

Democracy Promotion in the new international context

Introduction at conference: Global Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights

Organized by Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Helsinki, Finland, January 19th 2007

by

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Ladies and Gentleman,

I am grateful and privileged to have the opportunity to address this meeting and to engage in discussions on a topic – democracy promotion - that I consider to deserve more attention within foreign policy circles within the European Union and beyond.

Why? I believe that Europe is at a historic threshold in which it either takes up the challenge of assisting the process of democracy building in third partner countries, in recognition that it ultimately serves Europe's own interest to live in a world of democracies, or to fall back in complacency with the achievements of consolidating the former East and Central European countries - which transited peacefully to democracy - as new members within the expanded EU club.

That in itself has been a milestone of historic proportions as often acknowledged. However, if the EU fails to take the lessons of supporting transitions to and consolidation of democracy forward as a core objective in its foreign policy to other parts of the world, it will send a message of hope to the autocracies which have gained new ground in the current international context and a message of abandonment (betrayal) to those struggling to advance democracy.

There are so many people around the world with high expectations for partnership with Europe in the increasingly hostile international environment for democratic development, that – despite the many internal EU challenges to find ways forward out of the stalled proposals for a European Constitution – Europe should assume its natural vocation of recognizing that democracy is the basis for prosperity and peace, and express this vocation more centrally and pronounced in the EU's foreign policy than happens today. Only last July, the Council and Commission produced a first policy paper on *The EU Approach to Democracy Promotion in External Relations: Food for Thought*. A welcome and excellent paper by the way. Based on data from the Eurobarometer, a significant and consistent majority of Europeans is eager for a more proactive European foreign policy in this field. If taken up

seriously, it may help to inspire more European citizens to invest greater energy and confidence in the EU enterprise.

The organizers have kindly given me ten minutes to introduce the subject on which I could easily spend a few hours. To protect myself against this inclination, I have divided this introduction in three parts and, recognizing the high level of expertise on the subject present at this meeting, I'll present my views in a number of brief points.

The three parts of this introduction deal with 1) the new and changed international context, 2) the question of how to deal with the tension between state sovereignty and democracy promotion, and 3) the question of what have we learned in democracy promotion that should guide future approaches. It shall be sketchy but can be elaborated in the discussions.

1. **The new and changed international context.**

What do I mean when I talk about an increasingly hostile international environment for democracy promotion? A few trends, captured in seven points will explain the changing context:

- a. The 90s, following the end of the cold war, have been an unprecedented historical period for the spread of democracy around the globe. It benefited from the absence of the geo-political cold war context and an absence of a new conflict based geo-strategic framework;
- b. The democratic momentum generated during the 90s resulted in nearly seven out of ten countries formally following a democratic path. A recent worldwide Gallup opinion poll found 8 out 10 people wanting democracy as system of governance. But, the transformation to democracy proved to be a much more difficult road to travel – a valley of tears as Lord Dahrendorf called it – and the assistance provided has underestimated the challenges;
- c. The war-on-terrorism has introduced a new international geo-strategic framework with some distressing effects on the value laden concept of democracy promotion. The bungling of the war in Iraq (see Bob Woodward's book *State of Denial*) in the name of democracy promotion, the human rights abuses and the 'crusade' and 'regime change' terminology introduced in the process have not been particularly helpful to use an euphemism. It is also drawing new frontiers on the African continent, for example, in which the West is aligning itself again with governments resisting democratic reform, such as Ethiopia..

- d. The retreat from multilateralism to unilateralism in the conduct of international affairs by major powers in this world has impacted negatively on the development of the international rule of law and the conditions for democratic development;
- e. The hardening of the international competition of scarce natural resources, notably oil and gas, is pushing other interests in front of the interest of democracy promotion. The high prices appear happen to benefit strong handedly governed or autocratic countries. Take for example Russia, Saudi Arabia, the Central Asian republics, Venezuela, Equatorial Guinea, and Angola.
- f. The revival of absolute (religious) truth as the cost of rational decision-making in the conduct of international affairs; and finally,
- g. The emergence of an alternative non-democratic successful model, such as for example China. This model is actively advocated among those governments resisting the opening of democratic space in their societies. Hence there is an alternative model on offer that offers a way-out for those autocrats and dictators resisting the opening of democratic space. But let us not fool ourselves about the word 'alternative', it spells trouble. Of the forty-nine poor countries embroiled in civil conflict in the 1990's, forty-one were dictatorship. More alternative models simply mean more conflicts. More conflict means more peacekeeping and less change of meeting the Millennium Development targets. If we primarily focus on development and conflict resolution without actively promoting democracy, we continue putting the horse behind the cart.

In short, the euphoria about the advancement of democracy is over. However, it remains as necessary as ever and turning away from the challenges democracy promoting encounters would be unwise counsel. Hence the importance of the initiative of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs to bring us together to discuss this important theme and to focus on lessons learned and on how to improve the performance of democracy promotion?

2. the tension between external assistance and state sovereignty

- a. It is obvious, that in this new international context, countries resisting democratic change cry foul at any real or perceived outside intervention. The shouting match of Hugo Chavez of Venezuela against President Bush Jr. is an example, and Robert Mugabe's preoccupation with Prime Minister Tony Blair is another one. Yet, the concept of state sovereignty in the globalized world has witnessed an important evolution over the last decade, making it less and less absolute in the face of the limited economic policy options of governments and the emerging right to humanitarian intervention in the case of crimes against humanity.
- b. The distinction between the use of '**leverage**' (conditionalities, trade regimes, sanctions, military interventions) or hard power or negative measures in the interaction with other states on the one hand, or the use of '**linkages**' (special partnerships, trade privileges, finance, knowledge sharing, model of practicing professed values) or soft power or positive measures on the other hand. makes a lot of difference. States that interact with other states normally apply a combination of leverage and linkages to advance their foreign policy objectives. This is specifically important in dealing with the hard cases, counties that resist democratic change. Using the concept of linkages is the preferred approach for interacting with new and struggling democracies.
- c. Interactions between states are shaped on the sovereignty principle, hence interventions in the political process of other states are likely to result in tensions. Partnership agreements, an unique instrument in international cooperation, between for example the EU and third partner countries have opened the possibility for political dialogue on democracy, human rights, the rule of law, corruption, immigration and other highly political issues. Non-state actors, such as democracy promotion foundations and other civil society organizations engage their peers in partner countries and have in principle no inhibitions to engage in political dialogue.

For a more effective democracy promotion strategy, a joint-up approach is required to merge the strength of state to state intervention with those of non-state actor interventions (or second track diplomacy). Such a joint-up strategy does not exist within the EU, neither do we have a suitable instrument to do so at present. EU institutions relate to non-state actors through sub-contracting arrangements rather than through agreed strategies. This is a serious

limitation in the effectiveness of the current EU policies for democracy promotion. There would be much gained if EU foreign policy makers would recognize the virtue of cooperating strategically with European non-state institutions that can work at an arm-length of the governmental institutions. Positive experiences gained in this cooperation at the national level within EU Member States need to be introduced at the European level.

- d. Because of the real or perceived sovereignty tensions, international development assistance has taken an a-political format. Even when acknowledged during the 90s that ‘politics matters’ for ensuring human rights and in giving the poor a voice, the approaches were designed in technocratic ‘governance’ packages. This form of cooperation has resulted in reversed lines of accountability; governments accounting to the international community rather than to their citizens. This approach disempowers political society and limits the possibilities for an evolution of democracy. The way in which international development is delivered has a significant influence on the evolution of democracy on recipient countries. I would argue that an initiative is needed to encourage the meeting of minds between the development community and the democracy promotion community, for example through a substantive dialogue, with the purpose to enhance the effectiveness of the EU objective to contribute to peace and prosperity in this world.
- e. The political dialogue at the official levels is a great EU asset but has in-built limitations as well. To enhance the profile of EU support for democracy building, a much more sustained dialogue is required. Such a dialogue should include all the actors across the political spectrum and across political and civil society divides in new and struggling democracies. The facilitation of such dialogues can not be undertaken by EU governmental institutions. These dialogues are in principle non-threatening because they are dialogues among national actors, non-threatening because they are inclusive, and aimed at finding common ground on the weaknesses in the democratic governance process and institutions while identifying actions that can address these. Through such dialogues the art of peaceful conflict resolution (an essential feature of democracy) is practiced, building trust among the main actors in the political process within countries.

Former President Ben Mkapa of Tanzania recently told me that in his opinion the major stumbling block in Sub-Sahara Africa is the lack of trust amongst the political parties. Democracy promotion has been too exclusively focused on elections, practicing the art of competition.

Elections are essential in the democratic process but in fragile societies with incomplete nation and state building processes, the dominant focus on competition has been devastating. Building democracy involves much more than engaging in competition.

3. What should be done differently? Three golden rules.

- a. The golden rule is to respect that the **ownership** of the democratization process can only lie with the local stakeholders. Democracy building is a political process. The more political the objectives are, the more important is the adherence to local ownership. Democracy cannot be exported, full stop. Ghandi already stated: *'..the spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It must come from within.'* Internationally, we do an unsatisfactory job in applying this golden rule. There is much to be gained if we would focus our international assistance much more on this principle and, perhaps, introduce independent certification.
- b. The second golden rule is that it does not make sense to promote democracy without **engaging the political elite or political society** and political parties in your approach. It are the politicians that push the buttons in societies. If you want to improve road safety, you need to focus on the drivers as well. It is the interaction between civil and political society that forms the fabric of democracy. There is no stable pluriform governing system possible without institutionalized political parties for example. The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, the organization I represent, works explicitly to strengthen political society and to improve relations between political and civil society. NIMD works at a strictly inclusive and impartial basis and facilitates successful dialogues about national reform priorities between government and opposition parties. It helps to generate trust and political will to deal with necessary reforms. The perspective of this approach is well summarized by the words of a leading Ghanaian opposition leader, who said that through this approach *'politicians learn to disagree without becoming disagreeable'*, while it results, furthermore, in locally generated political reform agendas or – more ambitious – in Democratic Consolidation Strategy Papers (DCSPs) that could serve as basis for international partners to align or harmonize their democracy assistance.
- c. Ad hoc projects often serve a limited purpose and the impact on the advancement of democracy is difficult or impossible to assess. There is a misunderstanding that all democracy assistance must be inherently good. It is time to subject democracy assistance to external scrutiny

through evaluations and impact assessments. Hard questions need to be asked. This is not happening enough. Successful democracy assistance is provided on the basis of a strategy that is formulated by those pursuing democratic reforms in countries. It has to be **demand driven**, the third golden rule in democracy promotion.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to reiterate the following four messages:

- a. Democracy has been oversold (it moves more or less by itself from autocracy to democracy), missold (applying a too narrow democracy concept or using democracy promotion for other agendas) but, at the same time, undersold. There is no alternative for democracy.
- b. Democracy assistance providers need to revisit the concept of democracy beyond electoral competition. It should be aimed at institutionalizing democratic practice so that trust will develop among the key players in the political process. It implies, that political society, including political parties, needs to be part of democracy assistance.
- c. No one country can fix the problems of this world on its own. It may go against the current trend, but we need to be on the offensive in multilateral approaches and in building democratic global governance institutions. Hence, also the importance of investing in our transatlantic cooperation.
- d. Finally, if democracy is at the root of our own peace and prosperity in the European Union, we owe it to the integrity in which we engage in the political process within Europe, to make democracy promotion a core objective within the EU external policies as well, introducing a three dimensional or 3D foreign policy, development, defense (or security) and democracy!

Thank you very much for your attention!