

Investing in Democracy Abroad Doesn't Always Provide Benefits

Dr. Manal Jamal

In the post–Cold War era, few topics have captivated scholars and policy makers alike as that of promoting democratization and strengthening civil society in different parts of the world. Since 1991, bilateral and multilateral Western donor assistance for democracy promotion,¹ particularly civil society development, has increased dramatically and has become a central pillar of US foreign policy. The Middle East Partnership Initiative,² the Broader Middle East and North Africa Partnership Initiatives,³ and the Millennium Challenge Account are only a few such recent initiatives.⁴ At the same time, a heated debate has ensued about the best practices and role of Western democracy promotion efforts worldwide, and in the Middle East region in particular since the start of the Arab uprisings. In the late 1980s, less than \$1 billion a year went to democracy assistance; today that total is more than \$10 billion.⁵

Preliminary examination of numerous cases, however, indicated that there was little relationship between the amount of assistance provided and democratic outcomes. On the contrary, cases that had received ample democracy promotion support were exhibiting the most

¹ According to Schmitter and Brower, “democracy promotion” refers to efforts to liberalize, democratize, or consolidate regimes by “...re-writing their constitutions, designing their electoral systems, teaching their party members how to campaign, helping civil society organizations to lobby, socializing individuals to ‘proper’ civic values and behavior, and encouraging trade unions, business and professional associations, and state agencies to set up forms of (good) governance” (1999, 9). For more on democracy promotion, refer to Phillippe Schmitter and Imco Brower, *Conceptualizing, Researching and Evaluating Democracy Promotion and Protection*, EUI Working Paper SPS No. 99/9 (Florence: Department of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute, 1999).

² Then Secretary of State Colin Powell announced the Middle East Partnership Initiative in December 2002.

³ In June 2004, the G8 unveiled the “Partnership for Progress and a Common Future” with the Broader Middle East and North Africa.

⁴ Through the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), the White House linked significant amounts of foreign assistance to performance on democratic governance (for more on the MCA, see Windsor 2006).

⁵ Carothers, “Democracy Aid at 25.”

problematic outcomes. Although the examination of such outcomes was not absent in the policy and academic scholarship, the focus of the extant literature was on the type of aid and the variation in programs and allocations, often ignoring the role of political contexts, and political settlements in particular. Based on this preliminary observation, I began my in-depth examination of why democracy promotion efforts are more successful in some cases as opposed to others. Countering much of the extant scholarship, my preliminary findings pointed unwaveringly to the role of political settlement in shaping these outcomes. In 2006, Ḥamās won the Palestinian legislative elections and slowly a worst case scenario began to unfold. I was profoundly disturbed to see political events confirming my initial findings and argument.

These observations would become the basis for my book manuscript, *Democracy Promotion in Distorted Times*. This book elaborates on these answers by investigating how the degree of inclusion of political settlements shapes civil society and democratic developments more generally, and how Western donor assistance mediates these processes. The book examines these dynamics in two cases of conflict to peace transition, the Palestinian territories and El Salvador—two parts of the world that shared similar trajectories in terms of how the political organizations organized grassroots sectors that would diverge dramatically after the start of the peace processes in both cases. My in-depth examination of these two war-to-peace transition cases entailed over 150 interviews with grassroots activists, political leaders, and directors of professionalized NGOs and donor agencies enabling me to trace these divergent trajectories and the adverse effect that democracy assistance would come to play in the Palestinian case versus the Salvadoran case. In the Palestinian case, civil society became increasingly elitist with restricted opportunities to engage the state. In El Salvador, on the other hand, civil society remained less elitist and more inclusive of grassroots constituencies, involving greater opportunities to interact with the state. In both

cases, however, the resultant trajectories were direct outcome of the political settlement in each contexts and the level of support they enjoyed, and foreign donor assistance served to mediate these outcomes. In the Palestinian case, key actors were excluded from the onset of the Oslo peace process, and Western donor assistance would serve to reinforce this exclusion.

Unfolding events in the Middle East today confirm these findings. Regardless of how democracy is conceived and which dimensions of contestation are emphasized, non-inclusive political settlements in which key actors are excluded from the onset will undermine the prospects for the emergent democracy; Western democracy promotion efforts can serve to mediate these processes, but by no means determine these outcomes.