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Autocratic Opening to Democracy: Why Legitimacy Matters

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ABSTRACT As recent experiments in democratization around the world show signs of achieving success, or failure, or more usually something in between, the attention of democracy promotion actors in the international community is turning to the world's remaining outstanding autocracies. The article identifies the autocracies, discusses the notion of autocratic opening, and explores how opening can come about, with particular reference to international intervention. The article argues that for identifying the prospects for autocratic opening and determining the forms of constructive engagement available to international actors it is useful to distinguish between the different grounds on which various autocracies claim legitimacy, and the specific vulnerabilities to which their principal legitimating base gives rise.

‘Even within democratic governments, NGOs in the democracies, and academia, there has been relatively little reflection on the process of ousting dictators and the need for plans and action’.¹

Introduction

‘Autocracies’ and autocratic rule are words that have wide currency in debates about the progress of democratising trends around the world, delineating a particular category of political regime that is widely thought to be in retreat. The ‘third wave’ of democracy in the 1980s and the early 1990s and a more recent groundswell of political change displayed by the ‘rose’, ‘orange’ and ‘cedar’ revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Lebanon have all contributed to this impression. As more countries move some way along the pathways of political liberalisation and democratisation so the attention of democracy promotion actors in the international community, who have proliferated and expanded their activities in the last two decades or so, now begins to turn to the group of outstanding cases, the ‘non-transitions’. This is illustrated nowhere more vividly than in Ambassador Palmer’s book, *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil. How to Oust the World’s Last Dictators by 2025*, published in 2003.

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However, just as the very mixed record of democratization among those countries that have embarked on political change confirms the complexity of the challenge, so it underscores the realisation that there is no inevitability about successful autocratic opening to democracy. Understanding how autocratic opening might be brought about seems at one and the same time to be both more pressing and more difficult. This paper argues that the different sources of domestic legitimacy autocracies may enjoy and the different vulnerabilities these can give rise to, deserve more thought than the attention they have hitherto received, not least for the implications for constructive engagement by democracy promotion actors in the international community.

Distinguishing the autocracies

As a political concept ‘autocracy’ is actually rather poorly defined. The *Oxford English Dictionary* calls it ‘absolute government by one person’, which is much narrower than the rather loose way ‘autocracies’ have come to be cited in contemporary political debate. Moreover even individual despots rule by virtue of the acquiescence and connivance of others: at minimum they need the support of the praetorian guard, as the philosopher David Hume writing in the eighteenth century observed. Autocrats might claim there are no formal constraints on their authority, but de facto power is never unlimited, especially in today’s increasingly interdependent world where increasing amounts of polycentric or multi-level governance encroach on state power and national sovereignty. Furthermore, not only do definitions that emphasise individual rulers distract attention from the autocracies’ system of rule, but they fail to recognise important differences over claims about the right to rule on the one side and on the other side cases where no such right at all is claimed - that is, where the autocrats’ power enjoys no legitimacy at all, and rests solely on force and fear.

The many references to autocracies in current discourse betray no single or ‘true’ meaning, although there is a purely etymological account that can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophers. That said, autocracies can be understood as political regimes where competitive political participation is sharply restricted or suppressed and the power-holders reserve a right to determine the rights and freedoms everyone else enjoys, while being largely free from institutional constraints

themselves.² In a fundamental sense such claims to arbitrary or unlimited power mean the ruled must be unfree, even if in practice the people are permitted some liberties to a certain degree, for example some economic freedoms, at the autocrat's discretion. Situating 'autocracy' towards the 'hard' end of the scale of authoritarian rule not only captures much general usage of the term but, compared to the dictionary definition is less likely to be a fairly empty category in practice. Of course some, perhaps arbitrary decision must draw the boundary with less hard types of authoritarianism; and the literature's invention of terms for 'diminished forms of autocracy' such as 'limited autocracy', 'semi-autocracy', and 'liberalised autocracy' do complicate the picture. Nevertheless it should be possible to separate out the autocracies from both democracies and 'diminished forms of democracy' - the 'hybrid' regimes that share some democratic with some authoritarian characteristics.

To identify which states are the autocracies a pragmatic response would be to use the information supplied by Polity datasets, Freedom House scores and the like. For example the non-profit, Washington DC-based and in part US government-funded organisation Freedom House, which regards international democracy promotion as its core business, claims to measure freedom and its absence (not levels of democracy). However its annual surveys, which employ a scale of 1 = most free to 7 = least free, are cited widely in the democratisation literature. The number of existing autocracies is sensitive to where we set the threshold level for autocracy. For example if it is a 'double six' or higher (at minimum a score of 6 for civil liberties and 6 for political rights) then Freedom House's survey for 2004 would place 23 countries as autocracies. Lowering the threshold to capture all states that Freedom House itself styles 'not free' (a minimum score of 11 for rights and liberties combined) more than doubles the number of autocracies, to 49, which is not far short of the number of 'partly free' states (54).³ Variations of this nature that owe to where we draw the line can impact on the common or distinctive patterns we then detect and that autocracies are found to share as a group.

Variety of autocracies and domestic legitimacy

The 49 states deemed 'not free' in 2004 comprised 21 in Africa including North Africa, 16 in Asia including Central Asia, eight in the Middle East, two in the Americas (Cuba; Haiti) and two in Europe (Belarus; Russia). These autocracies

exhibited considerable variety in many notable respects. Whether the true number should be 49 or just 23 or indeed is now close to 45, the countries show much diversity in the following: demographic size; territorial size; geographical location; size of economy; average income per capita; recent economic performance (growth rate); socio-economic inequality; culture (including religion); military capability and general state strength or weakness (autocracies may all claim 'despotic power' - the power to control and suppress through coercive means - but they differ considerably in their 'infrastructural power', that is the power to penetrate and transform society, the capacity to promote modernisation and development⁴). They vary too in respect of the state's patronage resources whether oil revenues-based or some other (this is relevant to the thesis that says demands for political representation/ governmental accountability are proportional to taxation), and in their record of addressing society's material wants and other needs. They also vary with respect to how integrated they are into the global trading system and their openness to foreign private capital flows, their interaction with peoples from the established democracies through international communications, foreign travel and the like, and the state of diplomatic relations with other countries, especially the major powers, or 'linkage' more generally with the West. There is no equivalence among autocracies in their political clout (actual or potential) in regional and global forums and their ability to get what they want from the international system, with or without resort to coercion, threats or payments.⁵ The presence of China and its overall displacement in the group of autocracies makes the overall picture look more diverse in some major respects, but certain features that are generally found in autocracies (without being common to all) such as poverty and great inequality are not exclusive to autocracies. Moreover they do not necessarily preclude favourable scores for freedom and democracy: India, often called 'the world's largest democracy' and rated free by Freedom House illustrates the point.

In terms of the political system, most especially the route by which the chief executive is determined, it is conventional to distinguish between personalistic dictatorship, sometimes referred to as sultanism⁶ and absolute monarchs, which come closest to autocracy in the dictionary sense (best exemplified among the Gulf states), de jure one-party states and military or military-backed regimes. These distinctions and their importance to the nature and prospects of transition to consolidated democracy are widely understood. However, no less significant is that autocracies differ also in regard to how much domestic legitimacy they enjoy – the regime's

acceptance by significant sections of society as legitimate authority – and just as important, in the legitimising source of their authority - *how* they legitimate their rule. Many autocracies can - do - enjoy some measure of legitimacy among social groups or strata even while they may possess no legitimacy at all among other subjects, a fact that is conveniently overlooked by much present day talk of democracy as a ‘world value’ Such ethnocentric claims about the absolute appeal of democracy and reference to widespread recognition of the imperative to clothe claims to political authority in language reminiscent of democracy, however bogus or strained, should not lead us to ignore the alternatives that continue to bestow some stability on some autocratic regimes – however puzzling or unappealing most people in the established liberal democracies might find them. This is potentially significant to exploring pathways out of autocracy and deliberating the role that democracy promotion actors in the international community might play.

The differences in sources of legitimacy are not synonymous with the types of political system or in the manner of executive recruitment although in certain cases there is a close fit. The sources include the distinctive claims based around the claimed right to hereditary rule (the source of legitimacy claimed by the largest number of historical autocracies) and theocratic rule - legitimacy based on status as clerics - where Iran and Saudi Arabia currently come closest; others rest on religious credentials of a formally looser or weaker nature. Then there are the claims to legitimacy grounded in a specific political ideology, most notably communism or ethnic nationalism or some mixture of the two usually effected by the persuasive practical powers of state propaganda. This may or may not be linked to the architecture of political inclusiveness indicated by a ‘participatory’ one-party regime. ‘Electoral autocracy’, where popular ‘consent’ is expressed through plebiscites and/or an electoral process that is hardly free and fair (‘rigged election autocracy’) or is incapable of disturbing the top power-holders even though the procedures on election day might pass certain international tests, is another and well populated category. As has been argued in the case of Jordan for example, even a non-fraudulent electoral process that is incapable of producing alternation in the real seat of executive power can serve to lend support to a regime.⁷ It can be meaningful in terms of buttressing regime claims to legitimacy. Finally in terms of domestic sources there is ‘performance legitimacy’ – meeting or presiding over fulfilment of societal needs and desires such as material welfare and personal security. This can count for a lot,

whether achieved through ensuring an increasing supply of ‘standard public goods’ to society (as in East Asia’s authoritarian model of development) or by dispensing patronage more discriminatingly through patron-client networks, as in many African countries. Perceptions of ‘performance’ of course may differ among different social groups, and their individual judgments will correspond to how well they fare. Even so, the beneficiaries may be so well-placed, or the ‘winning coalition’ is sufficiently large, to ensure regime stability without the government having to resort to massive intimidation or extensive repression.⁸

For some regimes, international legal recognition and support whether material and/or symbolic - that is to say *external* legitimation – are very valuable to the manufacture of legitimacy at home. Conversely, the portrayal of an ‘enemy at the gates’ and manipulation of the ‘other’ (as in the demonisation of US imperialism by the leaders of North Korea and Cuba, or of Israel and Zionism by Iran’s rulers) too can contribute a major source of domestic legitimacy. Naturally this and the other legitimating sources are not all mutually exclusive. In practice an autocracy is likely to derive its authority from more than one source. And just as the conviction may be spread unevenly across society, so a regime’s main claim to legitimacy can shift over time, adjusting to developments in society and changes in the international environment.

Finally, today’s autocracies differ over when and how they came to be autocratic. In China there is a distinct political tradition going back centuries, whereas in some of the other countries statehood has been enjoyed for less than 50 years. Although such considerations might affect the possibilities for autocratic opening to democracy now, the ‘causes’ that illuminate an autocracy’s persistence will not necessarily coincide with the historical reasons explaining its origins, where subjugation and oppression at the hands of colonial masters and a legacy from botched preparations for self-rule may be part of the background (as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for instance).

The resilience shown by some autocracies over the last 20 years or so - a time when there has been considerable political flux else in the world - is noteworthy indeed, as is the durability of some autocratic leaders (Fidel Castro being an outstanding example, given the termination of Soviet patronage and constant US attempts to destabilise his rule). However, although persistence does not mean permanence, the club of autocracies has actually gained some new members as well as

lost some members, from time to time. To illustrate, compare the Freedom House survey for 2004 with its equivalent for 1992 when the tide of optimism in democracy's 'third wave' was at its height (1992 saw the publication of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*). Freedom House identified 42 'not free' states in 1992. By 2005 just eleven of them had 'graduated', although only one (Ghana) has since reached 'free' status (that is a combined score for political rights and civil liberties of five or lower). But, over the same period the number of 'not free' states increased by eight, and acquired 20 newcomers in the process. Figures like these suggest that it is easier to become an autocracy than to make a sustained opening to liberal democracy. Indeed, if as McFaul argues seven 'necessary conditions' or 'critical factors' are needed to explain the recent breakdown of the *semi*-autocracies in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine,⁹ then how much more challenging must be the task of transforming a full autocracy? Historically there are more examples of autocracy being replaced by a different kind of autocracy (for example military rule succeeding a personalist dictator) and of strong autocracy giving way to weak autocracy (as when 'Baby Doc' succeeded 'Papa Doc' in Haiti in 1971), than there are liberal democratic transformations.

The conclusion that explaining the persistence of autocracy might have to be 'multi-causal', with different explanations or varying combinations of explanations serving in different places *and/or* in the same place at different times, is lent support by the variety and plasticity of legitimating sources. Exactly the same finding could apply to explaining autocratic opening. And while autocratic variety might be considered problematic from the perspective of general theory-building aimed at making predictions, its advantage is that certain pathways to change that look unfeasible in some autocracies might be more viable in some others. Where diversity implies the need for more than one explanation, so there could be plural ways in which autocracies start to undergo change, especially with the 'encouragement' of international actors. It is in these circumstances that the relevance of legitimacy comes to the fore, as will be argued after first commenting briefly on the idea of autocratic opening.

Autocratic opening

Autocratic opening is no mere circulation of the autocrats, a change of faces at the top. To be meaningful it must mean regime change, and more. Autocratic inclinations and institutions may not be the preserve of an inner circle, the political elite, but may also be found within society including among groups that would wish to dismantle and replace the existing autocratic regime. Some of the Islamic militants who are seeking to overthrow the Saudi monarchy are an example. So, while regime change can come about in several different ways, such as following a popular uprising from below or fragmentation and implosion from within, or through financial and economic collapse of the state and following external military intervention, all these cases beg the question ‘opening to what?’ In practice the sequel to autocratic openings has often been some modest measure of political liberalisation but nothing more significant than that. Certain civil liberties are increased but with no intention to institutionalise the principle of uncertainty in answer to the question ‘who will govern?’, which is requisite for liberal democracy. Evidence from the Middle East in particular suggests that the conversion of a vulnerable autocracy into a semi-authoritarian regime through a controlled process of political liberalisation can furnish something like a sustainable ‘equilibrium’ - although a moot point is how long that can continue where international pressure to accelerate change is intensified. Even then the challenge might be to avoid what has been called ‘democratization backwards’, where elections are used to determine who governs and alternation becomes a real possibility but without substantial progress towards the rule of law and a situation where all individual/group liberties are firmly entrenched.

Theories of path dependence tell us that previous regime characteristics and the manner of its opening will impact on what happens next. Certainly, the factors that produce autocratic opening may well not seal democratic transition and are unlikely to be sufficient to consolidate democracy or guarantee improvements in its quality thereafter. If autocratic opening occurs in a way that destroys the state, through bankruptcy or physical destruction (perhaps because the state was targeted as the route to making the regime vulnerable or the state was already very weak, or regime and state were so indistinguishable that opening the regime inevitably had dire consequences for the state), then the final outcome will be hard to predict. The sequencing of developments can be critical. For instance, without the existence-in-waiting of something like political parties that can organise, channel, and control the expression of popular demands then the collapse of an *ancien regime* may give way to

disorder, which in turn allows elements hostile to democracy ('uncivil' social forces, or populist demagogues, and the like) to take control of events.¹⁰ Iraq at the present time looks like a strong candidate. Moreover the outcome of attempted opening and its longer term survival will be contingent in part on the legitimacy that is garnered by the successor regime (whatever its type) and on how claims about legitimacy are affected by the manner of regime replacement, including the impact of international intervention (a complicating factor in Iraq especially).

Legitimacy matters

'Opening sustained' is preferable to 'opening lost' but what can make it happen? A fairly safe generalisation is that the importance of agency has gained increasing recognition in studies of democratic 'transition', and that the significance of structural conditions to sustaining democratisation in the longer term, especially socio-economic conditions, retains strong credibility too. At all times structural features - themselves in part the product of agency - will influence contingent choice to some degree. Further to that generalisation, distinctions which offer useful analytical purchase include those between conditions that make opening possible ('facilitating conditions') and conditions that predispose or make it more likely to happen ('promotional conditions'). The distinctions between conditions/requisites and preconditions/prerequisites, between underlying conditions (or preconditions) and catalysts or 'precipitating factors' ('proximate cause', or 'triggers'), as well as between necessary and sufficient conditions are also very familiar. However, it is probably unavoidable that different theoretical persuasions will subsume the same pieces of evidence under different headings, with one 'school' or theoretical tendency, historical materialism for instance, labelling as a primary cause what another claims are merely predisposing conditions. However, any ahistorical or uniform theories of change would benefit from investigating whether the circumstances which merely predispose to autocratic opening in one country at a particular point in time could be more potent in some other countries. In fact a growing acknowledgment of the international dimensions of democratisation suggests that external judgments of regime legitimacy may now carry more weight than perhaps at any previous time, although external actors can probably play a more decisive role in transitional stages than the long haul afterwards - when a society's firm commitment (or lack of) to

democratic values makes all the difference. But even then, external factors have the power to damage democratic prospects, for instance by frustrating economic development. Thus one possibility is that influencing factors, international or otherwise, may exert an asymmetrical influence: the greater potential of external actors to unmake than to create *sustainable* opening to democracy may be a leading example.

One factor that much recent discourse has tended to overlook in all of this is the autocratic regimes' claims to legitimacy. This bears witness to how far the idea that democracy is a universal value has become the conventional wisdom in the West. But the view that all right thinking people want to give it priority, with the only exceptions being megalomaniacs and their cynically self-interested acolytes is too simplistic. Moreover by failing to distinguish the different claims to legitimacy and their effectiveness among the autocracies, it fails to give sufficient weight to the different vulnerabilities (and differences in the extent of vulnerability) to which those claims can and sometimes do give rise. This is crucially important from the perspective of 'contentious collective action' directed at changing the regime from within society.¹¹ For example whereas a 'dear leader's' deep personal unpopularity or a time of leadership succession may both create a crisis for personalistic dictatorship these difficulties should be less evident for rule by a military junta or the hegemony of institutional one-party rule. The tensions that can exist between a desire to rule and the commitment to professional military values which may sometimes cause even a military government to weaken, and the way that one-party rule in communist Central-Eastern Europe was hollowed out by mass indifference and defections among the public, do not refute the point. In contrast, electoral autocracies that have or are about to introduce elections may miscalculate the chances of an autocrat being able to retain power even in a 'rigged' ballot (of course the denouement may not come immediately in one single 'electoral revolution' but could take two or even three successive elections). This is especially so where the rigging is widely judged to be so extravagant and so blatant as to delegitimize the electoral outcome, the process and the regime (as in Georgia's 'rose revolution', for example). Autocracies that survive largely on the basis of dispensing patronage, however, will be more than usually exposed to a sudden dramatic shrinkage in the resources at their disposal, especially if it begins to hurt the autocrats' 'winning coalition' – the social groups who have benefited the most and provide the main source of political support.

The different sources of legitimacy and their vulnerabilities are significant not just for what they might tell us about the exit routes from autocracy but because of the implications for how democracy promotion actors in the international community could seek to become involved.

International ‘intervention’

International intervention of various sorts in the furtherance of both democracy and human rights has increased dramatically over the last fifteen years. The stakeholders in this ‘industry’ include both governmental and inter-governmental actors and a host of (quasi-)non-governmental actors too, for instance the specially created democracy foundations, funded by governments (like Britain’s Westminster Foundation for Democracy), and the activities of Germany’s political foundations that are affiliated to that country’s political parties.¹² For many of them the chances of influencing particular institutions, policies and specific behaviours to an extent that falls well short of autocratic opening have to be rated much more highly than securing autocratic opening. Conversely autocratic opening to democracy need not mean the abandonment of all the institutions, policies and behaviours that key actors in the international community find objectionable or believe pose some threat to their vital interests. Hamas’s victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections held in January 2006 illustrates the point. It may even exacerbate or introduce some new problems, like the difficulty of persuading electorates to make economic sacrifices in the interests of tackling global climate change, when an autocratic government could act more decisively. Not all the factors primarily responsible for producing autocracy may be amenable to external influence of any sort. At minimum, rapid results should not be expected from international intervention – a point made by Levitsky and Way in respect of international ‘linkage’, which unlike ‘leverage’ is a source of ‘soft power’ that derives from economic, social, cultural as well as general political ‘ties to the West’.¹³

The possibilities for international intervention which span the range from hard power (highly coercive), through ‘diplomatic pressure’, to soft power, or forms of persuasion and the provision of democracy assistance on a consensual basis means there are issues of strategy for international actors: what is an appropriate mix and is there a particular sequence in which the different approaches or instruments should be

employed in order to secure optimum effect?¹⁴ The enforcement of financial or economic sanctions and the withholding of aid or other sought-after privileges such as membership of a preferential trading bloc, owing to a failure to comply with democratic and human rights conditionalities, lie towards the hard power end of intervention. They are not wholly reliable, and ultimately they risk imposing double jeopardy on the hapless citizens without guaranteeing the regime will change (Zimbabwe and Myanmar are illustrative). But the ‘soft power’ alternatives are hardly feasible towards the most closed societies like North Korea. And Nye is surely correct to say that ‘soft power’ (the ability to get what you want through attraction, not coercion or payments) is a relatively unpromising instrument in regard to precisely those societies where power is most highly concentrated, and more viable (but hence not so easily justified) in open societies where power is already dispersed. The effects are diffuse and may take many years to materialise.¹⁵ But it is worth noting that if path dependence within the domestic course of regime transformation really does influence the eventual outcome, then the manner of international intervention can contribute a form of path dependence in its own right. For example some critics claim that the destruction of Saddam Hussein’s regime by military intervention has made the challenge of Iraqi democratization more difficult, even though such a challenge would have been unthinkable while Saddam remained in power. It may have made democratization elsewhere in the region more problematic too. Countering that is evidence from some regions of a positive ‘neighbourhood effect’, for instance the travel of ‘democracy revolutions’ from Georgia to Kiev (December 2005) and Kyrgyzstan (2006).

One of the more reflective attempts to get to grips with thinking strategically about democracy intervention is what might be called the nutcracker approach, although it was designed more for semi-authoritarian regimes than full-blown autocracies. It is grounded in the assumption that pro-democratic political change involves conflict (not necessarily violent conflict), as different groups engage in struggles for and over political power. One side of the ‘nutcracker’ involves applying international pressure to the regime to open up political space in which domestic pro-reform interests can advance their cause. That these interests may be primarily interested in changing the regime so as to pursue their particularist economic and other interests more effectively, rather than valuing democracy for its own sake, is no automatic disqualification. The second side of the ‘nutcracker’ combines external

pressure with practical assistance to those societal groups and associations who are judged to have the potential and willingness to put the regime under pressure from below, especially if given some external support (training plus organisational, material and financial help). The strategy does need closer specification if it is to become fully operational, and it begs certain questions over and above a simply tactical or technical nature. For the closer the intervention approximates to hard power and/or risks provoking violent conflict within the countries concerned, then the more it raises moral and legal questions over who in the international community has the right to behave in this way if the objective is simply one of securing the possibility of opening towards democracy.¹⁶

While questions about the legitimacy of different modes of intervention should not be ignored, a different but perhaps complementary strategy to the ‘nutcracker’, one that offers a more discriminating and less uniform approach, would hone in on the issue of political legitimacy within the autocracies. Where the regimes’ domestic legitimacy can be eroded by taking advantage of one or more of the vulnerabilities that the different bases of legitimacy potentially leave exposed, then autocratic regimes could be pushed closer to the point where they either have to concede demands for reform or, alternatively resort to more extravagant use of force – which in turn may degrade any legitimacy that previously came from international or domestic sources. ‘Soft autocrats’ and, in hard autocracies some elements in the machinery of repression may balk at the use of ever greater force, especially if international actors threaten high costs through exercising leverage, or if the means to apply increasing force simply do not exist (however, international arms embargos rarely seem watertight). It also reasonable to assume that ‘within-regime’ and/or intra-state splits that enable the formation of pro-reform coalitions/alliances cutting across elite level ‘softliners’ and mass society’s democracy activists will create stronger pressure for change than if only one of these two constituencies mobilises. A partial exception would be where just such an alliance drives elite level ‘hardliners’ to be even more obdurate, because they fear the consequences of making concessions even more than if negotiations over political reform could have been contained within the elite level alone.

Legitimacy and intervention

At first sight the domestic sources of autocratic legitimacy that appear to draw heavily on international legal recognition and external signs of support appear most vulnerable. After all, both the withdrawal of unconditional political and military support by the Soviet Union under Gorbachev and the waning confidence shown in communism are generally reckoned to have seriously undermined the communist party regimes of Central and Eastern Europe. It was the beginning of the end for them. However, some of today's surviving autocracies seem well able to contain the domestic reputational consequences of international moral and political censure, and the West does not have complete freedom to withdraw all forms of external legitimation, anyway. For instance it is not easy to deny a government its country's seat in the United Nations General Assembly. In 2003 the US was unable to prevent Libya's election as chair of the UN Human Rights Commission: only three states out of 53 members voted against. Of course some autocracies enjoy practical support from and seek to draw legitimacy from the presence of other autocracies. This too makes it more difficult for democratisation's international supporters to undermine some regimes when they are reluctant or unable to 'pick off' their main international 'friend', China in particular. Moreover, prominent actors in the West such as the foreign affairs, defence, and trade and industry departments of major states at times have reasons of their own for not wanting to destabilise one or another autocratic government. But where an autocracy can bolster its legitimacy at home by feeding domestic hostility to western intervention (including for instance democracy promotion efforts) then again the challenge for outsiders is anything but straightforward. Similarly where autocratic rule is underpinned by society's acceptance of the principle of hereditary rule, or by religious convictions and even more so if external pressure to democratise is seen as yet one more unacceptable example of cultural imperialism, then the regime's basis in legitimacy indicates no obvious grounds for leverage by international democracy promotion actors.

'Electoral autocracies' by comparison look like clear-cut candidates for sustained international efforts to improve the quality of the electoral process specifically. Moreover this approach to weakening the legitimacy an autocracy derives from holding elections should be positive also for sustainable democracy later, unlike for instance approaches that rely on eroding a regime's performance legitimacy by the use of sanctions that damage the country's economy.¹⁷ Of course that alone might not bring about alternation in office, and even if it does, the regime might

remain the same. In contrast autocracies that draw heavily on performance legitimacy seem exceptionally vulnerable to whatever reduces their ability to meet people's needs, wants, and expectations. Perhaps more telling still, they are vulnerable to whatever causes society to believe that the regime cannot or soon will prove unable to meet people's needs, wants, and *aspirations* such as in the event of a major 'exogenous shock'. These scenarios may not be of much concern to those autocracies that today are benefiting handsomely from globalising economic trends which lie outside the power of governments in the West to control. Thus for instance winners in the Gulf from recent dramatic hikes in the internationally traded price of oil and natural gas exemplify the political version of a 'resource curse'. A more contentious example would be President Chávez' Venezuela. But the same situation need not apply to states whose governments are heavily underwritten by international aid.

In oil-importing autocracies and especially the more aid-dependent, then, international actors do have the means to undermine regime legitimacy, by affecting economic performance through the application of economic sanctions, the enforcement of relevant political conditionalities and the like. But this can be done only at the price of making society incur some hardship in the meantime (i.e. 'double jeopardy'). Regime insiders who staff the instruments of repression will be the last to suffer. Calculating the inter-temporal and, possibly inter-generational distribution of costs and benefits to society from attempts to propel such a trajectory – one that travels from a spell of reduced performance (legitimacy) to autocratic opening - is extremely hazardous, not least because the crucial timings cannot be known in advance. Moreover no one can be absolutely certain that society will be 'rewarded' in the form of an improved regime 'performance' at the end. And it is not possible to objectively compare the estimated overall welfare consequences of gyrations in regime performance with the anticipated increase in freedoms that should accompany autocratic opening. The people's own preference weightings on these matters cannot be established easily under autocracies, where the impartial design and execution of opinion surveys is not allowed. Furthermore, *ex ante* and *ex post* judgments on these matters by the people may not coincide (successive polls of the Iraqi public asking whether life is better post-Saddam have produced varying results). Finally, weakening a country's economy is no way to prepare it for opening to democracy, if modernisation theory's claims that stable democracy has certain socio-economic requisites are at all valid (it is too soon to tell whether Indonesia, where externally-

driven financial crisis destroyed the Suharto regime in the late 1990s, offers contrary evidence).

An alternative scenario then, where society may not have to suffer absolute welfare losses in the meantime, would entail growing dissatisfaction with an autocratic regime's performance (or expected future performance) owing primarily to an increase in society's wants, felt needs, expectations and/or aspirations. In all but the most closed societies there is some scope for international contact to bring such a situation closer. Through the international demonstration effect of conspicuous consumption in the West greater 'linkage' can help convert inadequate regime performance into local dissatisfaction and political opposition. Practical external support for measures that raise the levels of education might help in this regard too. Where gross corruption, cronyism and/or mismanagement of scarce national and public resources are features of the autocratic rule, then any increase in public sector transparency which publicises the opportunity costs imposed on society will offer further possibilities. In this way the international financial institutions' efforts to promote better 'governance' can contribute to eroding autocratic regime legitimacy, even though they cannot guarantee wide publicity for their findings throughout the society (autocracies usually control and censor public communications). This in turn draws attention to the role of the media. Assistance to the development of independent, professionally-run radio and newspapers offers a further 'line of attack' even if the operators have to be stationed outside the country's borders, so long as the activity is not confused with more traditional propaganda activities geared to national interests. This seemed to be very effective in Serbia in the final months of Milošević's presidency, for instance.¹⁸

Of course a weakening of the hold exercised by a regime's legitimacy need not involve actual material reductions in societal well-being if society, or, perhaps just key members of the regime's 'winning coalition' can be persuaded that their (increasing) material wants, needs, and expectations/aspirations are more likely to be met (or, even, surpassed) in the event of autocratic opening. Raising expectations in that regard goes beyond merely dissatisfaction with the status quo, and it could add extra impetus to the domestic struggle anticipated by the 'nutcracker' approach. It might be every bit as important as a way of supporting struggle as is Palmer's emphasis on raising the activists' expectations about their *capacity* to secure political change.¹⁹ International actors may be complicit in getting the message across by

voicing criticism of a regime's performance and more substantively by publicising that the country would be rewarded with offers of development aid, admission to preferential trading arrangements and so on if - but only if - the regime reforms. Of course the logic of economic market forces may add its own impetus, independently: market actors strive to increase the people's wants, felt needs and aspirations for purpose of making profitable gain. Indeed, one argument is that autocrats' resistance to political reform might be overcome by pushing economic liberalisation in a direction that 'feather beds' them - they trade political power for secure economic gain - although such an outcome could easily defeat the purpose of democratisation, and may look attractive only to some types of autocracy (not hereditary monarchies, for example). And even if economic liberalisation and the operations of the market do challenge the economic power formerly wielded by the state there is no certainty that the legitimacy an autocratic regime enjoys will be destroyed, especially if the government can capture credit for the improvements in living standards. The point is amplified where society prioritises material gains over freedom - a modern version of the old Roman Republic's tale of 'bread and circuses' (latte coffee and DVDs, perhaps?). That said, identifying economically rational economic policy/institutional reforms that will impact adversely on an autocratic regime's key supporters while leaving much of society unharmed, and then working out how to persuade the government to initiate these reforms, is a strategy that offers interesting possibilities for international intervention. Its implementation need not compromise the principal international financial institutions' constitutional constraints on pursuing political ends, so long as the arguments that stress the potential economic gains from this course of action look plausible.

Where, in contrast, the performance legitimacy of an autocracy rests on its claimed ability to secure order and stability in society rather than prosperity, much could depend on society's willingness to believe that neither the process of autocratic opening nor the political situation that would be most likely to succeed it (weak government, for example) will jeopardise these valuable properties. The degree to which there really is a widespread 'fear of freedom' (or in the case of vulnerable minorities, fears about increased scope for injurious discrimination following a movement towards majoritarian democracy) will depend in part on whether the society is reasonably homogenous. The past record and historical memory of civil peace or sub-state violence will be influential too. The degree of empathy with other

societies where autocratic opening has brought chaos or violent disorder could also be important. Thus it is unsurprising that China should draw lessons of caution from the political changes that brought the internal collapse of the Soviet Union; similarly, peoples in the Middle East today may look at Iraq and fear the consequences of pushing for significant political change at home. For the most part these are considerations that are not open to manipulation by international democracy promoters, although where a military (-backed) government has been defeated in war that can undermine its claims to be essential to domestic order (as Argentina's junta discovered following the war in the South Atlantic). But perhaps the most that democracy promotion actors can do is try to combat the belief that authoritarian rule is necessary for development either directly or through presiding over stability, although here the signals sent out by scholarly investigations in the West continue to be mixed.²⁰ Initiatives in international development co-operation that really do enhance the performance of developing world democracies in furthering the well-being of the majority of their own citizens furnish a better advertisement for the merits of democracy than where trends in economic globalisation retard or undermine those democracies' record of development and human security in the larger sense.

Finally, there is the approach to promoting democracy that stresses its intrinsic worth as a system of values and beliefs that emphasises equal human rights, and is superior to all other political credos. An implicit premise in the arguments for spreading democracy by way of socialisation, acculturation and education – more akin to 'soft power' than harder power interventions like political conditionality - is that democracy's normative appeal can possibly trump the instrumental advantages *or disadvantages* it might be thought to have. The triumph of democratic ideals over communism in much of the former Soviet empire might be thought to lend support to this belief, especially in the 1990s during and after the political upheavals when living standards in the transition economies began to plummet. Where the main ideological rival is ethnic nationalism the contest may not be so easy. Most importantly in the Middle East and other countries with substantial Islamic communities, is the challenge of persuading society to believe that liberal democracy need not threaten fundamental religious beliefs and practices, regarding the status and role of women for instance.

International endeavours to combat autocratic legitimacy by disseminating liberal democratic norms and through socialisation are of course not incompatible

with efforts to apply the ‘nutcracker’ approach, although they do draw on very different models of politics. The second seeks to mobilise groups in struggle and sharpen the conflicts of interest, in short, it sees politics as action; the first places emphasis on changing the political culture and fashioning a new consensus, in other words, politics as talk. But the latter has an advantage wherever the ‘nutcracker’ finds itself working with domestic political activists who have no great ideological commitment to democracy and are motivated more by a calculus of self-serving and short term gain or harbour sinister political intentions. But of course there are some obvious caveats too. Apart from the practical problem of gaining access to society in the first place, does it really matter what the people think where the regime is prepared to respond to shifts in public opinion by increasing the repression? What do the democracy promoters do next if substantial numbers of people remain suspicious about the West - or more specifically about its ideas of freedom and democracy? And ‘Do not democratic principles imply that a community may, through a majority decision somehow manifested, delegate political decision-making to an authoritarian government in perpetuity, conditional on that government’s fulfilment of the purposes for which the delegation was made, for instance national unity, political stability, decisive government or long term planning. Any answer but yes violates the very equality of respect that democratic principles require us to accord members of different societies with different values, goals and traditions’.²¹ The absence of a democratic culture among the mass of society might not prevent autocratic opening by a regime, but it would certainly obstruct democratisation’s progress further on. Similarly the complete absence of true democratic convictions among the political elite need not mean there is no hope of autocratic opening: ‘nondemocratic actors, with nowhere else to turn, may seek negotiated, second-best solutions to contingent dilemmas that thrust them unwittingly on the path to democratic practice’.²² But an absence of liberal democratic convictions among both elite and mass looks very unpromising indeed, even if outside actors do tilt the incentive structure in favour of making some limited opening. Readers are invited to make their own estimates of which and how many countries fit this category.

The United Nations currently has no legal right to use force to impose democracy, even if it were logically and practically possible for democracy to be imposed. But in what could look like another example of double jeopardy, the citizens of longstanding autocracies do seem to be placed at a disadvantage compared

to societies where autocracy has been only recently reinstated following a democratic interlude, if there really is a 'new implicit norm: once the people of a state have chosen a democratic form of government, it becomes both a right and a duty of the international community to protect the will and sovereignty of those people against unconstitutional interruptions of democracy by internal actors.'²³ But not only does the UN lack much coercive power but the likelihood of military intervention by US-led forces for the purpose of bringing democracy should not be overestimated, given the growing burden of imperial overstretch and the salutary lessons to be gleaned from foreign occupation of Iraq. Where punitive sanctions are threatened or invoked, the main objective may not actually be democratisation but some other purpose, as in for example trying to dissuade the Iranian government from developing a military nuclear capability or from extending its political influence too deeply into southern Iraq. Yet in situations where a persistent gross abuse of human rights provokes sufficient international outrage or the UN Security Council declares that a regime threatens other countries' security, then the possibility remains that military intervention would gain the kind of legitimacy that even the most benign autocracies may never possess at home.

In the end that might not be necessary, however. For even where an autocracy has virtually no legitimacy and is maintained largely by force and fear, society's potential to make a difference through non-violent resistance and protest should not be underestimated either.²⁴ In these circumstances the extension of non-violent support by the international community to non-violent strategies of opposition to autocracy within a country are harder to label as illegitimate manifestations of a new imperialism. At least the autocracy's claims to legitimacy might be revealed for what they really are - threadbare - where not only does *domestic* opposition to the regime exist but the *only* way the regime feels able to respond is by increase of repression. And in some cases sound legal pretext may exist to at least bring autocratic (former) leaders to account under international conventions such as those that outlaw war crimes, crimes against humanity or more specific crimes such as torture, if the state is signature to some relevant international treaty.

Conclusion

That autocracies or hard authoritarian regimes vary in how they go about 'systems maintenance' is a fact that extends to the legitimating claims they employ - with

varying degrees of success - so as to avoid undue reliance on physical repression. Because these different claims are not all vulnerable in the same degree or in similar ways, actors in the international community who see it as their role to promote autocratic opening to democracy are presented with choices over how to proceed. From among the several possible resources of power and influence they can call upon, some approaches or combinations of instruments will have potentially more relevance than others, depending on which autocracies are identified and their legitimating properties. For autocracies that dispense with all claims to authority the analysis presented here would appear to have no relevance, leaving hard power as the most obvious approach. But that certainly cannot guarantee opening to democracy and moreover except in special circumstances the use of force has legal and legitimacy problems of its own. Where domestic claims to legitimacy furnish some support for a regime the democracy promotion actors outside would do well to take the distinctive claims and their vulnerabilities into account, when devising their strategies. Where a regime's claims to legitimacy draw on different sources or the substance of their claims changes over time, then a combination of approaches would seem to be indicated, and some attention should be paid to the sequencing too.

Notes

- 1 Ambassador Mark Palmer, *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil. How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, p. 86.
2. This is in keeping with for instance the account offered in T Gurr, K Jagers and WH Moore, 'The Transformation of the Western State: the Growth of Democracy, Autocracy, and State Power since 1800', in *On Measuring Democracy*, A Inkeles (ed.), New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1993, pp. 80-81.
- 3 A Puddington and A Piano, 'The 2004 Freedom House Survey', *Journal of Democracy*, 16(1), 2005, pp. 103-8. The most recent findings, for 2005 – to be published in book form as *Freedom in the World 2006* in the summer of 2006 - put the number of 'not free' states as 45, the lowest number for over a

decade, with a corresponding increase in partly free states, to 58. The number of autocracies and their identity would differ if other data banks are consulted, owing to differences of definition and methodology – an observation that only compounds the point made here. On the frailties of all such statistical measurements see D McHenry, Jr. and A. Mady, ‘A Critique of Quantitative Measures of the Degree of Democracy in Israel’, *Democratization*, 13(2), pp. forthcoming.

- 4 Distinction from M Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- 5 Of the 49 ‘not free states’ in Freedom House’s survey around fourth fifths are low income but at least six are ‘lower middle income’ and at least a further 3 are ‘upper middle income’ (World Bank classifications, which offer no data for three countries). Recent economic growth rates above 4.5% p.a. were recorded for at least six states. On the GINI scale for inequality that ranges from a high of 60 (as in the ‘free states’ of Brazil and South Africa) and a very low of under 25 (Scandinavia) several autocracies report figures in the low 40s (similar to UK and US) or even less. Around one fifth of all autocracies comprise significant oil producers/exporters but many more are very exposed to imported oil price inflation. There are majority Islamic populations in around one third. Many autocracies are situated in ‘bad neighbourhoods’ but some are adjacent to states with strong democratic traditions or a positive recent experience of political reform. North Korea remains aloof, but Cubans have many international connections and China is a major engine of economic globalisation. In Asia China appears to be seen as a potential rival to American soft power, partly through its association with the idea of a multipolar world where big powerful countries do not interfere aggressively in other countries’ internal affairs. See J Kurlantzick, ‘The Decline of American Soft Power’, *Current History*, December 2005, p. 422-3. On the significance of ‘linkage’ (density of ties to the West) see S Levitsky and L Way, ‘International Linkage and Democratization’, *Journal of Democracy*, 16(3), 2005, pp. 20-34.
- 6 J Linz and A Stepan distinguish sultanistic regimes from authoritarian, totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes in their *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-*

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- communist Europe*, Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- 7 See E Lust-Okar on elections to Jordan's parliament, where political contestation is primarily about gaining access to patronage through securing political representation. 'Elections under Authoritarianism: Preliminary Lessons from Jordan', *Democratization*, 13(3), 2006, pp.forthcoming.
- 8 On why extensive patrimonialism is not necessarily a source of regime weakness and can actually be a strength, so enabling an autocratic regime to survive the transition from one personalist leader (President Bourguiba) to another (President Ben Ali) as in Tunisia in 1987, see J Brownlee, '...And Yet they Persist: Explaining Survival and Transition in Neopatrimonial Regimes', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 37(3), 2002, pp. 35-63.
- 9 M McFaul, 'Transitions from Communism', *Journal of Democracy*, 16(3), 2005, pp. 5-19. 'The presence of only a few of these factors is unlikely to generate the same outcome', *ibid.*, p. 17.
- 10 Scenarios foreseen long ago by S Huntington in *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968.
- 11 A point made by J Ulfelder, 'Contentious Collective Action and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes', *International Political Science Review*, 26(3), 2005, pp. 311-34.
- 12 For greater detail see P Burnell (ed.), *Democracy Assistance. International Co-operation for Democratization* (London: Frank Cass), especially chapter 2.
- 13 Although essential if competitive authoritarian regimes are to be moved closer to democracy, the writers say linkage is 'primarily a structural variable...less malleable – and hence less amenable to foreign policy manipulation – than are individual leaders or constitutional frameworks', except in the medium to long term'. S Levitsky and L Way (note 5), p. 33.
- 14 On strategy see P Burnell, 'Political Strategies of External Support for Democratization', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 1(3), 2005, pp. 361-84 and P Burnell, 'Democracy Promotion: the Elusive Quest .for Grand Strategies', *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*, 16 (2), 2004, pp. 100-116.

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- 15 J Nye, *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004. For Nye 'soft power' comes from a country's culture, political ideals, domestic policies and manner of conducting international relations.
- 16 The nutcracker as presented here is a simplified rendition of the strategy outlined by T Carothers in for instance his *Critical Mission. Essays on Democracy Promotion* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004). Palmer's (note 1) recommendations are not dissimilar, although he is willing to countenance external military intervention and not just as a last resort. Some of the issues are explored further in Burnell (note 14).
- 17 Thus in *Beyond Free and Fair. Monitoring Elections and Building Democracy*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, E Bjornlund advises international observers to concentrate more on strengthening the civil society's own capacity to observe and monitor both the electoral process *and* the political process between elections.
- 18 See Krishna Kumar, *Promoting Independent Media. Strategies for Democracy Assistance*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006.
- 19 Palmer (note 1).
- 20 Thus while B Milanovic of the World Bank claims that war and civil strife is the main explanation of lack of development in the poorest countries and democracy has had no effect on growth (*Why did the poorest countries fail to catch up?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Paper 62, November 2005), M Halperin, J Siegle and M Weinstein argue that poor democracies have outperformed non-democracies and assert the developmental success of East Asia's autocracies is 'highly exceptional', in *The Democracy Advantage – How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace*, New York: Routledge/Council on Foreign Relations, 2004.
- 21 B Roth, 'Evaluating Democratic Progress' in *Democratic Governance and International Law*, G Fox and B Roth (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 508.
- 22 J Waterbury, 'Fortuitous by-products', *Comparative Politics*, 29 (3), 1996, p. 399.

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- 23 M Halperin and M Galic (eds), *Protecting Democracy*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005, p. 6. This view is new and untested; it may not have as much support as its proponents claim
- 24 See K Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections. People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.