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Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose

Summary: Democracy aid has arrived not at a crisis, but at a crossroads, defined by two very different possible paths forward.

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January 13, 2015 *Journal of Democracy*

With the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall so recently upon us, efforts to take stock of the global state of democracy have been proliferating. Efforts to take stock of the state of democracy aid, by contrast, have been a good deal rarer. Even though this type of international assistance has a specific goal—to foster and advance democratization—criteria for assessing it are elusive. “Democracy aid” itself is a catchall term for an endeavor that has acquired enough moving parts to make drawing boundaries around it difficult. Reaching conclusions about methods or effects that apply broadly across an ever more diverse field is daunting.

Yet such a stocktaking, imperfect though it will inevitably be, is necessary. Since the late 1980s, democracy aid has evolved from a specialized niche into a substantial, well-institutionalized domain that affects political developments in almost every corner of the globe. A quarter-century ago, the field was thinly populated, principally by the institutes affiliated with each of the major German and U.S. political parties, the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Latin America Bureau of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Foundation for Election Systems, and a few other organizations. Today, nearly every Western government gives some aid for democracy-building, whether through its foreign ministry, bilateral-aid agency, or other institutions.

Likewise, the family of political-party foundations and multi-party institutes that offer political aid across borders has expanded greatly. Numerous private U.S. and European foundations now fund programs to foster greater political openness and pluralism. An ever-growing range of transnational NGOs, both nonprofit “mission-driven” organizations and for-profit consulting firms, carry out programs aimed at strengthening democratic processes and institutions. Many multilateral organizations have entered the field as well. These include the UN Development Programme, the UN Democracy Fund, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and regional organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Organization of American States. Moreover, the governments of some of the larger “emerging democracies,” such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Turkey, are starting to use aid to support democratic change in their own respective neighborhoods.

With this striking growth in the number of actors has come a similar swelling of resources. In the late 1980s, less than US\$1 billion a year went to democracy assistance. Today, the total is more than

\$10 billion. This spending translates into thousands of projects that directly engage hundreds of thousands of people in the developing and post-communist worlds. The expansion of democracy aid also entails a widening reach. Two and a half decades ago, most democracy aid flowed to Latin America and a few Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Taiwan. In the intervening years, it has spread around the world, following the democratic wave as it washed across Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans, Asia, and the Middle East. Today, at least some democracy aid reaches every country that has moved away from authoritarian rule, as well as most countries still living under dictatorship. When new political transitions look promising, as they did in Burma and Tunisia several years back, a scramble occurs as organizations trip over one another in search of ways to bring democracy aid to bear.

Despite this impressive growth, many practitioners and observers wonder whether the field is adopting smarter methods over time and achieving better results, or just repeating itself in an endless loop of set approaches and inflated but never-fulfilled expectations. These lingering doubts come at a time when democracy aid is becoming increasingly controversial, a target for powerholders in many parts of the world who attack it as a form of subversion that deserves to be met with harsh countermeasures. Democracy's travails in many countries where it has long held sway, plus the waning of the optimism that accompanied the spread of democracy when the "third wave" was at its height, fuel serious questioning in diverse quarters about whether democracy support is even a legitimate enterprise. In short, as democracy aid reaches the quarter-century mark it remains far short of the settled, comfortable state of maturity that many of its early adherents expected (or at least hoped) it would be able to claim after decades of effort. Instead, it is beset by deep uncertainties about how far it has come and about the way forward.

A Pattern of Learning

In its early years, democracy aid rapidly took shape around a three-part framework consisting of 1) support for institutions and processes crucial to democratic contestation—above all, free and fair elections and political-party development; 2) the strengthening and reform of key state institutions, especially those checking the power of centralized executives, such as parliaments, judiciaries, and local governments; and 3) support for civil society, usually in the form of help offered to public-interest NGOs, independent media outlets, labor unions, and civic-education initiatives. Today, if one goes to a country that is moving away from authoritarian rule and surveys the democracy-aid programs underway there, most will fit within this framework. In short, democracy aid—in outline at least—continues to look much as it did back in the late 1980s. The three main types on offer then are still the three main types on offer. Look a little deeper, however, and changes become apparent. Broadly speaking, the changes reflect a pattern of learning from experience.

Studying each of the main lines of democracy-aid programming, one sees at least partial evolution away from the glaring shortcomings that often bedeviled early democracy-aid efforts. These shortcomings included attempting to export Western institutional models, failing to grasp local contexts in any depth, and naively assuming that positive postauthoritarian dynamics would somehow sweep aside all resistance to democratic change. At least some parts of the democracy-aid community have overcome these and other weaknesses as regards methods. They are seeking to facilitate locally generated and rooted forms of change, analyzing the terrain thoroughly before acting, and taking seriously the challenge of identifying and nurturing domestic drivers of change that can overcome entrenched resistance to democratizing reforms. Such changes have improved work in most of the major areas of democracy aid, such as (to give a partial list) election monitoring, civil society development, and rule-of-law building.

Early on, international election observation was too often a hasty fly-in, fly-out affair, long on publicity and short on depth. Today, at least the more serious groups engaged in such work understand that effective election monitoring requires establishing a long-term in-country presence and assessing the electoral process in its entirety, not just on voting day. Observers from such groups now more frequently support and partner with capable domestic monitoring groups. Rather than merely rendering simple "thumbs-up" or "thumbs-down" judgments, their assessment reports attempt to convey the complexity of electoral processes. And these groups are more apt than before to weigh

whether sending a monitoring mission risks allowing clever antidemocratic powerholders to exploit its presence to legitimate their artful electoral deceptions.

At least some civil society development work has evolved beyond the romanticism and superficiality that marked much of this kind of aid in the 1990s. Back then, elite advocacy groups tended to attract the most donor support, even when they lacked sufficient rootedness, local legitimacy, and sustainability. Today, some aid organizations do things differently. They are emphasizing the need for local civil society to focus on constituency building, striving to reach groups beyond the narrow range of Westernized donor favorites, giving local groups means and incentives to find their own local sources of support, and working to ensure that outside aid spurs cooperation rather than infighting within the local civil society scene.

In the rule-of-law domain, the early narrow, top-down interpretation of rule-of-law development as primarily a question of training judges, prosecutors, and police officers has given way to broader perspectives that include programs to strengthen legal education, improve legal access for the poor, advance legal empowerment, and strengthen civic organizations that exert pressure on the state's reform-resistant legal institutions. In addition, some aid groups have moved beyond the traditional focus on the formal legal sphere to work with customary or traditional institutions that are involved in resolving disputes and administering justice more generally.

Similar patterns of learning from experience can be seen in the other main areas of democracy support. In addition, democracy-aid strategies have become more country-specific. Decades ago, such strategic differentiation was rare. Assuming that transitions toward democracy would unfold in much the same way across diverse countries, aid providers favored a standard menu that entailed distributing aid somewhat evenly across all the types of programming included in the three-part framework.

This approach, however, soon showed its flaws. The growing heterogeneity of political paths among those countries striving to leave authoritarianism behind obliged providers of democracy aid to think about strategies more carefully and develop a wider array of them. For countries whose exit from authoritarian rule has led them only to semiauthoritarian stasis, for instance, the standard menu is clearly inadequate. Realizing that in this kind of setting a focus on institutions such as electoral commissions, parliaments, and judiciaries is likely to be of scant value, democracy-aid providers worth their strategic salt will concentrate instead on trying to keep some independent civil society and media organs alive. In a semi-authoritarian country with a dynamic, growing economy, democracy support may work for greater pluralism and a fuller rule of law by backing the efforts of independent businesspeople who want fairer, more transparent rules and a greater say in major political decisions.

The standard menu is also inadequate in countries that have exited authoritarianism only to end up cycling in and out of civil conflict. Aid providers may instead try to concentrate on activities such as bridge-building among contending groups, constitutional reform, security-sector reform, and support for those parts of civil society actively contributing to reconciliation efforts. Still other countries have become stuck in shallow forms of democracy where there is some formal alternation of power but elites remain so deeply entrenched that the turnover is mainly a matter of offices changing hands within unchanging circles while most citizens' concerns go ignored. In such places, the smartest democracy support tries to look beyond conventional programming. The search instead is for ways to encourage new entrants into the stagnant political-party scene, to help citizens convert their anger at corruption and disempowerment into serious pressure for reform, to create positive links between socioeconomic advocacy campaigns and political reforms, and to assist social movements that reach a wide base.

Another area of positive evolution based on learning from experience involves the growing relationship between democracy assistance and other parts of the international-aid domain, above all the dominant area of socioeconomic aid. The first generation of democracy-aid practitioners often wanted to stay apart from the world of socioeconomic aid. Their mission, they felt, was fundamentally different—not poverty reduction or economic growth, but political transformation. They were wary of traditional aid providers' willingness often to work cooperatively with corrupt, repressive

governments, and were put off by what they perceived as the rigid, bureaucratized structures of socioeconomic aid. Traditional aid providers, meanwhile, returned the favor: They feared that allowing socioeconomic assistance to become linked to explicitly political activities would damage their relations with aid-receiving governments. Some were also put off by what they saw as the improvised, even “cowboy” methods of democracy promoters who were suddenly racing around the world talking about bringing large-scale changes to countries they seemed scarcely to know.

Hesitantly at first, but more concertedly over the past ten years, practitioners on both sides of the aid divide have taken steps to narrow it and to create positive synergies between the two domains. Increasingly faced with the threat that poor socioeconomic performance poses to fledgling democratic transitions, some democracy promoters are actively exploring how strengthening democracy can more directly advance socioeconomic progress. At the same time, many developmentalists have embraced the idea that political pathologies such as systematic corruption and excessive power concentrations create basic problems for socioeconomic development. At first, this embrace gave rise to governance programs that focused in mainly technocratic ways on efficiency and capability. But over time, socioeconomic-aid providers have broadened their view to take on relations between powerholders and citizens, emphasizing relational concepts such as accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion. In addition, the rising focus on governance has led some socioeconomic-aid providers to work closely with institutions that democracy aid has long worked with, such as judiciaries, parliaments, and local councils.

Continued Shortcomings

The positive evolution of democracy aid based on learning from experience is an important trend, but sadly still only a partial and inconsistent one. Alongside the progress that one can find in each of the main lines of democracy programming, one also still encounters aid efforts that are seemingly untouched by learning and rely on weak methods from decades past. In election monitoring, for example, some organizations exhibit bad habits such as failures of objectivity and lack of attention to the risk of legitimating flawed elections. A recent European Stability Initiative report highlighting serious deficiencies in the election-monitoring work that the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe have done in Azerbaijan makes discouraging reading.¹

Some funders of civil society development still channel most of their aid to a limited circle of favored NGOs in the capital city, organizations that carry out technocratic advocacy efforts based on externally determined agendas. In the rule-of-law area, some aid providers have failed to move beyond stale judicial-strengthening efforts that rely on rote best-practices training while ignoring the broader array of entrenched obstacles that prevent ordinary citizens from achieving justice.²

The picture is similarly mixed with regard to the diversification of strategies. Some groups engaged in democracy work, especially the smaller ones that focus exclusively on it, are trying hard to think strategically and to move beyond the standard menu of approaches. Yet others, especially some of the larger organizations for which democracy work is only a small part of their overall portfolio, still sometimes operate on strategic autopilot, carrying out many types of programs in any one setting with little careful thought about which among them offer the most fruitful avenues for change. These autopilot approaches not only produce poorly conceived programs that fail to pinpoint key issues in troubled transitions, they also undercut the efforts of those actors that are trying to be more strategic. For example, some aid groups may attempt to pursue rule-of-law change in a thoughtful way, working with citizens' groups pushing for change and avoiding official institutions dominated by those benefiting from the system as it is. Yet other aid providers may then come in to swath the official institutions in blankets of loans or technical assistance that effectively insulate these institutions against the efforts of those pushing from below.

With regard to bridging the gap between democracy aid and the larger, older domain of socioeconomic aid, the glass is similarly only half full. Even as they admit the need to give more attention to politics in their work, many mainstream developmentalists remain opposed to broadening their definition of development to include democratic norms. Sweden remains alone

among major donor countries in embracing Amartya Sen's notion of "development as freedom." Most still treat democracy as, at best, a pleasing "extra." Some even see it as a negative factor that more often complicates socioeconomic development than facilitates it. Although the majority of large aid providers devote at least some funding to democracy programming, often under the less political-sounding label of "aid for democratic governance," they have been slow to integrate the principles and practices of such work into their main areas of activity, consigning democracy work to the margins of their own institutional structures.

In short, learning from experience in democracy aid has been real and significant, but less consistent and far-reaching than we might hope. The reasons for this are no mystery. Accumulating and acting on knowledge drawn from experience is a chronic problem for international assistance generally. Aid providers do carry out many program evaluations. But they are deeply wary of outside critical scrutiny and too rarely fund the sort of in-depth, independent studies that examine the underlying assumptions, methods, and outcomes in a sector of democracy aid.

The intensified focus on monitoring and evaluation that has gripped the aid world in recent years has not helped. Many monitoring and evaluation efforts are too narrow to shed much light on the larger questions that one must answer in order to craft effective democracy aid. What factors, for instance, are crucial to the emergence of the rule of law? How can parties overcome deep public alienation from anything that smacks of politics? How can civil society activism lead to organized efforts to build political institutions? As democracy-aid practitioners well know, the heightened attention to monitoring and evaluation often produces artificial and reductionist program indicators, rigid implementation frameworks, and unrealistic goals—all things that work directly against key lessons from experience about the need for flexible, adaptive programming.

Beyond lack of investment in deep-reaching qualitative research and resistance to critical outside scrutiny lie problems arising from the basic political economy of the aid industry. Many aid organizations are designed and operate more for the interests of aid providers than recipients. They impose agendas from the top down rather than allowing them to percolate from the bottom up. They obsess over risk reduction and central control, choking off innovation and flexibility in the process. They cling to standard project methods that unhelpfully frontload project design, insist on unrealistically short time frames for achieving change, and favor imported Western expertise over the local variety. Moreover, as the democracy-aid domain has grown and aged, it has become subject to what Sarah Bush has usefully warned about as "the taming of democracy assistance"—the tendency of some democracy-aid providers to become more concerned over time with maintaining their budgets and their "market share" in other countries by carrying out soft, unchallenging programs and avoiding incisive, challenging efforts to advance change.³

Turbulent Waters

If we look just at the enterprise of democracy aid itself, we see an assistance domain that is growing considerably in size and reach and absorbing some valuable lessons, albeit more slowly and partially than one might wish. Yet a wider focus is essential: The international context in which this enterprise operates has changed tremendously, especially in the past ten years. Democracy aid has entered murky, troubled waters, creating fundamental challenges for it.

When democracy aid came of age in the 1990s, an interlocking set of positive assumptions about the place of democracy and democracy aid in the world prevailed. It was assumed that:

- democracy was spreading globally;
- doors were opening to democracy aid in many parts of the world;
- Western liberal democracy commanded respect and admiration globally and neither had nor was likely to have any strong ideological rivals; and
- the weight of democracy as a foreign-policy priority of established Western democracies was increasing and would continue to increase.

Over the past decade, a cascade of negative developments has called into question or even toppled each of these rosy assumptions. Democracy practitioners confront a daunting set of harsh new realities. These include:

1) A loss of democratic momentum: The global stagnation of democracy is one of the most significant international political developments of the past decade. Democracy's failure to keep expanding has hurt the democratic-assistance field in at least two ways. First, it has sapped energy and impetus. Democracy-aid providers know that tough cases in which transitions are blocked or never really get underway are facts of life. What compensates for them are the promising cases—the times and places when democracy does break through and gain a foothold. These exciting opportunities are crucial. They make other parts of the policy community take notice, and indeed give life and force to the whole democracy-assistance enterprise.

Over the past ten years, the flow of such good news has slowed to a trickle. Stories about how the democratic spirit is manifesting itself in this or that surprising place have been cast into shadow by persistent democratic deficiencies or backsliding in Afghanistan, Hungary, Iraq, Mali, Russia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and many other places. For a short time in 2011, the “Arab Spring” looked as if it might be the start of a new global democratic wave, but that initial burst of hope has given way to pessimism. Now, many Western policy makers and analysts are asking whether efforts to foster democracy in the Arab world even make sense given the instability and conflict that political change has brought. With the democratic cause stalled (or even losing ground) around the world, democracy-aid providers must battle a growing sense in the Western policy community that the historical moment for democracy aid has passed.

Furthermore, the loss of democratic momentum raises questions in the wider policy community about the impact of democracy aid. The welter of factors that affect transitions makes it problematic to assess the effect of such aid based just on democracy's macro-level progress. Yet when democracy is on the rise in many places, democracy aid almost inevitably gains credibility by association. And when democracy is faring poorly in the world, hard questions about the effectiveness of democracy assistance are asked. Some recent or ongoing cases offer sobering examples of the limits of democracy aid:

- In Russia, long-term benefits from the wide range of Western democracy programs that got underway in the 1990s and operated into the last decade—including rule-of-law aid, electoral aid, political-party building, work with independent media, and support for civil society—may not be entirely absent, but they are certainly limited at best.
- For years, Western aid providers held up Mali as one of Africa's democratic success stories. Yet the vertiginous collapse of the Malian government in 2012 underlined how hollow even apparent success stories of democracy support can be.
- The United States and others have provided substantial rule-of-law aid to El Salvador for thirty years. Despite this, El Salvador today is notoriously beset by shockingly high crime levels that have overwhelmed its criminal-justice system.

Moreover, the fact that some of the largest investments in democracy assistance have been made in such difficult locales as Afghanistan and Iraq, with deeply problematic results, has contributed to the questioning of its impact.

2) Closing of doors: When some governments that had previously allowed in significant amounts of prodemocracy aid began pushing back against it in the early 2000s, observers thought this might be a short-term phenomenon. The George W. Bush administration's emphasis on democracy promotion in its intervention in Iraq, along with Western support for some of the civic groups that were active in the “color revolutions” in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine, had triggered heightened sensitivities about democracy aid in various places, especially Russia and other post-Soviet countries. But even as the color revolutions faded into the past and a new U.S. president took a far less assertive stance

on democracy promotion, the backlash kept growing.

In just the past few years, dozens of governments, in every region of the world, have been taking a medley of formal and informal measures to block, limit, or stigmatize international aid for democracy and human rights, especially civil society support, political-party work, and election monitoring. Aid from the United States is sometimes the principal target, as in 2013 when the Bolivian government charged that USAID was meddling in politics and ordered it to leave the country. Yet the backlash is hitting other providers as well: To cite just one of many examples, the Hungarian government recently began harassing Hungarian civil society organizations for their acceptance of Norwegian government funding.

Pushback—which is often strongest in countries where democratization is in trouble and outside assistance is most badly needed—has multiple negative effects. Most obviously, it often prevents democracy-aid providers from operating. Central Asian governments, for instance, decided about a decade ago to limit externally sponsored aid for civil society development, and looking around the region today one sees a greatly reduced pool of such aid. Restrictive measures by Egypt and some other Arab countries have similarly reduced outside support for nongovernmental organizations in their territories.

Even when pushback does not reduce the amount of democracy aid that reaches a country, it may end up changing the type of democracy support that is offered. To avoid problems, democracy promoters may hold back from politically challenging types of assistance, such as aid for independent human-rights groups or media organizations, and limit themselves to soft-focus governance programming. Similarly, pushback may cause some activist groups receiving democracy aid from abroad to avoid activities that they fear their governments may find too challenging.

3) *The troubles of Western democracies:* The struggle of Western liberal democracy to maintain the unrivaled pride of place that it enjoyed in the 1990s also affects democracy aid. Democracy's travails in both the United States and Europe have greatly damaged the standing of democracy in the eyes of many people around the world. In the United States, dysfunctional political polarization, the surging role of money in politics, and distortions in representation due to gerrymandering are particular problems. In Europe, the euro crisis, the rise of extremist parties, and challenges surrounding the social integration of minority communities are raising doubts about democracy's health. At the same time, the growing self-confidence and assertiveness of other political systems, especially authoritarian or semiauthoritarian regimes in China, Russia, Turkey, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, are making some people in transitional countries wonder whether the keys to decisive governance and economic dynamism do not in fact lie down some path other than that of liberal democracy.

These developments inevitably weaken Western democracy-aid efforts. A U.S. group going abroad to offer advice and training on how to strengthen a country's parliament will face punishing questions about the credibility of its offerings given the manifest deficiencies and unpopularity of the U.S. Congress. The same will be true for a European group seeking to help another country bridge a sectarian divide based on religious differences. Of course, smart democracy assistance does not seek to export a particular national model but instead offers insights gleaned from comparative experiences and tries to help locals craft their own solutions. Nevertheless, all Western democracy promoters must work harder than before to establish their credibility in other parts of the world, and in some quarters (East Asia, for example) they sometimes barely receive a hearing. Moreover, they can no longer assume that their task is to help local actors move ahead with democracy. Instead, they now often face the harder, more fundamental task of convincing locals that democracy is preferable to other systems.

Furthermore, Western democracy promoters are increasingly finding their efforts challenged and sometimes undercut by nondemocratic powers intent on influencing the political trajectories of other countries. A Western-sponsored anticorruption program in an African country may be outweighed by the deleterious effects on governance of a Chinese economic-aid package that creates perverse political-economy incentives. A program to help create a level playing field among political parties in an Arab country may be undermined by large streams of Iranian or Gulf money flowing to one of

them. An undertaking to support free and fair elections in a Latin American country may be distorted by Venezuela's engagement aimed at tilting the elections toward a preferred candidate.

Russia, China, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Qatar, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and other nondemocratic countries seeking heightened influence in the political life of their neighbors (or further afield) are not always bent on checking the influence of Western democracy-promotion efforts. And their actions are not necessarily aimed at promoting autocracy per se. But often they do cut against Western democracy aid and push other countries in an antidemocratic direction. Western democracy aid, having come of age at a time when it was often the dominant external form of political influence in most transitions, is now facing a markedly harsher, more competitive environment.

4) A feebler policy commitment: Of course, not all aspects of the international environment are unfavorable for democracy work. New communications technologies are helping prodemocratic networks to expand across borders and oceans and bringing political abuses to light. Repeated efforts by determined, courageous citizens in different parts of the world to protest against political wrongs are inspirational and underline the urgency of helping such people to translate their energies into sustained political gains. Yet the headwinds buffeting democracy aid—the waning of global democratic momentum, the growing pushback against democracy aid, the damaged status of Western democracy, and rising competition from nondemocracies—also influence many Western policy makers and add up to a further challenge: weakened commitment by the United States and other established democracies to making democracy support a foreign-policy priority.

In the 1990s, democracy promotion was clearly on the rise in Western foreign policy. As democracy expanded across the globe, it looked to Western politicians like a “growth stock” worth significant investment. Countervailing policy interests, such as the need to maintain strong ties with oil-rich authoritarian regimes, while certainly still present, appeared to be in decline. Democracy support appealed as a way to give definition to the optimistic spirit of the era and to provide an overarching policy framework at a time of post–Cold War policy drift. Although both U.S. presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and some of their counterparts in other Western democracies pursued democracy-related policies that were marred by compromises and contradictions, they did try to find a place for it near the center of their foreign-policy visions.

That outlook no longer holds. With democracy stagnant or in retreat in many parts of the world, Western politicians have less incentive to associate themselves with the cause. Democratization has come to appear to many Western policy makers as a risky, even ill-advised endeavor in some places due to its potential for unleashing sectarian conflict, as in Iraq and Libya, or for giving rise to populist, anti-Western politicians, as in Hungary and various parts of Latin America. Moreover, as more developing countries make big new oil and gas finds or become front-line states in counterterrorism struggles, the number of countries where the West feels a tangible need to befriend nondemocratic governments is increasing.

The result is a highly uncertain commitment on the part of the Obama administration and some of its allies to put democracy high on their foreign-policy agendas. Although some advisors around President Obama insist that he is strongly committed to democracy promotion, contrary evidence is more persuasive and shows a U.S. hesitation to push hard for democratization in many places. As the century's second decade nears its midpoint, the United States and Europe are preoccupied with daunting security challenges in the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, and East Asia that many policy makers read as making political stability rather than democratic change the overriding priority.

Thus, even though the overall spending worldwide on democracy aid is generally holding steady (despite drops at some major institutions such as USAID, where spending on democracy programs has shrunk significantly over the past five years), the aid is less grounded in policy frameworks that support the overall endeavor of advancing democracy. So if a government cracks down on civil society aid from abroad, the diplomatic response from the affected Western governments may be weak, as it was when Egypt took harsh steps in this direction in 2012 and 2013. Or an international election-monitoring effort may find serious shortcomings in an electoral process, but result in no negative consequences for the regime because the Western governments sponsoring the effort are

fearful of offending a useful friend, as was recently the case with Azerbaijan. In other words, the “low policy” of democracy support remains in place, but it often cannot count on the “high-policy” side for backing when it matters.

A Basic Choice

A quarter-century into its existence, the enterprise of assisting democracy across borders finds itself in an unusually complex state. On the one hand, it has grown in size and evolved positively in response to learning from experience. Yet now it must endure and make gains in a harsher international context, marked by an array of crosscurrents that have come on very strongly in the last several years, radically eroding the structural underpinnings that helped democracy aid to flourish in the 1990s.

The democracy-aid community is only just starting to come to terms with this much more troubled context. The major difficulties posed by this environment will not go away anytime soon. Democracy-aid providers need to invest much more energy and resources in finding ways to adapt and respond. With regard to the closing-space problem, signs of a strengthening response are emerging. Some of the most heavily affected aid providers, such as the U.S. government, are working on a menu of measures that includes strengthening the international norms protecting civil society’s freedoms, better coordinating diplomatic campaigns against restrictive NGO laws, and providing protective technologies to local partners threatened with surveillance and harassment. There is no magic bullet that will vanquish the closing-space phenomenon. A great deal more will need to be done, and by a wide range of aid actors, but at least a start has been made.

In contrast, democracy-aid providers have shown less willingness to confront the problems of Western democracy’s declining prestige and the growing competition from alternative political models. Some Western aid practitioners still talk behind closed doors about the special value of their own country’s political system and their mission of bringing its benefits to distant lands. They seem startlingly unaware of just how damaged Western models have become in the eyes of others and how much democracy aid needs to be built on far more modest assumptions about the relative appeal of Western democracy. A few groups including the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute have for some time emphasized comparative expertise drawn from established and transitional countries alike and hired many non-Western staffers with experience from other transitions, but such practices are still too rare in the aid community. In addition, aid providers need to go beyond their ritualistic assertions of openness to democratic variety, working together in a more focused way with those in other parts of the world who insist on a preference for non-Western forms of democracy, in order to clarify whether such alternatives are compatible with core universal principles of democracy and how Western democracy aid can support more varied but still legitimate democratic approaches.⁴

Regarding the diminishing Western commitment to making democracy support a foreign-policy priority, democracy-aid providers can play a counterbalancing role by drawing on their experiences around the world to address more systematically the growing concerns of Western policy makers about democracy. How can Western governments insert an effective prodemocracy element into their dealings with democratically deficient but strategically useful governments without sacrificing a broader cooperative relationship with them? Why should flawed democratic development be regarded not just as a side issue in many of the security threats that are flaring up from Ukraine to Iraq, but a root cause of them? How can elections be designed and supported in ways that specifically help to reduce the chance of emergent sectarian conflicts? By answering questions such as these, the “low-policy” side of democracy support (that is, democracy aid) can move away from its tendency to view itself merely as a beneficiary (or victim) of the “high-policy” side of democracy support and take on a significant role in shaping it instead.

The forbidding waters in which democracy aid now finds itself are prompting quiet but audible talk of a fundamental crisis facing the field. This talk is mistaken. The context is indeed daunting, yet this is not especially surprising. For too long democracy promoters have tried to hold on to the appealing but incorrect idea that rapidly expanding democracy, opening doors, and a lack of ideological rivals

are natural global conditions that will continue indefinitely. In other words, democracy aid is not facing an existential crisis so much as it is coming up against hard realities that are far from historically unusual when seen in a longer-term perspective. For the foreseeable future, democracy aid will have to operate principally in countries rife with forbidding obstacles to democratization; powerholders in many places will resist and resent such aid; and alternative political models will vie hard for attention and influence. Coming to terms with these realities is not about dealing with crisis, but rather about shedding lingering illusions.

In short, democracy aid has arrived not at a crisis, but at a crossroads, defined by two very different possible paths forward. Some democracy-aid providers facing the new environment will feel inclined to pull back, spend fewer resources, exit from difficult countries, trim their political sails, and avoid direct competition with contending models. In short, they will aim to reduce their risks, and their ambitions. Others will favor a different path. They will accept that backsliding, closing political space, and greater competition are the “new normal” of democracy aid. They will invest more heavily in learning, accept the need to tolerate greater risks, work harder to achieve greater cooperation and solidarity among diverse democracy-aid providers, and argue more effectively for principled, persuasive prodemocracy diplomacy to support their efforts.

It is unclear which of these paths will attract more adherents among the large set of relevant actors. But the eventual answer to this question will do much to determine whether a stocktaking of democracy aid another quarter-century down the road will tell a story of decline and growing irrelevance, or reveal a pattern of sustained productive engagement and iterative progress in the face of significant adversity.

NOTES

The author thanks Ken Wollack and Richard Youngs for helpful comments on a draft and Mahrokh Jahangiri and Oren Samet-Marram for research assistance.

¹ European Stability Initiative, “Disgraced: Azerbaijan and the End of Election Monitoring as We Know It,” 5 November 2013, available at www.esiweb.org.

² David Marshall, ed., *The International Rule of Law Movement: A Crisis of Legitimacy and the Way Forward* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

³ Sarah Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴ Richard Youngs of the Carnegie Endowment’s Democracy and Rule of Law Program has been examining the rise of calls for non-Western democracy and their implications for Western democracy aid. He asks whether those calling for non-Western forms of democracy are simply seeking rhetorical camouflage for nondemocratic approaches and to what extent genuine variety is possible without sacrificing the core principles without which liberal democracy cannot exist. The Carnegie Endowment will publish his findings in book form in 2015.

This article was originally published in the *Journal of Democracy*.

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