

TRANSITIONS ONLINE

## The Pitfalls of Aid

by Lincoln A. Mitchell and David L. Phillips

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*America's next administration needs to rethink how it advocates democracy.*

The development of democracy has suffered a series of setbacks so far this year. [Georgia](#) was once a model of successful reform in the former Soviet Union, but controversial presidential elections have stirred doubt about the future of its democracy. [Russia's sham elections](#) excluded serious opposition in order to anoint Vladimir Putin's hand-picked candidate. Meanwhile, calls to scale back U.S. democracy assistance are increasingly heard as the Bush administration enters its final year.

U.S. efforts to assist democratic movements have historically enjoyed broad bipartisan support among Americans. Democracy was embraced by peoples around the world as the best system of governance to realize universal human aspirations for freedom and to support human development. Last year, American taxpayers spent about \$1 billion on democracy assistance in 50 countries, excluding Iraq and Afghanistan.

President George W. Bush has, however, discredited democracy assistance by using Iraq's democratization as justification for military action after the fact. In addition, America's moral authority has been undermined by the Bush administration's apparent disregard for the rule of law at Abu-Ghraib and Guantanamo and by the rendition of suspects to countries that practice torture.

The United States must not be dissuaded from restoring the promotion of freedom and democracy as a core principle of U.S. foreign policy. Democracy assistance is both a reflection of American values and in America's strategic interests. Democracies do not fight wars against each other, nor do they engage in terrorism or produce refugees. They also make more reliable allies and better trading partners.

### GETTING IT RIGHT

America's next president will be challenged to revitalize the democracy agenda – and get it right.

The more difficult, but ultimately more fruitful, choice for the next administration will be a policy of democracy assistance appropriate to the challenges of the 21st century. In the past, U.S. democracy assistance has been largely centered around elections, political party development, support for civil society, the rule of law, and better governance. These are the right pillars, but they have atrophied somewhat since the successes of the heady post-Cold War years.

What's needed to address the challenges of the 21st century is a more versatile approach based on the requirements of each country and tailored to the characteristics of different regime types – authoritarian regimes, illiberal democracies, free-wheeling kleptocracies and post-conflict countries.

Authoritarian regimes enforce strict social control through coercion and repression. The state governs without consent of the governed, and denies them basic freedoms and human rights. Political parties are restricted, as are the rights of assembly and expression. Genuine civil society organizations are discouraged, lest they threaten the regime with effective advocacy and mobilization.

The president and Congress can support democratization in authoritarian countries by publicly criticizing regimes for antidemocratic behavior, downgrading in-country diplomatic representation, and issuing demarches to express concern. U.S. officials can support democracy activists by granting them high-level meetings and publicly praising them.

Supporting the creative application of technology such as e-mail, blogs, video phones, video-sharing services and text messaging so that activists can coordinate their democratic activities and keep the outside world abreast of new developments helps break down the secrecy and scarcity of information upon which authoritarian regimes rely.

Illiberal democracies are characterized by strong states with weak freedoms. Simply improving governance in illiberal democracies can undermine democracy assistance efforts by further empowering anti-democratic leaders already in charge of relatively strong states. What's needed is a strong civil society with organizations capable of challenging the government and holding it accountable.

Free-wheeling kleptocracies hold elections and permit citizens considerable freedoms, but democracy is shallow because the state is weak, political elites are corrupt and self-interested, and elections are often stolen. In these countries it is important to broaden support for civil society by emphasizing support for non-politically oriented associations – such as parent and students groups – to develop greater social capital, trust, and cooperation among citizens, rather than concentrating on elite NGOs.

In free-wheeling kleptocracies it is possible and important to support fair elections. To this end, the United States should provide ample assistance for election monitoring by both international and domestic organizations and engage in long-term work with democratically oriented political parties so that if an election leads to a change of power it may also result in enduring democratic reform.

Democracy assistance to post-conflict countries typically takes a back seat for donors who are inclined to focus on state-building aimed at fostering the development of legitimate institutions. Despite the inherent uncertainties, elections in post-conflict

countries are critical to launching a democratic process to harmonize competing claims. The sequencing of events in post-conflict countries is something over which the international community has limited control. The polity has its own goals and insists on setting the timetable and agenda.

## EMPOWERING PEOPLE

To create conditions for democratization in shattered and traumatized war-torn societies, it is essential to address social justice issues that link the polity's need for security with a better quality of life. It is also important to consider ways that democracy assistance can better the odds for pro-development outcomes such as poverty alleviation, education, and the political, economic, and civic participation of women. Getting those who receive assistance involved in the process of monitoring and evaluating programs helps make those programs more effective while also promoting democratic governance.

The challenge to democracy assistance is to build on past successes and learn from our experiences. The last several decades have yielded some guiding principles. They proceed from the recognition that America's role should be vigorous, but it should always be to stand behind, not in front, of democracy movements. The United States should not seek to "lead" democratic revolutions or "teach" about democracy, but it can nurture local leaders and fortify indigenous institutions that are the pillars of democratic development.

To get it right, the United States must also recognize the benefits to working with the international community. Transatlantic and international cooperation not only complements American efforts. It also undermines democracy's opponents who claim that U.S. democracy assistance is merely a Trojan horse for regime change intended to serve Washington's interests.

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