Jumping the Loaded Gun: How Promoting Democracy Fails to Achieve Peace

Jumping the Loaded Gun: How Hastily Promoting Democracy Fails to Achieve Peace

"Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere." In his second State of the Union Address in 1995, then American President Bill Clinton captured the very essence of the United States' (and most of Western Europe's) foreign policy foundation of the 1990s and onward. Diplomacy rested on the concept that the spread of democracy, arguably the most integral liberal ideal, would inherently make the world a better place, safer from the dangers of war and violence. While the Kantian notion of a global federation had long disappeared, attention turned to another major Kantian principle: "democracies will rarely fight or even threaten each other" (Russett in Dunne & Kurki, 2010: 102). Thus, the era of democratization began. Unfortunately, the peace and security democratization promised never came, at least in regards to the societies of, as Paul Collier refers to, the "bottom billion". Initially this essay will show that the West's hurried promotion of democracy, notably through regime change in low-income and conflict-affected states, has in fact achieved the antithetical outcome of its purpose: an increase in the political violence of, and destabilization within, such states. Following this, the essay will focus on the need for institutional construction or reconfiguration that favours and safeguards the advancement of successful democracy. Bear in mind this essay is not an attack on democratization as a whole. Rather, it is a criticism of the hastily attempted democratization common in US and Western foreign policy of the past two decades that has so far prohibited democracy from being a source of peace and prosperity in much of the underdeveloped world.

To begin with, let us examine the different results of democracy in low-income and high-income states. The majority of Paul Collier's work focuses on this fundamental issue. Collier explains the paramount fact: that "to date, democracy in the societies of the bottom billion has increased political violence instead of reducing it" (Collier, 2009: 11). Building on this point using statistical methods, Collier declares that "democracy had the opposite effect in poor countries to that in rich countries" (Collier, 2009: 20). A high-income society that featured democracy was found to be safer, while a low-income society that featured democracy was found to be more "dangerous", in this instance meaning more "assassinations, riots, political strikes, and guerrilla activity", as well as the possibility of a full-fledged civil war (Collier, 2009: 22).

Let us then apply these facts to the first scenario of democratization: a dictator, after years of international pressure, caves in and relinquishes his or her autocratic command for democratic elections. Initially, the dictator of a low-income country is the definition of elite; he or she lives in a palace, he or she controls all aspects of the nation, he or she possesses virtually unlimited power, and more importantly, the ability to eradicate any opposition. Democracy doesn't allow mass purges, and thus the democratized dictator of a low-income nation has no way of pruning the rose bush of opposition, humanly or legally (Collier, 2009: 24). Suddenly the masses have the power of the vote, yet because the democratized dictator wishes to retain authority, and because the level of poverty and the subsequent lack of institutional strengths prevent checks on his or her supremacy, voter fraud, miscounts, and lost ballots become commonplace (Collier, 2009: 30). However, due to the leader's inability to commit purges on a massive scale from the outset, a much larger percentage of the population has both a reason, and a willingness, to defy his or leadership in response to the mounting illegitimate activities.

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Thus, the democratized dictator momentarily loses his or her totalitarian source of power: fear. However, because of his or her desire to remain in power no matter the cost, he or she never gains the true and lasting source of power in democracies: accountability and legitimacy (Collier, 2009: 18). Subsequently, in the societies of the bottom billion, democracy does not provide either of these two necessary elements for both the continuation of effective governance and maintenance of societal necessities (Collier, 2009: 24). Based on Collier's statistical research, it would appear that economically, militarily, and rhetorically promoting dictators to abruptly take up democracy, without properly installing the necessary foundations of democratic fruition, generates worse conditions than those that originally caused the West to attempt democratization in the first place. In other words, democracy is supposed to bring peace and prosperity to such states; instead, it brings further chaos and bloodshed.

We then arrive at the second scenario of democratization: postconflict, in which the dictator does not abdicate to the ballot (even deceitfully) and instead retains power until being overthrown in an all-out civil war or, more significantly for our analysis, additional Western military intervention. Turning to Edward Flores and Irfan Nooruddin, "post-war democracy promotion has resulted in the holding of increasingly early post-conflict elections" (Flores & Nooruddin, 2012: 559). The earlier the election, the greater the probability that said election will "hasten the recurrence [of conflict or violence]" (Flores & Nooruddin, 2012: 559). You need only compare the Iraq under Saddam Hussein to the Iraq of today: one was relatively peaceful at the price of individual freedom, the other is quite possibly more hazardous for the average Iraqi citizen (Collier, 2009: 24). Another emerging and attesting example is the deterioration of security in Libya, which in less than a year after the NATO supported civil war against Muammar Gaddafi, held congressional and prime ministerial elections (Pack & Cook, 2012: 1). Early post-conflict elections also run the risk of not possessing genuine democratic principles in the selection of leadership (Flores & Nooruddin, 2012: 562). Voters "may support an insincere candidate or fail to support a sincere one", vote solely along ethnic lines, or be intimidated into choosing the "pseudo-democrat", dreading the possibility of more violence occurring should that candidate be defeated (Flores & Nooruddin, 2012: 564).

Furthermore, the power vacuum created in the transition will continually lead to competition among whoever wishes to assert command over the state. A good analogy is provided by Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder:

"Governing a society that is democratizing is like driving a car while throwing away the steering wheel, stepping on the gas, and fighting over which passengers will be in the driver's seat" (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995: 80).

Returning to our Libyan example, when victorious Prime Minister Mustafa Abushagur submitted his initial list of cabinet selections, not a single member of the congressionally victorious National Forces Alliance (NFA) was selected to serve on the cabinet; "furthermore, it was apparent that Abushagur's allies were favoured" (Pack & Cook, 2012: 2). NFA members left the Congress mid-session upon hearing the selections, and in the ensuing administrative turmoil the government was forced to admit it "did not have sufficient military capacity to provide adequate security for their own parliamentary offices" as "protestors from Zawiya… stormed the Congress building" (Pack & Cook, 2012: 2). Raising a defence and police force is difficult when the previous one of over four decades lays either dead or disbanded in the Libyan Desert. So by focusing foreign policy on regime change, followed by "rushing to the polls", political violence statistically, according to Flores and Nooruddin, tends to increase, and thus destabilization is furthered by the very effort of democratizing in the name of peace and stability.

So where did the West go wrong? Collier sums up the incident precisely in one sentence: "we have been unrealistic in expecting that these societies could in one step make a transition that historically has been made in several distinct steps" (Collier, 2009: 49). Mistakes admitted, how do we proceed? Mansfield and Snyder offer the best course of action, writing "what is needed is to identify the conditions that lead to relatively peaceful democratization and try to create those circumstances" (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995: 79). Luckily for our analysis, Flores and Nooruddin, as well as Nancy Bermeo, have done just that. According to Flores and Nooruddin, the postponement of elections to focus on institution-building decreases the probability of recurring violence (Flores and Nooruddin, 2012: 566). The two researchers identify three main concerns: "a well-designed electorate" for free and fair elections, "constraints on the executive" to reduce the capability of repression, and the need for "security institutions – including civilian control over the military and police to help lower the probability that politicians can resort to violence" (Flores & Nooruddin, 2012: 566). In achieving the third concern regarding civilian control of defence forces, Nancy Bermeo writes that the

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new government must "purge or retire any officer who is disloyal, punish coup makers ruthlessly, clarify the chain of command…and raise the status of the 'reformed' military through public ceremonies" (Bermeo, 2003: 168). Successfully creating these institutional changes before handing out ballots will safeguard the development of democracy in low-income or postconflict societies while at the same time promoting stability.

The issue of rushed democratization is a paramount subject in today's realm of international relations. Before the United States, any Western nation, or multilateral coalition decides to intervene in the domestic affairs of another country, attention must be given to the political, economic, and social repercussions long after armies have come and gone. This should especially be kept in mind throughout developments in the Syrian conflict. By hurriedly sponsoring democracy in the form of "rushing to the polls", the West has in fact increased political violence in the societies of the "bottom billion", and most likely "retarded the reform of economic policies and governance" in these societies (Collier, 2009: 44). Thus, as of now, democracy has not been a source of peace and prosperity across-the-board in international relations. Only through producing the institutional necessities of successful democracy beforehand can democratization ever be remotely beneficial in end result; for "the establishment of functional systems of democratic governance … is an indispensable dimension of efforts to build lasting peace" (Brown, 2003: 176).

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