K4D | Knowledge, evidence and learning for development

Opposition political party approaches and international assistance against democratic backsliding

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Question

What are approaches for supporting political party development in non-democratic systems (including where there is no opposition in parliament)? Please provide learnings, reflections, evaluation of those approaches.

Contents

1. Summary

This quick review synthesises the literature from academic, policy and knowledge institutions sources on the approaches that opposition political parties use to increase democratic spaces when operating in non-democratic settings. The literature showed that "democratic backsliding" is on the rise worldwide, limiting the rights of political parties, independent media and civil society organisations. Democratic backsliding is partly attributed to the increasing influence of authoritarian regimes in their regions and beyond, like Russia, China and Saudi Arabia (Burnell, 2017). On the other hand, Klaas (2016) showed that the Western democracies are not coherent in their actions as governments in Washington, London and Brussels chase pyrrhic short-term economic and security victories.

The literature showed that authoritarian regimes increasingly obey to formal rules of the game, which Uribe Burcher and Bisarya (2017) call 'modern democratic backsliding'. This opens some (although limited) opportunities in which to challenge authoritarian regimes' power through legislative processes and elections. However, research is not abundant on political party development in non-democratic settings. There seems to be more emphasis in research on how authoritarian regimes operate and maintain power, than how opposition forces work in periods of increased oppression. From the available literature, it showed that opposition political parties make use of the follow approaches to increase democratic spaces in authoritarian settings:

- **Dialogue with moderate elements of the governing power** could be effective to reach compromises and change the country's democratic culture. In particular, elite opposition political parties without a strong activist base are more likely to seek dialogue or even co-opt with the regime (Buckles, 2017).

- **Organising and mobilising activists within and outside the party** is important, as leaders with a strong and large activist base are better able to endure state repression, which makes parties more capable of forcing regime openness and achieving electoral gains. However, since 2005 the success rate of unarmed resistance has dropped as regimes have learned and deployed counterstrategies to thwart resistance movements (Vintagen, 2017).

- **Unite opposition forces** as the literature showed that a fragmented opposition landscape is often held-up as one of the most significant determinants of regime durability and democratic stagnation. Strong opposition coalitions are able to reduce the efficacy of the incumbent's divide-and-rule strategies, increasing the costs and risks associated with repression and manipulation (Beardsworth, 2016).

- **Align with regional and international organisations and governments** to increase diplomatic pressure on authoritarian regimes. Regional organisations have increasingly sought to protect democracy. Research found that one of the most powerful determinants of democratic change is the regional level of democracy (Finkel et al., 2006).

- **Rebuild democratic spaces at the local level.** Winning local elections and increasing democratic spaces in some important areas, cities and towns of the countries is a way to increase trust, create political learning and opportunities to align with grassroots organisations (Schakel & Svåsand, 2014).

- **Use modern communication methods to counter disinformation.** Social media has the potential to enable activists and protesters to voice their discontent about an increasingly eroding democratic landscape. However, incumbents with support from

foreign authoritarian regimes manipulate these tools to misinform their followers and increase their power (Chenoweth, 2016).

- **Opposition parties could go into exile:** When oppression under authoritarianism is too much of a risk for opposition parties to continue activities and presence in the country, many have no choice other than go in exile. There is very limited literature on how effective these governments or groups of opposition in exile are in pressing for more democratic spaces in their home countries.

The literature (research and evaluations) that focuses on international political party assistance concluded that the impact of these development programmes is very limited, due to a combination of limited resources and the political complexities within countries (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2018a). Comparative analysis at the programme level remains relatively rare. The literature that is available showed that positive impacts depend on the willingness of the party leadership to transform into a membership-based organisation, with links to grassroots organisations and build internal democracy as they fear losing control of the parties (Burnell & Gerrits, 2010). Evaluations of the programmes showed that donors are increasingly focussing on civil society organisation, human right groups, young political activists and women politicians rather than on the leadership of political parties in order to encourage the development of an alternative political leadership in the future (Svåsand, 2014).

Depending on specific circumstances and types of authoritarian regimes and forms of backsliding, international donors are using the following approaches:

- **Multi-party dialogues** are used in competitive authoritarian systems, where there is some space and willingness for co-operation. In these settings more locally based (provincial level) approaches of political dialogues are encouraged to build dialogue platforms to break the political deadlock or create pathways for reforms in countries, like Ethiopia, Burundi and Myanmar (Schakel & Svåsand, 2014).

- **Capacity building and direct support** within the country or outside the country. Opposition leaders and activists receive specific training on how to build their platforms, to organise and maintain strong coalitions, develop a strategy for transition, and how to use social media to counter disinformation. Depending on how repressive the regime is and how hostile against foreign interventions, capacity building can take place within the country or outside the country. Aid providers seek relief from pressure on their work and from repression on opposition activists by relocating and carrying out their work from headquarters or neighbouring countries (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014).

- **Diplomacy** could be effective, but linkages and leverage are important; if a country has some important linkages with donor countries (e.g. trade, aid, geopolitically, historically) diplomacy with an authoritarian regime is more likely to succeed. High linkage appears as an external shaper of 'democratising pressure' ("diffuse and indirect but nevertheless considerable") even where leverage is low; increasing the chances that it will trigger broad domestic opposition to the regime (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Diplomacy is more likely to succeed in competitive authoritarian systems than in single party systems (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2017).

- **Aligning with international and regional institutions** as providers of support can direct their assistance to third-country organisations that may have more operational flexibility and greater credibility in recipient societies. Doing so could contribute to increasing the number of non-Western actors and organisations involved in international democracy

assistance. However, they value their independence and do not want to become or be seen to be dependent on Western donors to avoid a pushback from authoritarian regimes (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014).

- **Focus on youth and women empowerment**. International political party assistance in non-democratic settings, now focuses more on new or future members of political parties, within the opposition or the incumbent government (Svåsand, 2014). Although youth and in particular women's participation in politics has improved, researchers debate how this influences changes in the democratic landscape (Carothers, 2016). There is criticism that authoritarian regimes are using these programmes to get better publicity, but without real opening up of democratic spaces (Bush, 2015).

- **Focus on protective knowledge and technology** designed to increase opposition capacity to protect themselves against governmental repression, harassment, and surveillance. For example, platforms for offshore data storage, aimed at protecting opposition parties in the case of raids, arrests, or attempted assaults (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014).

- **Pullback, going under the radar or refocus on independent media and civil society organisations.** Carothers & Brechenmacher (2014) note that anecdotal evidence indicates that tactical pullback may be more useful before a situation becomes inflamed. Some international donors might decide to continue some kind of support in less transparent ways and with small-scale support efforts, however, these efforts are off the radar and cannot be evaluated. A visible trend is to refocus support efforts away from political parties to civil society, human rights groups and independent media.

2. Democratic backsliding and opposition political parties' approaches to reverse it

Democratic backsliding

The term 'democratic backsliding' is often used to describe the changes "made in formal political institutions and informal political practices that significantly reduce the capacity of citizens to make enforceable claims upon the government" (Lust & Waldner, 2015, p.3). Is can occur in both democratic and authoritarian regimes. These changes may not lead to the breakdown of democratic regimes, but "they do degrade citizens' rights and their engagement with the state" (Lust & Waldner, 2015, p.3). Uribe Burcher and Bisarya (2017, p.70) mentioned that political leaders increasingly manage to use their political power by "manipulating electoral norms, restricting dissent and freedom of speech, and altering the constitution to extend their terms in office — all within the legal framework of the democratic system". Governments, which roll back democracy, use the law to reduce civic space and political freedoms in order to crush dissent and disable political opposition, and diminish the role of civil society.

Democratic backsliding does not necessarily result in dictatorships. There are many different forms, in which it authoritarianism occurs (Ahlers & Stichweh, 2017). The literature showed that a highly personalised and uncompromising type of autocracy is on the rise in all the continents: in Europe (e.g. Hungary, Poland and Russia), Latin America (e.g. Venezuela and Nicaragua), Africa (e.g. Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zambia and Rwanda), Middle East (e.g. Turkey as most of the other countries are long-term authoritarian regimes) and Asia (Thailand, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Philippines and Bangladesh) (e.g. Bermeo, 2016; Uribe Burcher & Bisarya, 2017). Some

literature also referred to this pathway towards authoritarianism as 'recession of democracy' (Diamond, 2015). The endpoint of modern backsliding is thus mostly not full-scale authoritarianism, but "weakened democracy" (Uribe Burcher & Bisarya, 2017).[1]

Bermeo (2016) distinguished between six types of backsliding. The first three types are becoming rarer, while the latter three have increased in frequency and are now referred to in literature as 'modern' democratic backsliding (e.g. Uribe Burcher & Bisarya, 2017).

- A **classic coup d'état**, in which a sitting executive is ousted by the military or other state elites (Bermeo, 2016, p.6).
- An **executive coup**, in which a freely elected executive seizes power unilaterally by suspending the constitution and establishing a rule-by-decree dictatorship (Bermeo, 2016, p.7).
- Election day **vote fraud** (Bermeo, 2016, p.7).
- A **promissory coup**, which is framed as a defence of democracy and accompanied by a promise to hold elections and imminently restore constitutional democracy. Examples are Pakistan (1999), Fiji (2006), Thailand (2007), Honduras (2008), Madagascar (2009) and Guinea-Bissau (2012) (Bermeo, 2016, p.8-10).
- **Executive aggrandisement**, which takes place without executive replacement and at a slower pace, whereby elected executives gradually weaken constraints on their power and increase institutional obstacles to political opposition. Examples are Turkey, Sri Lanka and Mozambique (Bermeo, 2016, p.10-13).
- The **strategic manipulation of elections**, which hampers media access, using government funds for incumbent campaigns, keeping opposition candidates off the ballot, hampering voter registration, packing electoral commissions, changing electoral rules to favour incumbents, and harassing opponents — but all done in such a way that the elections themselves do not appear fraudulent (Bermeo, 2016, p.13-14).

Promissory coups and strategic manipulation of elections often go hand in hand with political parties acting as the "surrogate for the coup leader" winning the elections, like in Fiji, Madagascar and Honduras (Bermeo, 2016, p.10). However, also in countries were opponents of the coup win elections, democratisation is often not regained, like in Niger, Guinea-Bissau and Pakistan (Bermeo, 2016, p.10). In Thailand, after initial progress, the military seized power again in 2014, and made no promise of elections.[2]

Executive aggrandisement is often combined with strategic manipulation of elections too. The long-term 'strategic' manipulation is part of the executive aggrandisement to avoid blatant election-day vote fraud and rarely involves obvious violations of the law. A number of studies explain strategic manipulation as an unintended consequence of the rise of international election monitoring. They argue that politicians found new ways to ensure victory once better monitoring made straight-up fraud "more costly" (Hyde & O'Mahony, 2010; Simpser & Donno, 2011).

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[1] See for recent example Zambia report of Frontline Defenders (2018) and for Bangladesh Nahar, (2018).

[2] Retrieved from BBC website: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-27517591

Approaches to increase democratic spaces in times of backsliding

Troubled democracies are now more likely "to erode rather than to shatter" (Bermeo, 2016, p.14). This means that authoritarian regimes labelled as 'modern backsliders' must obey the formal rules of the game, which opens some (although limited) opportunities in which to challenge their power. The outcome is a hybrid regime that maintains some elements of constitutional democratic governance, such as political parties, elections or independent courts (Uribe Burcher & Bisarya, 2017). As Jelmin (2012) showed: if one institution fails, others, like the judiciary and the media, can exert pressure and at least limit the weakening of the system. "Even if the cards are stacked in favour of autocratic institutions, the persistence of meaningful democratic institutions creates arenas through which opposition forces may — and frequently do — pose significant challenges" (Levitsky & Way, 2002, p.53-54).

Public perceptions of democracy in the aftermath of democratic backsliding is often not in question, as "citizens feel more attached to it than ever" (Uribe Burcher & Bisarya, 2017, p.86). In other words, the literature suggests that backsliding has greater impact on civil liberties than on participatory engagement, which means that there remain some ways for democratic bounce-back for opposition parties, as backsliders must continue to hold elections, and do so without complete ownership of the state. However, executive aggrandisement often takes place precisely where a majority that supports the regime is already taking root and opposition parties are already weakened by performance failures and internal divisions, making it especially hard for the oppositions to muster the power of numbers needed to reverse backsliding (Bermeo, 2016).

By considering these limitations, the literature mentioned the following approaches that opposition political parties use to increase democratic spaces during a period of backsliding.

Seek dialogue with moderate elements of the governing power during backsliding.

Strategic long-term interparty dialogue might help all sides to reach compromises and change the country's democratic culture, rather than focusing on a one-off political crisis (Uribe Burcher & Bisarya, 2017). In particular, for elite opposition political parties without a strong activist base seeking dialogues or even co-option with the regime could gain them some compromises or avoid repression (Buckles, 2017). Opposition parties in Africa are responding by recruiting ruling party defectors and aligning with rivals, tactics which in part explain opposition victories in Nigeria in 2015, Senegal in 2012, and Kenya in 2002 (National Intelligence Council, 2018). However, for opposition parties with a strong and large activist base, any co-operation, even dialogues of their leaders with the regime is likely not to be tolerated. In this case, the "opposition leaders' political survival, to varying degrees, relies on support from party activists who are alienated when their leader colludes with the incumbent. Any 'selling out' to the regime may cause activist defections or, in parties with divided leadership, competition over control of the party" (Buckles, 2017, p.2). Buckles (2017, p.2) suggests that internal political concerns of the opposition party leaders serve to weaken authoritarian control, "but may push some parties to engage in unnecessary conflicts with the government".

The strength of a party's activist base and its internal leadership structures, therefore, influence whether an opposition party is willing to start a dialogue or co-operate with the regime. For example, co-operation with the regime has caused activists to abandon their party in long-standing non-democracies such as Gabon. In cases like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2014) and Togo (2010), party members expelled opposition leaders for accepting political appointments (Buckles, 2017). In Zimbabwe, the main opposition party's power-sharing deal in

2009 led to a de-emphasis on mobilisation and protest politics within the organisation, which ultimately eroded the party's activist base and produced significant electoral losses in the next election (LeBas, 2014). In Egypt during the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak the Muslim Brotherhood is an example of opposition to maintain pressure on the regime with a large activist base (Albrecht, 2013).

Organise and mobilise activists within and outside the party.

Based on the arguments and experiences mentioned above, it makes sense for opposition political parties and their leaders who are not willing to co-operate with the regime, even as this means giving up rent distribution, to seek for the largest possible activist base within the party or through alignments with human rights groups, NGOs and grassroots organisations. Leaders with a strong and large activist base are better able to endure state repression, which makes parties more capable of forcing regime openness and achieving electoral gains (Buckles, 2017). Evidence shows that activists convey local information and demands to the party leadership, while implementing party strategy on the ground, such as mobilising ordinary citizens for protests and elections. Hence, grassroots members are valuable for opposition leaders, "who can mobilise with greater confidence that their base will not collapse under pressure from the regime. This makes opposition leaders more likely to pursue power through confrontation" (Buckles, 2017, p.5).

Crucially, party activists require opposition leaders to invest in mobilisation strategies for the base to remain intact. Without mobilising, activists quickly become disengaged and the loss of grassroots support renders the leader politically vulnerable. Political mobilisation, such as staging protests and organising other forms of dissent, is a key party-building strategy that keeps activists loyal and engaged in the party (LeBas, 2014). Vinthagen (2015; 2017) showed the important role of mass non-violent resistance. The higher the number of people participating in a campaign, the more successful it will be. Historic data showed that if 3.5% of the population joins a campaign, it is bound to succeed in overthrowing the autocratic regime (Vinthagen, 2017). However, since 2005 the success rate of unarmed resistance has dropped. Vinthagen (2017) highlighted that regimes have learned and deploy counterstrategies to thwart resistance movements, for example by using violent repression, restricting access to the internet, releasing criminals, creating counter-movements who protest in the streets in support of the government, encourage sectarian conflicts, temporary closure of social media and even moving the national capital (Vinthagen, 2017).

Unite opposition forces.

In the democratisation literature, a fragmented opposition landscape is often held-up as one of the most significant determinants of regime durability and democratic stagnation. Coalitions enable opposition parties to pool scarce resources and prevent unnecessary competition, while cooperation facilitates the sharing of information and allows greater coordination concerning mobilisation efforts, party agent deployment and vote protection mechanisms (Beardsworth, 2016, p.750). Howard and Roessler (2006) found that opposition coordination was the most prominent explanatory variable to predict the likelihood of regime transition. Strong opposition

coalitions are able to reduce the efficacy of the incumbent's divide-and-rule strategies, increasing the costs and risks associated with repression and manipulation.

Beyond the mobilisation benefits, coalitions also serve as a signalling mechanism to voters that opposition leaders are able to set aside their differences and work together, making an opposition victory appear more attainable and trustworthy (Beardsworth, 2016, p.750). Although opposition pre-electoral coalitions are an increasingly popular tactic used by parties during elections, it seems in particular a successful approach in backsliding, hybrid regimes (Howard & Roessler, 2006). For example, in 2015, an opposition coalition in Tanzania came closer than ever to overturning the hegemony of Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), in power since independence in 1962 (Paget, 2017).

The literature that deals with opposition bargaining during coalition formation is sparse and predominantly theoretical (Beardsworth, 2016). One exception is Arriola (2013) on multi-ethnic coalition bargaining in Kenya and Cameroon. Arriola (2013, p.234) claimed that opposition coalitions "are more likely to emerge where opposition politicians can use the resources of business to mimic the pecuniary strategy of incumbents, that is, purchasing cross-ethnic electoral endorsements". The results suggest that access of the opposition to financial resources of some businesses leaders is important for coalition forming. However, this is only possible in situations of financial autonomy of business (Beardsworth, 2016). According to Beardsworth (2016, p.751), although funds are an incentive, "[t]his overlooks the array of choices available to opposition parties of varying sizes who, acting within a dynamic context characterised by information asymmetries, attempt to use coalition processes to bolster their own positions relative to the largest opposition party as well as the ruling party."

Align with regional and international organisations and governments.

Opposition parties or coalitions also increasingly use international and regional institutions to put pressure on the authoritarian regimes to avoid further backsliding and repression. Finkel et al. (2007) found that one of the most powerful determinants of democratic change is the regional level of democracy. This 'diffusion' or 'neighbourhood' effect shows that for every one standard deviation improvement in the regional level of democracy there is a statistically significant improvement of one-fifth a standard deviation in an individual country's democracy score (Finkel et al., 2007). Intergovernmental groupings like the African Union, the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have taken principled stands and even applied sanctions against some of the region's most incorrigible autocrats.[3] Although insufficient, the African Democracy Charter (African Union) could validate and legitimise domestic demand by providing opportunities for better democratic governance and normative convergence at the continental level (Hengari, 2017). For example, Gambian president Yahya Jammeh was ousted in January 2017 after two decades in power when he lost his bid for

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[3] Retrieved from the opinion article of Christian Hennemeyer (Bridging the Divide) on the PRI website dated May 2010: https://www.pri.org/stories/2009-12-09/opinion-how-stop-africas-democratic-backsliding

re-election. His attempt to stay in power was met with troops from Senegal to enforce the election results, backed by a unanimous UN Security Council vote.[4]

Regional organisations, also in other continents, have sought to protect democracy; some have adapted tools designed to deal with traditional coups in order to address threats to constitutional democracy from within (Choudhry & Bisarya, 2014). For example, the Organisation of American States (OAS) has mechanisms to sanction member states for violating shared values for promoting constitutional democracy and the rule of law, which modern backsliding actions fall foul of, which the opposition in Venezuela is using to increase pressure on president Maduro in 2019.[5] In this way, democracy's resilience and pathways for opposition parties is bolstered not as an inherent characteristic of democratic governance, but as an important shared international value (Uribe Burcher & Bisarya, 2017).

Open relations with international players is also an important way to bolster the credibility of opposition parties, particularly before elections. For example, the Malaysian federal opposition alliance had a meeting with senior EU ambassadors just before the elections, which they eventually won in 2018.[6] It is in line with the Vienna Convention for foreign ambassadors to conduct international diplomacy with opposition parties.

Other approaches

In the limited timespan of this review, less information could be found on the following approaches for opposition political parties to increase democratic spaces.

- **Rebuild democratic spaces at the local level:** When on the national level all doors are closed and repression is making it hard for opposition political parties to open democratic spaces, they look at the local level, in cities and provinces or district levels. Winning local elections and increasing democratic spaces in some important areas of the countries is a way to increase trust, create political learning and opportunities to align with grassroots organisations.

- **Use modern communication methods to counter disinformation:** Social media has the potential to enable activists and protesters to voice their discontent about an increasingly eroding democratic landscape. The low costs and broad availability of these platforms makes them attractive tools for citizens to engage in political discussion and respond to state abuses (Bruns et al., 2016). However, incumbents can also manipulate these tools to misinform their followers and increase their power (Chenoweth, 2016).

- **Monitor the integrity of elections over a longer period:** Opposition parties make sure the government abides by international electoral principles and that the media accurately reports on instances of electoral malpractice. Importantly, resilience is bolstered not as an inherent characteristic of democratic governance, but because it is an important

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[4] Retrieved from an article of Adam Withnall in The Independent (19 January 2017): https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/gambia-adama-barrow-sworn-in-inauguration-yaha-jammeh-president-a7535956.html

[5] Retrieved from the OAS website: http://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-001/19

[6] Information retrieved from Reuters website dated 28 January 2018: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-politics-eu/malaysia-criticizes-opposition-party-meeting-with-eu-ambassadors-idUSKBN1FH0PC

shared international value action to prevent electoral violence and demand actions that protect the role of non-incumbents.

- **Opposition parties could go into exile:** When oppression under authoritarianism is too much a risk for opposition parties to continue activities and presence in the country, many have no choice other than go in exile. For example, in Ethiopia the Oromo Democratic Front (ODF) is an opposition party in exile. Some of its leaders started talks with the Ethiopian government in 2018.[7] While in exile, several opposition parties could join forces for the same reasons as mentioned above to increase international pressure, to mobilise and influence local activists, and to increase credibility and trust. Some opposition coalitions go further and establish governments in exile, like the Burmese, Belarusian and Syrian governments in exiles. No literature could be found how effective these governments or groups of opposition in exile are in pressing for more democratic spaces in their home countries. Some news items suggest that these opposition forces in exile are more influential by denying international recognition of authoritarian regimes, than in maintaining strong ties with activists within the country. For example, Burma in 2008 (lobby against UN seat)[8] and Belarus in 2011 (lobby against IMF support for Belarus government)[9]. Furthermore, it seems difficult to maintain strong coalitions during long periods, as divisions emerge between fractions. For example, in 2014 the Syrian National Council withdraw from the Syrian National Coalition in protest against the decision of the coalition to attend negotiations with the government in Geneva.[10]

Foreign forces that influence opposition approaches

Opposition parties face multiple challenges from the incumbent through increased repression, violence, manipulation, disinformation and information disparity, and attempts to increase divisions in society. Internally, opposition parties face many threats, like fractions in the opposition coalitions and lack of resources. The literature mentioned two types of international challenges that influence the approaches against backsliding.

- **Support from other authoritarian regimes for the incumbent governments:** Authoritarian regimes like Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela under Chavez support semi-authoritarian regimes in other countries to maintain or increase political power (Burnell, 2017). Individual case studies have focussed on a range of modalities whereby the governments of leading autocracies might be thought to influence the internal politics of other countries, with consequences that could bear on the type, stability and direction of travel of the political regime there (Burnell, 2017). The kind of support given is wide, e.g. financial or technical assistance to the government or in media campaigns via controlled media or social media. Even if opposition parties are on the winning hand, foreign authoritarian forces could limit further democratisation with

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[7] Information retrieved from All Africa website: https://allafrica.com/stories/201805130064.html

[8] Information retrieved from: https://unpo.org/content/view/8651/236/?id=8651

[9] Information retrieved from Financial Post: https://business.financialpost.com/news/economy/crisis-hit-belarus-seeks-emergency-imf-loan

[10] Information retrieved from Al Jazeera: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/01/snc-pulls-out-geneva-ii-talks-syria-201414125529877424.html

campaigns against the new government. Leading autocracies can and do try to influence domestic politics elsewhere, such as by offering lucrative cross-border trade arrangements, withholding vital energy supplies, offering bilateral loans on favourable terms, arms sales and diplomatic support generally (Burnell, 2017).

- **Non-coherent international development reactions**: Western governments who promote democratisation processes are not coherent in their actions as governments in Washington, London and Brussels chase pyrrhic short-term economic and security victories (Klaas, 2016). In particular, there is a sense that the West has recalibrated its balance of priorities toward security and away from democratisation, which could make leaders at regional and national level less likely to respond to international pressure for governance reform (National Intelligence Council, 2018). "Western democracy assistance has negligible effects on encouraging good governance in countries that also receive large amounts of counterterrorism assistance" (National Intelligence Council, 2018, 2018, p.9). Several African countries - including Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe - in recent years have passed anti-terror laws that define terrorism broadly and emphasise anti state activities, and they have used these laws to stifle political opposition. Security services in Kenya, Niger, and Nigeria - among others - have engaged in mass arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and torture as part of those governments' heavy handed counterterrorism campaigns (National Intelligence Council, 2018).

Development donors' might react with cuts in development aid after disputed electoral wins of authoritarian parties. However, many authoritarian "governments quickly learned how to make the minimum necessary reforms to retain their levels of aid: allowing opposition parties to compete, but not win; permitting an independent press to operate, but not freely; allowing civic groups to function, but not effectively; and consenting that elections be held, but not replace the ruling party" (Brown, 2005, p.184).

3. International party assistance and approaches for political party development in non-democratic settings

Effectiveness of political party development programmes

Types of party assistance.

The official term for donor programmes targeting political party development is 'international party assistance' (IPA). The most common used definition of IPA is "[t]he organisational effort to support democratic political parties, to promote a peaceful interaction between parties, and to strengthen the democratic political and legal environment for political parties" (Burnell & Gerrits, 2010, p.1068). IPA is part of the international democracy assistance. (Svåsand, 2014) mentioned four different types of IPA:

- **Party-to-Party cooperation**: In particular Sweden (PAO), Denmark and the UK (WFD) have been engaged in these projects.[11] Other donor institutions, such as the IRI and NDI

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[11] For 2014, in Sweden 70% of the funding for IPA is allocated to party-to-party projects, while the corresponding share in UK and Denmark is 50 and 40%, respectively (Svåsand, 2014).

in the US and the German foundations (*Stiftungen*) are prohibited by their financial sponsors to support a particular party.[12] Evaluation reports for the Swedish IPA programme (Menocal & O'Neil, 2012), showed, there are two main challenges. First, it is not evident that the partners that donor parties choose are linked to the overall aim of party system consolidation or to democratic consolidation. Second, an increasing concern among donors is the lack of linkages between party support and other types of democracy assistance (also mentioned by: Svåsand, 2014). A recent evaluation of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy concluded that party-to-party programmes need to be more strategic; looking beyond election campaigns to include party finances, membership and policy development. This entails efforts to co-ordinate with other democracy promotion actors to exploit complementarities between programmes (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2016).

- **Multi-party cooperation**: Due to the challenges and critique on party-to-party cooperation, IPAs focus now more on multi-party cooperation (also donors, like Sweden, Denmark and the UK).[13] The bilateral programmes from Germany, US and the Netherlands, and the multilateral programmes from International IDEA (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) and the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) all focus on multiple political parties. The inclusion of several parties means that IPA does not express a preference for one or the other party; not explicitly at least (Svåsand, 2014). Evaluation reports from the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) (Schakel & Svåsand, 2014; Piron, 2015) showed limitations, in particular in dominant party systems, as in Uganda, Mozambique and Georgia. The main opposition party to the incumbent party can be so weak that other actors like civil society groups and minor parties are included in some programmes (Svåsand, 2014).

- **Party system support:** More recently, and often as a response to the above mentioned challenges, multi-party programmes are not solely focussed on the institutionalisation of political parties, but aim to strengthen the party system. Donors organise platforms for multiple parties to discuss issues beyond the parties themselves. This includes efforts to reform and improve the electoral management system in order to have a level playing field for parties and candidates, reform of the legal regulations of parties, and the structuring of public subsidy schemes for political parties (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2016). These fields have been of particular concern to multilateral institutions like International IDEA and UNDP (Svåsand, 2014).

- **Support particular groups of actors, such as youth and women**: There is also an increasing focus in IPAs on supporting marginalised groups in the political processes. In particular, there has been an emphasis in programmes seeking to increase the recruitment of young people and women in politics (Svåsand, 2014). The purpose is often to recruit new political activists and support them, in particular capacity building and organising a dialogue to increase participation in the party system (Muriaas et al., 2013). By doing this, the initiatives avoid the problem that party elites could act as a brake on
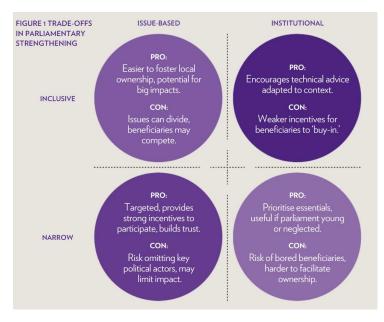
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[12] The German foundations started as sister-party cooperation, but this has changed around the start of the 2000s.

[13] In its Strategic Framework for 2015-2020, WFD indicated an intention to make greater use of integrated programmes that strengthen the performance of parties in parliaments and cross-party work that encourages negotiation and compromise on major public policy issues (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2017a).

democratisation projects. At the same time, it signalled a new perspective with a focus on generational change (Svåsand, 2014).

What do we know so far from research and evaluations?

Overall, the impacts of political party support have been broadly under-analysed (Wild et al., 2011; Menocal & O'Neil, 2012; Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2018). The studies and evaluations that do exist are mostly non-experimental short-term studies that emphasise processes, outcomes and activities, rather than the specific impacts of party programmes (Burnell & Gerrits, 2010; Menocal and O'Neil, 2012). Demonstrable improvements that are often mentioned are in the use of information technology and communications, the enhanced scrutinising role of parliamentary committees, and increases in the number of questions submitted on bills or oversight procedures such as formal questions (or interpellations) and commissions of inquiry (Hinds, 2013).

Figure 1. Trade-offs in Parliamentary Strengthening

Source: Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2016b.

Comparative analysis at the programme level exists, but remains relatively rare (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2018). One view that is often mentioned in the literature as the most comprehensive study of IPA is Carothers (2006). It concludes that transformative impact is rare (Carothers, 2006, p.160) and that the reasons for this all relate to "underlying economic, political, social, and cultural conditions that are largely beyond its ambit" (Carothers, 2006, p.214-215). One of the main challenges Carothers (2006) highlighted is the willingness of the party leadership to transform into a membership-based organisation, with links to grassroots organisations and an internal democracy as they fear losing control of the parties.

Burnell and Gerrits (2010) are also cited frequently in the literature as a compilation of research on IPA. They conclude that the empirical material for these studies is very diverse. Burnell and Gerrits (2010) conclusions are largely confirming Carothers conclusions from 2006: no study is able to argue that IPA has had a transformative effect. The common explanation for why IPA has not succeeded more is that the established elites are not interested in party reform (Burnell and

Gerrits, 2010). Also more recent research literature and the evaluations of IPA programmes (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2016; Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2018) indicate that critical factors that influence the success rate of IPA, relate to the 'ownership' issue, such as when IPA programmes establish trust among the participants and where the recipient parties are committed to change, and the institutional and political environment in which IPA is situated (see also Figure 1). Furthermore, there is a discussion among scholars about the expectations of what can be achieved with limited resources for IPA programmes (Svåsand, 2014; Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2018b).

Implications of these findings for party assistance in non-democratic settings.

IPA donors have learned from these challenges. Obstacles were reason why IPA donors have expanded their targets towards civil society organisation, human right groups and young political activists in order to encourage the development of an alternative political leadership in the future. This change indicates that IPA programmes are moving closer to other forms of development assistance. These trends and lessons learned from IPAs during the last decades are also important to understand the specific challenges and limitations for political party development in (semi-)democratic or semi-authoritarian systems facing backsliding. One of the main conclusions from research and evaluation on this topic is the importance of regime effect on IPA projects. In states that are semi-authoritarian, efforts to strengthen parties have largely failed and programmes have been re-oriented towards civil society or to environmental factors, such as the media structure.

Dodsworth and Cheeseman (2016, p.3) noted that this not simply because "dramatic success is rare, but also because those who provide support sometimes refrain from claiming credit for the successes of their partners due to fears that this could […] trigger backlash from authoritarian regimes". A stronger ruling party might also turn party assistance programmes to authoritarian ends, because increasing internal party democracy might lead to splits that destabilise opposition parties and the party system as a whole (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2016). Therefore, in many cases IPA projects are not focused on extending democratisation, but on democratic consolidation.

Donor approaches for party assistance against democratic backsliding

Depending on specific circumstances and types of authoritarian regimes and backsliding, international donors are using different approaches to increase democratic spaces in non-democratic settings. Most of the approaches are strategically used at the same time to increase pressure against further backsliding.

Multi-party dialogues.

In non-democratic settings, in particular in one-party systems or in non-competitive authoritarian systems, where political parties are mainly a tool for elite groups to stay in favour with the dictator (e.g. most countries in the Middle East and Russia), multi-party dialogues are seen as not an option (Albrecht, 2013; Bush, 2015; Stukal, 2017). However, in Jordan a consortium of the European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES), European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), the French Agency for Media Cooperation (CFI) and NIMD recently started working on a comprehensive democracy assistance programme

including building multi-party dialogue platforms. The aim is to create and facilitate safe spaces for political parties to meet and discuss issues and ensure the inclusion of all relevant actors, including MPs, women and youth candidates.[14] Bush (2015, Chapter 7) showed that a similar US-led programme in Jordan was 'regime-compatible' and created a situation in which rulers adopt the language but not the substance of democracy.

The use of dialogue in competitive authoritarian systems seems far more common. Lessons have been learned and forms of more locally based (provincial level) approaches (Schakel & Svåsand, 2014) are encouraged to build dialogue platforms to break the political deadlock or create pathways for reforms in countries like Ethiopia, Burundi and Myanmar (See also box 1 on NIMD's approach in Ethiopia).[15]

Box 1. NIMD approach for multi-party democracy development in Ethiopia

Since 2017, the Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy (NIMD) together with the AWEPA are working in Ethiopia to start multi-party dialogues. The Strategic Partnership Annual Plan 2017 stated:

"Given the political context in Ethiopia, the programme start with capacity building for political actors as a first entry point. Through this capacity building, the building of trust among the political actors can be facilitated; this trust could then lay the basis for interparty dialogue in the future. Given the country's federal arrangement, a two-tiered intervention approach is proposed at both the Federal and Regional levels. At a regional level the strategy is to start with Oromia, being by far the largest region, and then move to engage, as necessary, other regions depending on demand. The presence of political leaders willing to explore more democratic avenues of engagement, can only help to facilitate this process. The first phase programming is foreseen for two years (2017-2018), after which an assessment will be made on the actual political space to continue with the programme." (AWEPA and NIMD 2016, p.6)

Since then, next steps have been made. In the summer of 2018, 60 of the 70 registered political parties in Ethiopia received a training on dialogue and conflict resolution. The delegates were senior party representatives of both national and regional parties and included members of the governing EPRDF alliance as well opposition political parties.[16] In January 2019 a two-day meeting titled "Dialogue and Consultation among Political Parties in Ethiopia" was organised by NIMD in conjunction with the Office of the Federal Attorney General and NEBE. Delegates from across the political spectrum set together a democratic reform agenda. The NIMD press release stated:

"As institutions acclimatise to real interparty competition based on policies and ideologies, meetings such as this will continue to serve an important role in sustaining the respect and cooperation that multiparty democracies rely on."[17]

Capacity building and direct support within the country or outside the country

Opposition leaders and activists receive specific training on how to build their platforms, to organise and maintain strong coalitions, develop a strategy for transition, and how to use social media to counter disinformation. This approach has the advantage that it does not include support for opposition forces with links to the regime, as in approaches that seek political

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[14] Information retrieved from the NIMD website: https://nimd.org/programmes/jordan/

[15] See for more information on the website of NIMD: https://nimd.org/

[16] Information retrieved from: https://nimd.org/60-ethiopian-political-parties-come-together-for-dialogue-in-adama/

[17] Retrieved from: https://nimd.org/32-item-democratic-reform-agenda-agreed-between-ethiopian-parties/

dialogues (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2018a). Depending on how repressive the regime is and how hostile against foreign interventions, capacity building can take place within the country or outside the country. Aid providers seek relief from pressure on their work and from repression on opposition activists by relocating and carrying out their work from headquarters or neighbouring countries (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014).

An early example of moving democracy assistance offshore took place in Serbia in the late 1990s (Spoerri, 2015). Anti-Milosevic activists were forced to leave the country. As a result, political party training programmes for Serbian opposition actors were carried out in Budapest, while local activist groups used the German and Dutch embassies to collect foreign funding under the pretext of applying for visas (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014). Norwegian and Hungarian diplomatic representatives distributed salaries, grant funds and equipment that they transported over the border from Budapest to Belgrade to USAID grantees (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014). This specific example of offshore campaign is rare and was only possible because of the high-level European and US desire to remove Milosevic from power, combined with large resources and involvement of high-level diplomacy (Spoerri, 2015). Carothers and Brechenmacher (2014) also mention less extensive and assertive methods. For example, after being asked by the government of Bahrain to cease operating in the country in 2006, NDI began carrying out trainings for Bahraini activists in other countries. Similarly, IRI responded to push back from Malaysian authorities by relocating training activities to Thailand.

Diplomacy

Diplomacy can make a difference in opening up democratic spaces or blocking further backsliding with measures against laws that reduce the democratic spaces. Linkages are important; if a country has some important linkages with donor countries (e.g. trade, aid, geopolitically, historically) diplomacy with an authoritarian regime is more likely to succeed (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Levitsky and Way (2010) discuss linkage and leverage as two different concepts. Leverage is the ability of pressure or influence. Linkages are more about cooperation and trade. They showed that democracy promotion does no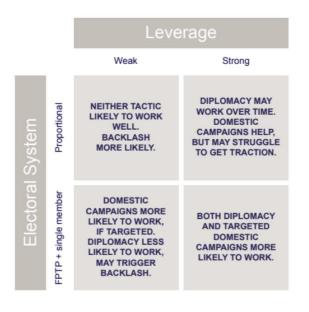t work well in Africa, because it is high leverage and low linkage. High linkage appears as an external shaper of 'democratising pressure' ("diffuse and indirect but nevertheless considerable") even where leverage is low (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p.53); increasing the chances that it will trigger broad domestic opposition to the regime. Therefore, in low-linkage countries, diplomacy is considered weaker.

Figure 1
Likely success of different strategies

Another study showed that diplomacy is more effective where the strength of leverage is not undermined by a problematic colonial past (see Figure 2; source Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2017). It also showed that diplomacy is more likely to succeed in competitive authoritarian systems than in single party systems (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2017). Dodsworth and

Cheeseman (2017, p.12) argued that the contrast between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan shows that "diplomacy can work, but that successful diplomacy takes time and sustained effort" and that "pressure from international actors tends to be more effective when it is channelled through local intermediaries". In Kyrgyzstan, which is more a competitive authoritarian regime, the domestic campaign initially struggled to convince deputies to reject the *Foreign Agents Law*, although it was sufficient to buy time to build diplomatic pressure, which gradually shifting the attitude of the regime, creating a political climate in which deputies were more willing to openly oppose the law (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2017). The joint opinion of the Venice Commission/ODIHR was influential in Kyrgyzstan in part because it had been actively sought by some members of the Supreme Council, rather than external actors. In Kazakhstan, which is more authoritarian, diplomacy had less chance to oppose the *Operator Law*. However, there is a bias here, as (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2017, p.12) mentioned: "Western governments and INGOs are unlikely to invest in sustained diplomatic campaigns unless they judge the targets of those campaigns to be vulnerable to such pressure".

Aligning with international and regional institutions.

Coordinated diplomacy is necessary, not only for the donor community, but also through alignments with international, multilateral and regional institutions. Providers of support can direct their assistance to third-country organisations that may have more operational flexibility and greater credibility in recipient societies. Doing so could contribute to increasing the number of non-Western actors and organisations involved in international democracy assistance. Carothers and Brechenmacher (2014) gave the example of the Indonesian Institute for Peace and Democracy, which carries out democracy support work in Asia, and has received funding from several Western donors to address sensitive political issues in the region. Such an approach is appealing but faces significant limitations (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014, p.45): "They value their independence and for understandable reasons do not want to become or be seen as pass-throughs for Western donors."

Focus on youth and women empowerment. With restrictions to assist political party development in non-democratic settings, support has been refocused on less political sensitive approaches. Support goes to sub-groups like youth and women and empower them to be part of political parties. The focus on youth embeds the aim to increase long-term change with capacity building and technical support for young aspirational political leaders and activists (Svåsand, 2014). Implementing programmes for women's political empowerment in semi-authoritarian contexts involves some important strategic considerations (Carothers, 2016, p.14). The focus on women in political parties and a broader scope to women's political empowerment imply that their participation could soften the semi-authoritarian regime. Carothers (2016) showed one example in Burkina Faso where long-term women focussed programmes indeed had some positive impact on the democratic transition in 2014. Svåsand (2014) showed that there is an increase of women participation in political parties, also in semi-authoritarian regimes. While some of the increase may have been the result of changes in parties nominating more women candidates, in several countries there has been a change in legislation which requires parties to introduce quotas for women candidates in order to qualify to be on the electoral ballot, or special seats have been introduced where only women candidates may contest, such as in Uganda (Svåsand, 2014). Donor institutions have also organised training for women candidates, whether belonging parties or not (Muriaas et al., 2013). Economic and educational opportunities, two variables known to impact political recruitment, may also have improved for women and thereby increased the number of female candidates.

However, Carothers (2016, p.17) stated that in some semi-authoritarian or authoritarian contexts, regimes allow elements of openness and meaningfulness in local-level elections and representative structures that they disallow at the national level. "In such contexts, working on women's political empowerment at the local level can be a valuable undertaking, potentially the most worthwhile element of the standard menu of programming. But in other such contexts, the apparent openness of political activity at the local level is simply a façade, granted by strongmen leaders to distract domestic and international actors angling to find a democratic opening" Carothers (2016, p.17). Bush (2015) also mentioned this for her study on Jordan women-participation programmes which she labelled as the most 'regime-compatible'. Bush (2015), p.170) stated: "Several royal non-governmental organizations (RONGOs) also received democracy assistance. Although RONGOs were clearly not sincere democratizers in the sense of promoting electoral democracy, they worked on internationally supported objectives such as advancing women's participation on municipal councils. All of these groups were funded by a panoply of foreign government agencies."

Focus on protective knowledge and technology.

A relatively new response are aid programmes designed to increase opposition capacity to protect themselves against governmental repression, harassment, and surveillance. Increasingly, these include the development of technical tools, such as panic buttons on mobile phones and platforms for offshore data storage, aimed at protecting NGOs, human rights defenders or opposition political parties in the case of raids, arrests, or attempted assaults (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014). Training in secure communication methods to avoid governmental surveillance and circumvention technologies that allow citizens to bypass online censorship are also widely used. Carothers and Brechenmacher (2014) mentioned some 'protective technology initiatives', which include support for Tor, a US-based initiative that provides software enabling groups and individuals to access blocked websites, communicate safely and share information without compromising their privacy or revealing their location. The European Commission's "No Disconnect Strategy" includes support for the development of technological tools and online security training for activists in developing countries. The strategy foresees the development of a "European Capability for Situational Awareness" platform, which aims to provide the European Union as well as local political, civil society groups and journalists with up-to-date information on human rights abuses, surveillance measures, and restrictions on internet freedom.

Pullback, going under the radar or refocus on independent media and civil society organisations.

'Tactical pullback' means that aid providers scale back more politically sensitive activities such as political party training to protect other types of assistance that may get closed down if a host government decides to swing a retaliatory axe against all democracy work. (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014) mentioned that anecdotal evidence indicates that tactical pullback may be more useful before a situation becomes inflamed. "[M]odulating the political assertiveness of assistance programs before a government reaches the point of open hostility may help head off future restrictions." In such settings with high levels of repression or where foreign assistance has been used successfully in propaganda against the opposition parties, the literature suggests that a strategy of "do not harm" is the only option to avoid backlash or violence against political activists (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2018a). Some international donors might decide to continue some kind of support in less transparent ways and with small-scale support efforts, however,

these efforts are off the radar and cannot be evaluated. It is also common to pullback from political party development and refocus support efforts towards civil society, human rights groups and independent media. However, there a danger that civic organisations and media representing disadvantaged groups can be framed and silenced as tools of foreign forces.

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