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Conflicting Objectives in Democracy Promotion: Avoiding Blueprint Traps and Incomplete Democratic Transitions

Summary

Western donors attempting to promote democracy across the globe face a dilemma. Democracy is a highly valued policy goal, but they are fearful that the path to democracy will undermine another highly valued goal – political stability – and potentially cause widespread violence in the recipient countries or beyond. We ask whether these fears have empirical support and how donors can balance the potentially conflicting objectives of democratisation and stability when intervening in governance matters.

Recent research at the German Development Institute shows that fears about the destabilising effects of democratisation do indeed have some empirical support (Leininger et al 2012; Ziaja 2013). But these fears deflect attention from the bigger problem of "getting stuck in the middle". Hybrid regimes that exhibit authoritarian traits under a façade of formal democratic institutions constitute, in the long run, a larger security risk than attempts to make these countries more democratic. Hybrid regimes also hamper economic development, thus constituting an additional, indirect, risk of violent conflict.

The promotion of democracy is hence a laudable effort, but it may itself carry risks. A recent DIE study of 47 African countries suggests that support for democracy increases popular mobilisation in the short run, leading to increased demonstrations and riots. However, the same study produced no evidence that democracy support is likely to spark civil wars. Increased mobilisation is thus rather a sign of aid effectiveness than a reason to worry.

Yet, to be effective in the long run and to help steer popular demands into peaceful channels, democracy support must assist domestic actors in building institutions that fit the needs of their society. In the past, the potentially destabilising consequences of popular participation have seduced would-be engineers of social change into restricting competition in young democracies. This is a bad idea, as our recent research shows: narrow, elite pacts have, on average, led to worse political outcomes than open competition.

The best contribution that donors can make from the outside is to enable marginalised groups to participate in creating the institutional setup. This is best achieved when many donors promote democracy simultaneously. Only then can they avoid the "blueprint trap", which snaps shut when donors try to impose – advertently or inadvertently – an institutional setup on the partner country that does not fit its society's needs. Diversity on the donor side increases the chances of finding a context-adequate institutional design.

These findings suggest that an overly cautious sequencing approach to democracy promotion – stability first, only then democracy – has little empirical support. Most countries in the world embarked on a (formally) democratic path more than two decades ago. A gradualist approach that builds institutions while at the same time encouraging mobilisation is thus the more viable approach.

Recommendations in brief:

- Promote democracy now
- Keep democracy aid diverse
- Encourage endogenous, inclusive polity design
- Enforce conditionality on conflict resolution mechanisms in institutional design
- Balance trade-offs of democratic transitions.

Regime change and political instability: avoiding the abyss of incomplete democratic transition

Democratisation – understood as the expansion of political competition and public participation in the selection of the government – entails, by definition, the reform of old power structures and constellations, and thus some kind of instability. But institutional transformation need not necessarily translate into widespread political instability. Balancing the conflicting objectives of democracy support therefore involves the following questions: Can conflicts during regime transition be solved peacefully, or are substantial fractions of society more likely to opt for violence as a means of pursuing their interests? Does democratisation weaken the state's control of the monopoly of violence, potentially leading to violent unrest or civil war?

Examples of countries suffering from internal strife and violence during the process of political opening up abound these days. In particular, recent events during the "Arab spring" fit this perception. The Libyan government fails to disarm militias that helped remove dictator Muammar Gaddafi from power, Egypt struggles with resistance from the Muslim Brotherhood since a military government replaced President Mohamed Morsi, and Syria is deeply embroiled in an apparently unending civil war.

But are these typical trajectories? No, they are not typical for democratisation in general but only for very particular constellations: countries that start out as fully autocratic regimes and then fall short of achieving fully democratic status during a period of five years, i.e., cases of "incomplete democratic transition". These countries have been shown to suffer from a higher risk of civil war, and our research shows that these destabilising effects also hold for more subtle signs of instability (Ziaja 2013). State fragility, i.e., the sustained failure of a state to fulfil its basic functions, has been recognised as one of the most pressing issues in developing countries. One of the most crucial of these functions is upholding the monopoly of violence. Some states are not able to tackle security problems such as control of their territory (e.g. Mindanao region in the Philippines or Northern territories in Mali) or organised crime (e.g. narco-traffic in Guinea-Bissau or Bolivia). Our research found that cases of incomplete democratic transition lead to lower levels in the monopoly of violence.

This finding is, however, good news for the majority of developing countries, the so-called "hybrid regimes". These are known to be less stable than autocracies or democracies, and more than twice as likely to experience civil war. This base risk in hybrid regimes must be taken into account when assessing the risks of democratisation, but in the long run the advantages of being a fully democratic country far outweigh these transition risks. Once a hybrid regime has been established, further democratisation also implies more stability.

Can one therefore conclude that the promotion of democratisation from the outside is in most cases recommendable? One also needs to consider the direct effects of democracy support on political instability to assess this question.

Democracy support and political instability: mobilisation versus institutionalisation

The proposition that attempts to democratise are welcome does not necessarily translate into a recommendation to promote democracy from the outside. Democracy assistance by external actors can alter the dynamics in the recipient country, in both positive and negative ways. Democracy support may mitigate conflict in the recipient country by supporting the institutionalisation of conflict resolution mechanisms. Or it may aggravate conflict by polarising the recipient society.

Bolivia is an example where external involvement may actually have fostered political and social instability. Between 2000 and 2004 social unrest erupted in a highly mobilised society whose demands could not be channelled by exclusive and corrupt political institutions. Democracy support helped empower indigenous people to demand political inclusion and participation. At the same time, general international cooperation had promoted socio-economic development, which included access to basic services. It strengthened state institutions. A trade-off with democracy support emerged because the access to human and socio-economic progress was not open to everybody. As indigenous protests succeeded when two Bolivian presidents stepped down in 2003 and 2005, it became obvious that existing democratic institutions had failed. The actor-centred approach of international donors had missed out institutional support. But is this a typical trajectory? Does aid contribute to creating explosive situations in recipient countries?

Evidence on social conflict in Africa from 1990 to 2009 can help assess the generalisability of such claims. The example makes clear that the effects of democracy support on political instability cannot be assessed in isolation from the effects of other foreign aid flows ("general aid"). General aid has been shown previously to delay democratisation, because it strengthens rulers by providing funds that can be used for appeasing or repressing opposition groups. Recent evidence from Africa confirms that general aid reduces the occurrence of demonstrations and violent unrest. General aid thus mitigates political instability, but it also mutes popular participation (Ziaja 2013).

Wait or push? Gradual versus sequential democratisation

What implications do these results have for the organisation of democracy assistance? In the past decade, it has been hotly discussed whether democratisation should be delayed until a capable, stable state has been established, or whether both objectives should be pursued at the same time. This debate has been led under the label of "sequencing versus gradualism".

The figure below compares sequencing (dashed arrows) and gradualism (solid arrows). Proponents of sequencing argue that institutions have to be in place before mobilisation occurs. Gradualists like Thomas Carothers argue that, given a basic state structure that claims the monopoly of violence over a defined territory, institutional reform and mobilisation should unfold simultaneously.

The evidence presented above suggests that sequencing is rather illusory. Most countries have already embarked on the path to multiparty democracy, and there is no way to revert this trend. The fact that many countries got stuck on the way to full democracy is far more dangerous than attempts to overcome it, or to strengthen the corrupt regimes that are in power. Strengthening institutions while maintaining a *de facto* political exclusion of large shares of the population will erode trust in these institutions and potentially increase pressure to a point beyond which escalation cannot be avoided.

The gradualist approach acknowledges the benefits of participation in early stages of institution-building. The very design of the institutions must be accomplished with participatory means (see also Leininger et al. 2013). For example, Benin's national conference of 1990 included all sectors of society in the formulation of its democratic constitution and succeeded in creating a broad basis for the democratic regime.

Promising support strategies: avoiding the blueprint trap

What is the donors' role in a gradualist approach? Donors can best support a gradualist strategy by encouraging marginalised groups to influence the polity design, and by providing incentives to institutionalise the resolution of conflicts that will occur in the process of democratisation.

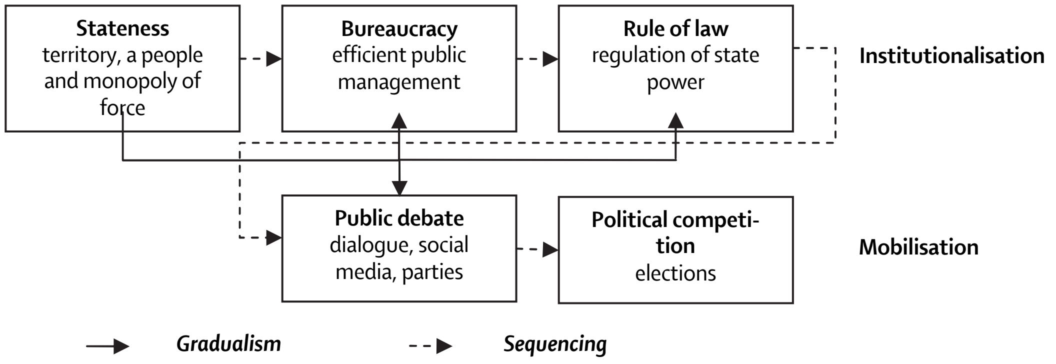
The problem that donors have faced in practice is that democracy is a custom-made "high-tech" product that cannot be planned in advance from the outside. Donors who attempted to impose their ideas of democracy on recipient countries fell into the "blueprint trap": they provided institutions that did not fit the recipient's context. Even the best intentions do not necessarily translate into good outcomes when one tries to engineer something from the outside that has to arise from inside.

The best option for external actors who wish to support processes of democratisation is to strengthen political diversity and decentralisation in the recipient country. Old elites monopolise the economy and thus access to financial resources. A pluralist society can only emerge when marginalised groups receive access to decision-making processes. Our research shows that this goal is best achieved when many external democracy supporters are present at the same time. Until now, scholars assumed that diverging goals of donors cause conflicts, which, in turn, undermine democratisation. But each donor provides a unique perspective and technical portfolio that helps increase the chances of domestic state and non-state actors receiving the support they need. A more evenly funded pluralistic society increases the chances of politicising relevant social cleavages that lead to resilient institutional designs. The fact that demonstrations and low-level violence occur more frequently when donors encourage participation is no contraindication. It is another indication that democracy support can actually work.

An escalation of conflict, however, needs to be avoided. This is best achieved with functioning institutions that channel demands and resolve conflicts. In unconsolidated democracies, institutions often fall prey to rulers who circumvent official procedures. Here, donors can exert pressure by coordinating the provision of aid other than democracy support and making its disbursement conditional on abiding by the rule of law – an opportunity that has been missed many times in the past due to competing and allegedly superior interests.

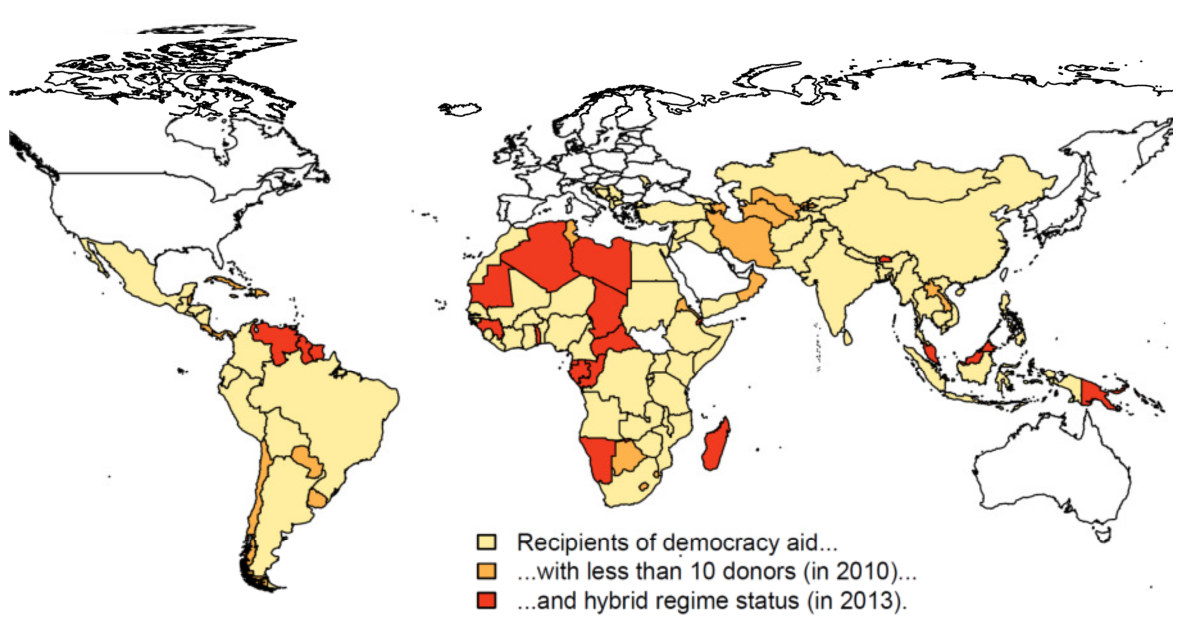
How well does the current practice compare to these recommendations? Conditionality is inherently difficult to measure. At the same time, it is relatively easy to detect whether democracy support is sufficiently diverse. A lack of diversity is not always a failure on the supply side. Many regimes – such as North Korea, Russia and Venezuela – severely restrict opportunity for external NGOs to provide support. Hybrid regimes, in particular, will most likely benefit

Figure 1: Support strategies: gradualism versus sequencing


Stateness
territory, a people and monopoly of force
Bureaucracy
efficient public management
Rule of law
regulation of state power
Institutionalisation
Public debate
dialogue, social media, parties
Political competition
elections
Mobilisation
Gradualism
Sequencing

Source: Own graph, based on Leininger et al. 2013

Figure 2: Unused options: Lack of diversity in democracy aid and hybrid regimes


Recipients of democracy aid...
...with less than 10 donors (in 2010)...
...and hybrid regime status (in 2013).

Source: Own compilation

from additional diversity. The map above indicates which countries received democracy aid from fewer than 10 donors in 2010, and which of these countries are hybrid regimes and would thus most likely benefit disproportionately from additional diversity in democracy aid today.

Recommendations for democracy assistance: building a (regulated) "market for democracy"

Promote democracy now in hybrid regimes. Democratisation is already underway in the majority of developing countries, in particular in hybrid regimes. The perpetuation of hybrid regimes is more harmful in the long run than a bumpy democratic transition.

Keep democracy aid diverse. Ineffective institutional blueprints can be avoided when many different donor perspectives are available for domestic state and non-state actors to choose from.

Encourage endogenous, inclusive polity design. Respect domestic choices that stem from participatory processes. If participative and inclusive processes are not established, donors might encourage more inclusive institution-building.

Enforce conditionality on conflict resolution mechanisms in institutional design. Make general aid strictly conditional on the implementation of institutionalised conflict resolution mechanisms that help avoid the outbreak of violence. Boycott rulers who engage in overly polarising politics or who limit diversity.

Balance trade-offs. Given complex local settings and diverging donor interests, conflicting objectives are the rule and not the exception. Strategising and continuous monitoring of interventions, while knowing about patterns of democratic transition and hybrid regimes, helps to mitigate potential negative effects of trade-offs.

Literature

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