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Democracy and Development Reconsidered

The global expansion of democracy in the past 25 years is one of humanity's greatest achievements. At the end of the 20th century, democracy emerged as a universal value.[1] Today it faces no significant *ideological* challenge. Undemocratic regimes abound, but they cannot offer a competing global vision. Rather, they persist pragmatically, through appeals to nationalism and religious identity, or some combination of rewards and repression. Most autocratic regimes feel the need to present at least a veneer of electoral democracy.

Although the Third Wave[2] of democratic transitions came to a halt by the mid-1990s, we are witnessing a democratic resurgence, not only in the Middle East, but in the growing challenges to semi-authoritarian rule and one-party dominance in Russia and East Asia. Burma has begun an opening after 50 years of dictatorship. More democratic transitions are likely in the rest of this decade. We do not yet know what kinds of regimes these transitions will produce, and whether this constitutes a Fourth Wave is an academic question. What is clear is that a combination of demographics, information technology, and global ideology now combine as a powerful force against authoritarian rule in all of its forms. Whereas once scholars debated where democracy could take root, today's question is: "Where can dictatorship survive?"

And yet in most countries where USAID works, democracy is struggling to deliver a better life, and by doing so, to take root.

Elusive Consolidation

Democratization theory proposes a "consolidation" phase following a transition from authoritarian rule in which democratic behaviors, attitudes, and institutions mutually support and sustain each

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1 Amartya Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy*, 10.3 (July 1999).
2 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). The Third Wave refers to a historic period of democratic transitions spanning 1974 into the 1990s, including the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Southern Sudanese hold pro-independence banners as they travel the streets of the southern capital Juba on October 9, 2010, to mark three months until a referendum for their independence.
AFP Photo: Peter Martell

other. Following the transitions of the early 1990s, USAID turned its attention to consolidation as a long-term vision. Consolidation became central to five-year strategies featuring local governance, the rule of law, elections, and civil society. As one strategy followed another, practitioners came to view consolidation as an aspiration—not an urgent problem. Nearly 20 years later, the concept of "democratic consolidation" has gone stale and lost its utility. It is time to let it go and rethink how we assist democracy, human rights, and governance if the triumph of democratic rule is to become more than ideological. The fundamental challenge today is to make governments work.

Of the 20 largest recipients of USAID assistance in 2010, only 4 rank above the World Bank Institute's 50th percentile in

government effectiveness scores. While a few cases have shown modest improvements, only one (Colombia) has moved from below the 50th percentile in the past 10 years.[3] Consistently over the past decade, 16 rank below the 50th percentile, and half of those at the 25th percentile or lower. These scores are consistent with other governance categories, such as transparency and the rule of law. Of course, USAID invests its resources where they are most needed—in poorly governing states. But even with considerable

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3 USAID, Policy, "Where Does USAID's Money Go?" September 30, 2011, http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/money/; World Bank, "World Governance Indicators," http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp, accessed December 22, 2011. World Bank data for Sudan are prior to the independence of Southern Sudan in 2011. Indonesia, Ethiopia, and West Bank/Gaza have shown modest but steady improvement.

USAID assistance, many have made relatively little progress in this critical indicator.

To make matters worse, weak governments confront young, impatient populations. The median age for the 16 low-ranking USAID recipients falls below 19 years, compared with the global average of 27.[4] All of this means higher pressure on limited resources—land, water, and jobs—and chronic incapacity to respond. Most of the 16 are trapped in a state of internal or external conflict, or are recently recovering from one. In countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, these conflicts are about fundamental questions of legitimacy and identity. But in others, such as Haiti, the ongoing pressures on resources create a permanent state of misery and exclusion.

Therefore, an open-ended commitment to "democratic consolidation" needs to give way to a more clearly defined goal of making governments work better, and to do so in a decade. Effective governance, then, should translate into concrete improvements, such as:

- The ability to manage conflict and natural resources
- Creation of jobs
- Improved education and skill levels for youth and women
- Protection of public health

This requires action to integrate governance around the environment, economic growth, and the health sectors, among other disciplines.

Placing Governance at the Center

A decade ago, we feared that a decline in citizen participation would lead to democratic breakdowns and the return to authoritarianism. Today, open authoritarianism—in the form of military juntas, for example—is increasingly difficult to impose, for the reasons stated at the outset. The greater threat is to *development*. Our investments in agriculture, food production, education, health, gender equality, and conflict resolution all depend on participation and ownership—by governments, but more importantly, by citizens. When citizens lose confidence in the ability of their governments to provide services, and they cannot improve those services through political action, they opt out in various ways:

- They buy services privately (such as tutoring or private security in its various forms).
- They pay for services via bribery.
- They refuse to use services (such as early withdrawal from school).
- They look to their villages and kin and solve their problems locally. (Although local initiative is positive, state weakness can feed local disputes as well as broader conflicts. Such is the case of Afghanistan.)
- They emigrate in frustration, taking their critically needed skills with them to better places. (This is occurring throughout the former Soviet Union and Central America.)

These forms of opting out undermine the *quality* of governance, which remains the foundation of USAID's development mission and the quality of democracy.

Re-engaging a Cross-disciplinary Approach

In the 1960s and 1970s, USAID invested heavily in public administration and human resource training because the early practitioners assumed that development rested on an effective civil service. This assumption was correct, though openended training programs were not the answer. Unfortunately, attention to the core public sector was lost in the various development approaches

that followed, which focused on communities, the private sector, civil society, and local government. The challenge is to balance both the demand for good governance with its supply, engaging both public and private spheres. This means taking what we have learned about governance and integrating that knowledge with the substantive specialties of agriculture, health, natural resource management, and education to achieve specific objectives. Today, experts in these fields do coordinate, but they tend to operate in parallel—even in field missions.

Governance (a subset of democracy assistance) may remain its own discipline, but governance specialists should be embedded with teams working in other sectors to acquire as much substantive knowledge as possible, and reciprocally, non-governance specialists should serve with teams working on governance initiatives. This approach requires new thinking and more holistic training. Perhaps a new version of the former Development Studies Program—a rigorous course which years ago brought different disciplines together around development problems—can serve this purpose.

The principle of integration is illustrated in youth programs. About a decade ago, USAID launched anti-gang programs in Central America under its "rule-of-law" program. It gradually became evident that the lack of educational and economic opportunities were the decisive factors driving the growth and resilience of gangs, more so than the weakness of justice institutions. While effective prosecution and policing could suppress a fraction of offenders, the only way to stop the constant regeneration of gangs was to choke off their supply of uneducated, unemployed, and abused youth. That led to creative solutions bringing educators, businesses, and churches together around community initiatives to create "youth centers" and job programs, jointly supported by education and rule-of-law programs. Combating youth violence could no longer easily fit into any single program category: It may have been led by the democracy and governance office, but it became everyone's business.

Notwithstanding numerous conflicts and economic crises since the end of the Cold War, the expansion of democracy has brought about an unprecedented level of peace and an opportunity for greater prosperity. The irony is that this hard-won achievement is threatened not by any ideological or national force, but by the steady erosion of governance—with direct negative consequences on the quality of life. Importantly, building effective governance provides powerful support to the growing consensus among donors to make great use of local institutions in development. Those efforts extend beyond the passing of money through host governments to the explicit transfer of responsibilities to local public institutions and the sharing of risks over a sustained period.

Ultimately, the fate of democracy will depend not only on credible elections and an effective legislature, but also on the effective management of issues that affect citizens' daily lives, such as climate change, providing water and education, and creating jobs. More than a universal ideology, democracy can become a universal way of life for billions of people. We can achieve this in our time.

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