Premature Democracy:
Waking Up to the Reality of Incomplete Democratic Transitions in Latin America

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Over the last thirty years, the world has seen a large and diverse number of nations transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes. These "waves of democratization" represent a dominant shift in the nature of international relations and how policymakers in the United States and elsewhere perceive development and democratization. At the end of the Cold War, this shift in focus became one of the most predominant features of American foreign policy. Nations in nearly every corner of the world began to liberalize and transition to democracy in numbers larger than at any other time in history. However, while some nations continue to undergo democratization, others have either failed to successfully consolidate democracy or experienced a slide back toward authoritarianism as they began to face economic and social difficulties during their respective transitions. Such failures raise an interesting question for democracy promotion as a basis for US foreign policy: is the promotion of democracy a feasible and beneficial policy to pursue in every case?

One of the major assumptions in discussions of US foreign policy over the past three decades regarding democracy promotion has been that democracies can and should be constructed in every nation—no matter the respective socioeconomic, cultural, historical, geographical, or psychological conditions present there. Given the increased importance placed on the promotion of democracy in developing nations as well as, contrarily, the increased occurrence of failing and struggling democracies (e.g., Haiti, Somalia, Russia, Honduras, Iraq, and Afghanistan), it is critical for

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American-led efforts of democracy promotion to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind such failures. This paper will explore this challenge to the policy of democracy promotion by focusing on incomplete democratic transitions and failed democratic consolidation in Latin America, but with reference to other countries and areas.

Democratic Transitions in Latin America and Globally

Latin America experienced a brief surge of democracy in the late-1950s and early 1960s. This was followed by a wave of authoritarianism beginning in 1962 that by the 1970s resulted in fourteen countries being under military-authoritarian rule; in three others, the armed forces were so close to the surface of power that the line between military and civilian authority was erased; and only three—Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela—remained democracies (albeit elite-directed). In the mid-1970s, seventeen of twenty Latin American countries were under authoritarian rule.[1]

The Latin American transition back to democracy began in 1978 with the Dominican Republic and Ecuador. That was soon followed by other countries. During the 1980s, the United States determined it could isolate the extreme left and extreme right in Central America by ensuring that centrists won elections, thus saving US foreign policy interests in that fractious, violent, and polarized part of the world. The policy worked so well and enjoyed such bipartisan consensus that the United States employed a similar approach in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other unlikely countries. By the 1990s, the mantra regarding Latin America was that "nineteen of the twenty countries were democratic" (all save Cuba). Democracy also became one of the legs of the Washington Consensus (the others being free trade and open or capitalistic markets) and the basis for US foreign policy. After all, democracy promotion not only enabled the United States to stand for a moral principle, but also served US national interests. As the most liberalized economy in the world, the United States was best positioned to take advantage of a globalized, liberal economy and a world of stable, middle-class, democratic regimes.

But this mantra of "nineteen of twenty democratic" was clearly misleading and did not tell the full story. First, some of these countries, especially in Central America, had been coerced into accepting electoral democracy by US pressure. Second, some countries had only undertaken democratic transitions to receieve sorely-needed US foreign aid and other inducements. Third, democracy had been initiated in some countries only by elites seeking to retain power with no intention of initiating real, grass-roots democratization. Fourth, some countries were woefully unprepared for democracy, not possessing the necessary level of economic development, literacy, political culture, degree of social modernization, institutionalization, or extent of

civil society. In this article, we have labeled these cases as "premature democracies." And fifth, while many countries held elections and therefore qualified formally as "democracies," other features of genuine democracy such as real pluralism, participation, greater egalitarianism, and equal opportunities were lacking.

Just as in the case of Latin America, the global results of democracy promotion are very mixed. There have been a great number of successes as well as a decent number of failures. Over the last two decades, we have seen nations like Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine backslide towards authoritarianism as democratization efforts in each nation either stalled or completely reversed. Each faced economic, social, or political problems that made the continued transition to democracy difficult. In addition, there have been cases such as Afghanistan and Iraq where the transition towards democracy was propelled by direct military intervention and continued occupation by military forces to provide domestic security and stability.

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In the case of Afghanistan, attempts to promote democracy have had extremely limited results, having been hampered by the continued violence and instability caused by the resilient Taliban forces challenging the American-backed regime, as well as questions surrounding the credibility of the recent presidential elections and charges of corruption against members of the Karzai administration. It is very likely that in the absence of NATO forces, Afghanistan would see any advances that it has made over the past several years disappear and would likely be thrust into an all-out civil war that would leave the nation even more unstable than it currently is. Such possibilities are evidenced by a 2008 cable from the British ambassador in Afghanistan that suggested that NATO forces there would fail and that the best solution for the Afghani situation would be the installation of an "acceptable dictator."[2] While such calls may be premature and are not acceptable to American policymakers, they do show the fragility of the Karzai regime and the low potential for future advances towards democratic consolidation.

Similar to the case of Afghanistan, Haiti is yet another case where the transition to democracy has been met by fierce resistance from many of the key governmental and societal actors. Until 1986, Haiti had either been ruled by a succession of authoritarian regimes or controlled by foreign power, and thus had very little experience with any semblance of democracy. In 1990, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected president of the nation, only to be deposed a short time later by a coup d'état in 1991. In 1994, a deal was struck that paved the way for the removal of the military regime and the

restoration of Aristide as president. However, during the 2000 election in which Aristide was re-elected to the presidency, many outside observers, including the United States, perceived the election as fraudulent and thus refused to recognize its outcome. The result was an American embargo of Haiti and continued struggles for the Haitian people. Finally, in 2004, Aristide was forced from office after widespread popular demonstrations due to governmental ineffectiveness regarding economic policy and corruption.

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Haiti today is one of the poorest nations in the world, let alone in the Western hemisphere, and has generally failed to move beyond its history of corruption and weak governing before, during, and after Aristide. This ineffectiveness was only aggravated by the recent devastating earthquake that not only killed upward of 200,000 people, but essentially destroyed most of the Haitian government and national infrastructure. In both the cases of Haiti and Afghanistan, one could argue that these states were woefully unprepared for the transition to democracy. Both nations have been unable to provide for their own domestic security or stability, have been unable to sustain economic development, and lack many of the fundamental characteristics—civil society, a free press, independent internal groups, and political parties—that are likely required for the consolidation of democracy. Both these countries fall into our "premature democracy" category.

While it is easy to focus only on the failed or failing experiences with democracy by Haiti, Russia, Venezuela, Somalia, Afghanistan, and others, there have also been many successes. The transition from authoritarian rule to democracy in Chile is one notable example of how consolidation has been successful. In recent elections, the ruling left-of-center party, known as the Concertación (Concert of Parties for Democracy), lost to a right-of-center party, known as the Alianza por Chile (Alliance for Chile), for the first time since the 1990 election that started Chile's transition to democracy. This peaceful transition of power shows that Chile's democracy has become fully consolidated. Another example of Chile's success at consolidating its democracy has to do with its reaction to and recovery from a recent severe earthquake. When compared to the response in Haiti, Chilean recovery efforts have been unsuccessful using predominantly its own resources, while Haiti has been forced to accept massive financial and military aid from other nations, as it lacks Chile's level of development and infrastructure. Other success stories include the former Soviet Republic of Georgia and its Rose Revolution, as well as the continued growth of democratic regimes in Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay, and Costa Rica. While each of

these cases have faced challenges to further consolidation, the fact that they have not weakened or given in to such challenges shows that they have been successful at promoting democracy. In contrast, transitions in Paraguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have been problematic. When these cases are coupled with authoritarian regimes in Haiti, Cuba, and now Venezuela, half of Latin America may fall into our "premature democracy" classification.

Democracy Promotion after the Cold War

At the end of the Cold War, the United States found itself without an international opponent that has allowed the United States to influence and force certain types of behavior on its allies and satellites. In relation to the promotion of democracy, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant that the United States would no longer have to coddle dictators and authoritarian regimes in critical regions such as Latin America and the Middle East in order to gain the assurance of their support in the broader ideological conflict with Soviet Union. Instead, the United States was now able to push for the overthrow and removal of such regimes and promote liberalization and democracy much more widely and freely than ever before.

In doing so, however, liberalizing and democratizing efforts were conducted without regard to many important features of the targeted nations. Democracy was widely promoted in a manner that implied that "one size fits all" and that characteristics such as a nation's history, culture, or geographical position were inconsequential when it came to the successful promotion, growth, and consolidation of democracy.

In addition, the predominant belief behind such a policy of democratization was that one need only create the necessary institutions such as a constitution and an electoral system, and the nation would bloom into a free and independent democratic state. Institutions, it was thought, would trump the political, cultural, and the usual socioeconomic prerequisites of democracy. This belief assumes that free and fair elections are a sufficient defining characteristic of democracy.[3] While the promotion of free and fair elections and "proper" institutional design is a necessary condition for the development of democracy—as it includes certain basic freedoms such as 1) the freedom to form and join organizations, 2) the freedom of expression, 3) the right to vote, 4) eligibility for public office, 5) the right of political leaders to compete for support, and 6) alternative sources of information—they alone are not enough to capture what it means to be a consolidated democracy.[4] Nor does institutional design matter all that much; Bolivia has had 16 constitutions in its history, but that does not mean it is a functioning democracy. Such a constitutional conception of democracy ignores the reality of pre-existing conditions in a transitioning state that may require attention to be placed on other characteristics of democracy.

By operating under the assumption that the development of the necessary electoral machinery and/or institutions in any given nation should be sufficient to successfully build democracy there, supporters of democracy promotion are ignoring many of the historical, cultural, or path-dependent conditions in different nations that may hamper or completely derail such efforts in the long-run. For example, in nations such as Russia, Venezuela, and Afghanistan, the institutions associated with free and fair elections have failed to prevent corrupt or authoritarian-like rulers from rising to power. Once elected to office, leaders in these nations usurped power that had not been delegated to them away from other institutions like parliament, the judiciary, and a free and fair media. While it may be too bold to label such states as authoritarian, they most definitely are not consolidated democracies. They fall more under the category of mixed or "illiberal" regimes because they violate key democratic requirements such as separation of power, checks and balances, and the rule of law—making future free and fair elections difficult or even impossible to conduct.

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The key to preventing such an erosion of democratic qualities is to incorporate and focus on other concepts and institutions that are needed to avoid such an undesirable outcome. These concepts include, but are not limited to, the development of a civil society; political parties; interest groups; an independent court system; a strong and independent parliament able to check the power of a powerful leader; civilian control over the military; and perhaps most importantly, the development of a democratic or civic culture that consists of 1) tolerance and respect for different points of view, 2) free speech, 3) the acceptance of the authority of the state by most citizens, and 4) the willingness of citizens to participate in government through grassroots movements.[5] Such concepts are important because each plays a large role in assuring that a freely elected regime will be able to remain in power, and that no one leader of the regime becomes too powerful. For example, Larry Diamond et al. note that the "absence of a vigorous sector of voluntary associations and interest groups or the control of such organizations by a corporatist state can reinforce authoritarian rule and obstruct the development of democracy."[6] Along similar lines, if a nation's military is not under civilian control, it is much more likely to play an independent and direct role in politics that may challenge the survival of a freely elected regime, as was the case in Honduras in 2009. While the inclusion of this broader range of criteria may complicate the democratizing process, it is important

to include all of the relevant aspects required to make democracy work.

In addition to the key characteristics mentioned above, there are several potential pre-requisites for democracy that have been debated by scholars over the last fifty years. These include a nation's level of socioeconomic development, culture, domestic institutions, degree of modernization, and whether or not its citizens trust their government to provide services, security, and stability. When considered separately, each of these variables is often promoted as necessary, but in reality is not a sufficient condition for democratic consolidation to occur. This suggests that there is some combination of some or all of the variables listed that is needed for successful and long-lasting democratization to take place.

The first requisite is the particular level of socioeconomic development that a nation has achieved. Proponents of this line of thought, such as W.W. Rostow, S.M. Lipset, and Robert Heilbroner suggest that economic development is a condition for democratization because there is often a strong correlation between income and democracy.[7] Socio-economic development provides a base for democracy and helps a developing nation and prospective democratic regime to survive. As Diamond suggests, "…poor countries can maintain democracies but only if they deliver broad and sustained (not necessarily rapid) socioeconomic development, especially 'human development.'"[8] Lipset's research supports this argument by suggesting that a nation is better able to sustain democracy if is well-off.[9] If one looks briefly at many of the major indicators of economic growth and modernization—such as per capita income, literacy rate among adults, the urbanization rate, and life expectancy rates—many of the same nations that often fall near the bottom of each category are also places where democracy promotion has stalled or failed, such as in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Haiti among others.

While gradual and sustained efforts to promote socioeconomic development in developing countries is useful, even essential, to help a democratic regime to remain in power, socioeconomic development alone is not enough to consolidate democracy in such nations. Lipset notes that "if a political system is not characterized by a value system allowing the peaceful 'play' of power, democracy becomes chaotic," implying that economic growth by itself is insufficient to achieve democracy.[10] Along similar lines, Bueno de Mesquita and Downs suggest that "…economic growth, rather than being a force for democratic change in tyrannical states, can sometimes be used to strengthen oppressive regimes" in the absence of certain other political and social requisites.[11]

These findings suggest the need to construct domestic institutions that take a nation's culture into account. In his analysis of the relationship between socioeconomic development and democratic survival, Alan Siaroff found that the successful

promotion of development aids the survival of democratic regimes at an insignificant level. Further, the fate of premature democracies is best explained by their civil-military-external culture and environment, which includes a democratic political culture, an external orientation of the military, the presence of a civil society, and a supportive international environment.[12] Other factors that are often cited as requisites for democracy are associated with what Fareed Zakaria refers to as constitutional liberalism, the combination of 1) a rule of law, 2) a separation of powers, 3) checks and balances, and 4) protection of an individual's autonomy and dignity against coercion from state, church, and society (i.e., its political culture). [13]

The criteria for the successful consolidation of democracy are the establishment of electoral democracy (i.e., free and fair elections), socioeconomic development, a political culture supportive of democracy, *as well as* constitutional liberalism. It is important to note that constitutional liberalism may lead to democracy, but (electoral) democracy rarely brings constitutional liberalism. The goal according to Zakaria should not be to forcibly implement democratization in states that are unprepared for it; rather, it should be to consolidate democracy where it is growing and to push the gradual development of constitutional liberalism elsewhere. In this sense, it may be the case that democracy is simply being promoted prematurely in some nations. If we suggest that there are particular requisites for socioeconomic development, institutions, political culture, among other important factors, then perhaps those promoting democracy should focus on helping those nations perceived as "premature" for democratization achieve a certain level of progress within each of the requisite categories prior to the installation of a democratic regime. It may be the case that what Zakaria refers to as "illiberal democracies," or what others coin as mixed regimes, or competitive authoritarianism, must be tolerated in such nations at least for a time, while simultaneously pushing for the basics: literacy, education, economic growth, democratic values, civil society, and the like. The Millennium Challenge Account created in 2004 sought to do just that, even if it was a flawed program. Such an approach may be required because sustained political development can only take place within the context of "a multi-dimensional process of social change in which no segment or dimension of the society can long lag behind."[14]

Conclusion

The United States discovered in the 1980s that a policy of democracy promotion was both morally and strategically unimpeachable and politically irresistible. Who could argue with a program that brought peace to Central America, helped win the Cold War, and at the same time had the support of the public, media, businesses, the labor force, both major political parties, Congress, and the White House? The democratic

agenda was so popular that it became a program with global, even universal applications, resulted in huge budget increases for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), was incorporated as one of the three legs of the Washington Consensus, and evolved into a one-size-fits-all approach where doubts, skepticism, and negative results were largely ignored.

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After twenty years of democracy promotion, it is time to reexamine the basics of the policy. On a global basis, the march of democracy has slowed or been reversed in some of the largest and most influential countries (Russia, Ukraine). In addition, US efforts to push democracy in countries ill-prepared for it (e.g. Haiti, East Timor, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Honduras, and Somalia), which we have here called “premature democracies,” have helped produce instability and failed states—precisely the result that democracy promotion efforts hoped to prevent. In addition, rising giant China opposes our democracy promotion efforts and is in no hurry to go down the democracy route; other successful Asian nations, now especially in the wake of the global economic crisis, are championing statist and non-liberal models of political economy. And throughout the Third World, there is widespread sentiment in favor of local, home-grown, and indigenous models of change and development (East Asian, Islamic, South Asian, African, Latin American), distinct from those imported from the outside.

This is not a call for the abandonment of democracy promotion efforts, which in some regions and countries has been quite successful. But it is a call for a reexamination of the assumptions of the policy, a study of its concrete results, and a thorough housecleaning effort, including reexamining personnel at democracy-promoting agencies like NED and others whose leaders have been around too long and whose ideas are old, outdated, and fatally flawed.

Our conclusions here have taken the form of a broad sweep, but our particular focus has been on the phenomena of premature democracies, in Latin America and elsewhere. Our research shows that a too-hasty effort to construct democracy in countries that lack the political culture, the infrastructure, the institutional base, and the socioeconomic requisites for it almost always results in failure. Not only does it often produce instability, failed states, and conflict in the country affected, but also it often, as in Haiti or Afghanistan, draws the United States into a long-term involvement that is wasteful, extremely costly, controversial, and usually damaging to the United States itself. What is needed, instead of the cookie-cutter approach, is a policy that is prudent, selective, and based on a careful assessment of the costs

and benefits of each case.

Notes

1. Howard J. Wiarda, ed., *The Continuing Struggle for Democracy in Latin America* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977). Also see: Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
2. Elaine Scioloino, "Afghan 'Dictator' Proposed in Leaked Cable," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2008, accessed October 4, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/04/world/asia/04afghan.html.
3. Huntington, *The Third Wave:* 5-13.
4. For a more detailed discussion of the key elements of competitive elections, see: Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 1-10; see also Dahl's book: *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), as well as: *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
5. Howard J. Wiarda, *Introduction to Comparative Politics: Concepts and Processes*, *Second Edition* (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning, 2000), 100-101; see also: Wiarda, *Political Development in Emerging Nations: Is There Still a Third World?* (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning, 2004), 91-92.
6. Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz and Seymour Martin Lipset, "Introduction: What Makes for Democracy? in *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy* eds. Diamond, Linz, & Lipset (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995).
7. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, *Expanded Edition* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 27-63, specific quotation on 28.
8. Larry Diamond, "Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered," *American Behavioral Scientist* 35 (1992): 453-488, specific quotation on 488.
9. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1(1959): 69-105.
10. Lipset, *Political Man*, 27.
11. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs, "Development and Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 77-86, specific quotation on 78.
12. Alan Siaroff, "Premature Democracies, the Promotion of Development and Political-Cultural Factors," *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1999): 405-419.
13. Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22. See also, Fareed Zakaira, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).
14. Lucian W. Pye, *Aspects of Political Development* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1966), 44-45.