

The Global Context for Promoting Open Democratic Societies

As the 20th century came to a close, many of us who have seen the horrors of war and dictatorship up close were for good reason cheered by the steady spread of open democratic societies taking hold throughout the world. Unfortunately, just six years later, there is much reason to see the glass as half empty rather than half full. This book, analyzing the strains and setbacks in the field of democracy promotion, helps illustrate why.

Internal forces pushing for democratic change are always the essential driver of a society's readiness to embark on the rocky path of democracy. But the external environment can also play a critical role. At the dawn of the millennium, international circumstances tilted the playing field in favor of democratization. The end of the Cold War and the pull of globalization and new technologies were breaking the logjam of old conflicts and opening new doors to political and economic transformation.

In fact, the main threat to the democratic trend was not military domination or the east-west conflict but rather the accelerated pace of change. The centrifugal force of globalization, and the neoliberal economic model that accompanied it, allowed autocrats to enrich themselves and left many developing economies behind, greatly frustrating the high expectations of so many citizens that democracy would deliver a better life. Moreover, the dispersal of the balance of power left the United States, already dominant in world affairs, a wide open field for seizing the advantage. It exploited its superpower position, at great peril to itself and others, by launching a global "war on terror" that put Iraq at the new ground zero for a transformational project to spread freedom around the world.

The widening gap between Washington's rhetoric for democracy and its actual record on protecting human rights and the rule of law has greatly exacerbated the situation. As a result we are facing a much more troubling international environment for democracy, one which distorts what should be a pro-democratization dynamic into an anti-American one. Groups

ardently working to pursue democratic change are burdened with a new wave of attacks by authoritarian leaders who accuse them of being pawns of a foreign plot to seize power and oil.

It is in this difficult context that the contributors of this volume approached the task of assessing how well members of the international community concerned with consolidating democracy have fulfilled their commitments to “work together to promote and defend democracy,” a pledge made at the first meeting of the Community of Democracies in Warsaw in June 2000. As the seven chapters attest, some constructive steps have been taken, not only by traditional actors like the European Union and the United States, but more importantly by some democratic states of the African Union and the Organization of American States. On balance, however, democratic states have a long road to travel before they can say they have a real strategy to back up their rhetorical commitments to support democratic transitions.

This book offers a thoughtful critique of what has been learned from recent experience with a variety of situations where opportunities have opened for democratic change. The authors helpfully present a number of concrete recommendations for policy-makers to fix the diplomatic toolbox so that reform is rewarded and, if necessary, denial of rights is punished. These ideas can work, but the essential task remains to create the political will to work together, through the Community of Democracies and other multilateral venues, to tilt the playing field in favor of democratic change.

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