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## **Democracy Support: a Fresh Start**

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## 1 Background

On April 30, 2009, FES New York and the Century Foundation organized an international conference on new prospects for the democratic idea. Attending the conference *Supporting Democracy: Pressing the Re-set Button on International Policy*<sup>1</sup> were senior experts and policy makers from government, diplomatic missions, UN organizations, trade unions, NGOs, think tanks/research organizations, academia and the media from Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the US.

Discussions covered an array of topics, such as the coupling of democracy and economics, democracy promotion in the Middle East as well as the general challenges for democracy promotion, particularly since the international consensus around democracy has eroded over the recent years. In addition, the key note speaker addressed the possible effects of the current financial crisis on democracy at large.

Much of the content of this paper draws from the debates at this conference.

### 1. Introduction

Democracy support faces a period of severe challenges and surprising opportunities. The legacy of the Bush administration's linkage of democratization and forceful intervention cannot be resolved quickly. But the Obama administration has already undone some of the damage, especially with the Muslim world. Regime change will be out of fashion for quite a while. With the new US administration in place, a "fresh start" for democracy support would be possible, but there are fears that the financial crisis and shifts in global power – most obviously towards China – mean that it still has an uncertain future.

Freedom House, which surveys political and civil freedoms worldwide, calculates that these have dropped for three years in a row.<sup>2</sup> Pessimists foresee an "age of insecurity, a time not unlike the thirties when authoritarian politicians were able to persuade voters to embrace fascism."<sup>3</sup> Yet the current crisis creates openings for democracy

support. It has challenged governments to show that they can respond to their citizens, not only in terms of economic needs but also in protecting their legal and political rights in the downturn.

These pressures are felt beyond established democracies. In China, law courts are seeing the number of labor cases double annually and criticism of official corruption is rising.<sup>4</sup> In Russia, the Kremlin's "managed democracy" has faced protests as far a field as Vladivostok as the recession has ended its energy boom. From Latin America to Egypt and Iran, public criticism of autocratic leaders has increasingly spilled onto the streets.

The challenge for democracy supporters today is to show that open societies – societies that allow their citizens to express their concerns freely and participate in political parties, trades unions and civil society movements – are better placed to weather the economic storm than the non-democratic alternatives. It is probable that China's growth rate will rebound more dramatically than that of most democracies. But there are other metrics for policy-makers during the crisis. How effectively can democracies protect social solidarity and the rule of law? How readily can they respond to the poor? Can they defend and develop the international cooperation needed to manage an interdependent global economy?

This is the agenda that should motivate democracy supporters – and one that allows them to move on definitively from the Bush era. It focuses not on regime change but protecting individuals and communities currently under huge stress. It also opens opportunities for non-Western democracies to influence global debate. India, for example, is surely central to discussions of how to aid the poorest. If this broad agenda is to succeed, however, it is necessary to tend to two more immediate sets of problems:

- **Instability in young democracies.** Economic and political forces have put increasing pressure on a number of countries that moved towards greater democracy in the Bush years. In Europe, Georgia and Ukraine are suffering chronic instability. In Africa, young democracies like Liberia face huge social and economic challenges, sometimes descending into violence. While many democracy advocates disavow the US experiments in Iraq and Afghanistan, either or both of these countries may slip into autocracy (or worse) in the near future.

1 For more information, including video footage of the debates, please visit:

<http://www.tcf.org/list.asp?type=EV&pubid=250>

2 See data and commentary at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

3 Edward Webster, "The Difficult Dilemma facing Democrats in the Global Crisis" (FES conference paper, 2009), p3.

4 See section 3 below.

Nonetheless, a number of relatively new democracies – including Serbia and Ghana – have recently held free elections resulting in peaceful transfers of power. These cases suggest that democracy support can pay off in the long term.

- **Uncertain international institutions.** The role of international institutions in protecting democracy and human rights is in doubt. The UN has been weakened by disputes between China and the West over human rights in Burma, Sudan and Zimbabwe. Russia has undermined the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe. There is better institutional news elsewhere. The African Union has opposed a series of coups on the continent, and even the cautious ASEAN has criticized Burma's regime. The UN has founded a Democracy Fund with India among its largest donors. The World Bank and UNDP have recognized that good governance is key to development. But much of this activity is disjointed, limiting its overall impact.

This set of circumstances – combining the after-effects of the Bush years with the new threats of the financial crisis – demands actions on three tracks. The first is to mitigate the harm of the economic downturn, not only to the welfare of vulnerable populations worldwide but also their legal and political rights. This requires support to trades unions, social movements and individual human rights defenders who can speak up for the poor.

The second track of action involves focused assistance to young democracies – countries likely to slip back into autocracy or chaos under present pressures. This support can take a number of forms, from governance assistance to help newly democratic governments meet voters' needs to high-level diplomacy to reduce outside interference in their affairs.

The third track of action is to strengthen international organizations to ensure that they continue to sustain democracy and social and economic rights. This involves boosting their technical capacities – by expanding the governance work of development agencies, for example – but it has an inescapable *political* dimension. It will be necessary to bargain with undemocratic powers to get deals on climate change and economic governance in the near future. But democratic governments (and the NGOs that monitor them) must combine these deals with continued concern for human rights questions.

If this triple approach represents a significant departure from the Bush administration's poli-

cies, it is more consistent with the policies of other democracies over the last decade. European and Latin American governments have, for example, invested heavily in development aid and international institutions – but often seen their policies undone or overshadowed by US decisions. There is now an opportunity for a more coherent democracy support strategy that includes the US as a partner rather than a problem.

Moreover, this strategy harks back to earlier efforts to protect individual and group freedoms – including successes won during periods of economic difficulty and global tension. Grim as it is, the current economic crisis resembles the great stagnation of the 1970s more than the depression of the 1930s. Before turning to current policy priorities in greater detail, this paper looks at how advocates of democracy and human rights responded to the challenges of the 1970s and 1980s – and finds parallels with today.

## 2. Democracy support: lessons from the past

Today's debates around democracy support tend to focus on the post-Cold War experience – often with a sense that the West wasted many opportunities in the “unipolar moment”. As that moment passes and we enter an ever more multipolar period, it is worth reviewing the later Cold War. It offers lessons on how to stand up for rights and rights defenders in the context of international ideological and economic competition ultimately helping defuse rather than exacerbate East/West tensions in the later 1980s.

The early 1970s witnessed a period of pessimism about democracy's future and Western power worse than today's. The Nixon administration and European governments recoiled from the protests and uprisings of 1968 and the 1973 oil crisis, and emphasized the need to strengthen international cooperation through working with Russia and China.

Yet, partly in reaction to US support for anti-democratic forces in Chile and Indonesia, the later 1970s saw a renewal of democracy and human right advocacy. The US put pressure on the Soviet Union on human rights. In Europe, politicians and civil society leaders affected by the events of 1968 also committed to democracy support.

Three aspects of these efforts, which fed into the dissolution of the Soviet bloc in the 1980s, are worth highlighting. Firstly, there was a strong focus on civil society, in democracies and

non-democracies alike. US and European advocates alike invested in supporting human rights defenders such as Aleksander Solzhenitsyn and Natan Sharansky. Similarly, pressure groups and trade unions brought pressure to bear on South Africa by pushing for sanctions. The role of civil society in international human rights promotion won global attention when Amnesty International received a Nobel Peace Prize in 1977.

The second feature of this era was democracy advocates' successful support to states transitioning from dictatorship to democracy, including Portugal, Spain and Greece. In these cases, the impetus for democracy came from within. But external actors, notably the German political foundations, moved quickly to assist their transitions – especially through supporting and advising fragile democratic parties thrust into power.

Finally, international institutions played a central role in advancing democracy. In the Greek, Portuguese and Spanish cases, entry into the European Community (EC) was a reward for stability in the 1980s – providing the model for the EU's much larger expansion this decade. But the decisive institutional development of the later Cold War was the formation of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which balanced agreement on Europe's borders with – initially underestimated – clauses on human rights concerns that strengthened dissidents challenging their own regimes.

The form of democracy support that helped end the Cold War thus rested on three strategies relevant to today: (i) strong civil society cooperation between democratic and undemocratic countries to protect human rights defenders; (ii) intensive efforts to defend emerging democracies; and (iii) recognition of international organizations as frameworks for dialogues over values (CSCE) and protecting young democracies (EC). These strategies mixed persistence with pragmatism, combining initiatives to support dissidents and democratizers with constructive engagement with the Eastern bloc. Without the latter, the former would have been futile, as the West would have lost much leverage.

After the Cold War, gradualism was replaced by a wave of democratization. International institutions like the UN and CSCE (which became the OSCE in 1995) found themselves monitoring or administering democratic transitions. Democracy supporters, having self-consciously stood by the powerless, tasted power. Some – though far from all – were misled by the experience, choosing to support the “transformation” of Iraq.

The errors of Iraq should not detract from the successes of the last twenty years – a democratic Eastern Europe, the end of apartheid in South Africa and much progress elsewhere. But if, as Freedom House concludes, the tide is turning against the democracy movement it is time to relearn some lessons from the past. This requires a similar mix of pragmatism to the 1970s, and renewing some of the tactics that worked in that era.

### 3. Democracy support and the financial crisis: protecting rights defenders

If the Cold War showed the importance of support for human rights defenders, this principle needs to be reinterpreted for the financial crisis. There is a significant risk that the crisis will strengthen leaders in both weak democracies and autocracies who argue that a “strong hand” is required to guide the state through troubled times (and, perhaps, beyond). In a recent edition of *Foreign Affairs*, Ian Bremmer argues that the crisis favors “state capitalist” regimes like Russia and China which combine control over economic activity with powerful internal and external security services.<sup>5</sup> As Bremmer notes, the ostensible strength of states like these often hides huge domestic problems. Russia's over-reliance on energy exports has been highlighted by the drop in oil prices. Nonetheless, the relative resilience of China in the face of economic pressures has led some Western intellectuals to argue that the liberal democratic model is in decline.<sup>6</sup>

But, as Bremmer argues, the appeal of autocracies may be short-lived – especially where state capitalism rests on limiting citizens' rights. Outbreaks of disorder in places such as Egypt and China are often ill-coordinated, reflecting the lack of organized movements able to channel public frustration. But these movements are increasing number and suggest widespread desire for better governance and representation. It is very important to back those individuals and movements that can speak up for the victims of the crisis.

Sometimes the most effective advocates for workers' rights may be within governments – regulatory agencies and institutional reform programs can bolster good governance, even in

5 Ian Bremmer, “State Capitalism Comes of Age”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2009.

6 See also Azar Gat, “The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007.

non-democracies. But government bureaucracies are likely to be more honest if subjected to independent scrutiny. The most striking proof for this comes from China, where the government is (very) gradually opening avenues for labor movements to voice their concerns, including through the press. The number of labor disputes filed in Chinese courts more than doubled in 2008, and may leap by a greater degree this year.<sup>7</sup>

China's workers rights' protection remains poor – but many developing countries lag far behind China. If the anti-Soviet human rights icons of the 1970s and 1980s, like Solzhenitsyn and Shadransky, stood up for freedom of expression, it may now be necessary to assist individuals and movements associated with defending workers rights.

This echoes the role of trades unions in opposing apartheid - Edward Webster of the University of Witwatersrand argues that independent unions remain "the only bulwark against authoritarianism" in Africa, as they "are virtually the only group representing the popular classes that has the continuing organizational influence at the national level and poses challenging questions about rights of mass access to public resources."<sup>8</sup>

Examples of effective unions in Africa include a 2007 strike in Guinea that forced the autocratic president, Lansana Conte, to replace his prime minister and last year's action by South African unionists to block Chinese arms bound for Zimbabwe. The latter was part of a wider range of support given by southern African unions to their counterparts in Zimbabwe, highlighting another advantage of trades unions: a well-established international network, organized at the global and regional levels. Aid to African unions may flow across borders more readily than that focused on individual governments.

But unions remain very weak in other regions, not least the Middle East. Many African unions refuse to cooperate with their counterparts in places like Egypt and Sudan, knowing them to be under government control. In these regions, expectations have been placed on NGOs and nonviolent Islamist movements instead. Contrary to Western caricatures, these movements have tended to respond by emphasizing social concerns. As Shadi Hamid remarks, "in Egypt,

Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Syria, each of the major mainstream Islamist groups has deemphasized moral crusades and instead focused attention on expanding democratic space and protecting political rights."<sup>9</sup>

If democracy advocates wish to respond effectively to the financial crisis, they should emphasize initiatives to mitigate its impact on political, social and economic rights. This may mean taking on unexpected allies, from Chinese labor courts to Islamist social movements. But democracy support in the 1970s required similarly diverse coalitions. Demonstrating a pragmatic concern for the victims of the financial crisis may be the basis for unexpected collaborations, and openings for democracy, once the crisis is passed.

#### 4. Protecting existing democracies

While the financial crisis continues, there is a particular need to focus on upholding rights in young democracies, just as it was essential to support Spain or Greece in the 1970s. Some of the Bush administration's apparent successes in democracy support – the countries of the "color revolutions" – are weak. In Georgia, President Mikhail Saakashvili is under daily pressure from protestors demanding his departure after last year's war with Russia. Ukraine is paralyzed by disputes between former political allies.

This instability is not solely associated with US policy. The troubles in Ukraine and Georgia are also a set-back for European governments, which have invested heavily in both. Many countries that have moved towards democracy under UN guidance, from the Democratic Congo to Timor-Leste, have also slipped back into periods of violence. Of particular concern, Pakistan's return to democracy has teetered on the edge of chaos.

The causes of instability differ widely. In Ukraine and Georgia, resurgent competition between the West and Russia is clearly a factor. Many countries assisted by the UN remain desperately poor and have been shaken by the recession. Liberia, which has made progress towards stable democracy, has a youth unemployment rate of 88%.

Nonetheless, certain damaging patterns have recurred in many new democracies. As in the 1970s, political parties have often proved weak and ill-prepared for government. Leaders who championed democracy – from Joseph Kabila in

7 Wan Linqing, "Love of labor need not be at expense of capital", *China Daily*, 27 April 2009.

8 Webster, "Difficult Dilemmas", p3.

9 Shadi Hamid, *Resolving America's Islamist Dilemma* (Century Foundation, 2008), pp8-9.

the Congo to Vojislav Kostunica in Serbia – have proved erratic and nationalistic. But these internal problems are compounded by external errors. Outside governments often struggle to meet the high hopes of democracy supporters after a transition. This is especially true where new democracies are economically vulnerable (as in Ukraine's need for Russian gas). Even where democracies emerge under direct international supervision, governments often receive insufficient assistance. In Liberia, the UN spends \$600 million a year on peacekeepers. By contrast, the Liberian government's total budget is \$300 million.

Recent democracies are also affected by their allies' security concerns. US support to the Georgian military may have distorted Tblisi's sense of priorities prior to last year's war. Although opinion polls in Pakistan consistently show the economic issues are a far greater source of public concern than security, 99% of US aid to Pakistan in the Bush era was for military and other security projects – with 1% going on civilian aid projects.<sup>10</sup>

If recently-democratic states are not to retreat into autocracy, a dual effort is required. Firstly, there is a need for increased assistance to responsible political parties (perhaps through civil society channels). Secondly, governments and international organizations need to calibrate aid efforts towards meeting the needs of voters in those states.

## 5. International institutions

If democratic countries are to reinforce their support for sensitive countries like Ukraine and Georgia, they will have to take the geopolitical considerations into account. Russia's resurgence has recreated some of the confrontational conditions that shaped democracy support during the Cold War – although only in its neighborhood. Similarly, China's rise has created tensions with the West (most notably over Burma, Zimbabwe and Sudan) but these have not yet coagulated to create a sense of global ideological conflict.

Given the need for cooperation on issues like climate change, the US and other democracies have a strong interest in averting any further increase in these tensions. Just as the CSCE created a framework for human rights promotion in Europe that was accepted by Russia in the 1970s, it may be necessary to define a new interna-

tional framework for defending democracy and human rights that enjoys general consensus.

It is unlikely that this framework can center on any single institution. The new US administration has won a seat on the UN Human Rights Council. But the Council's agenda is driven by non-democracies, with Western countries often on the defensive.

Democracies are more likely to develop a compelling agenda by working through institutions and forums that are directly relevant to the financial crisis. Given the impact of the financial crisis, for example, the G20, the international financial institutions, International Labor Organization and UN Development Programme are all important centers of debate.

In these forums, democracy advocates – including not only governments but the NGOs that monitor institutional affairs – need to make a strong case for the importance of open, participatory politics in managing the fall-out of the financial crisis. International trades unions have, for example, recently led a successful campaign to persuade the World Bank to factor ILO conventions into its rankings of countries' business environments – reversing a previous Bank policy that rewarded many countries with poor labor laws.

At the UN, democracy supporters may be better advised to focus on specific agencies involved in technical work on democracy support, like UNDP and the UN Democracy Fund. The Fund is notable for having India among its largest donors – working through the UN allows Western and non-Western democracies to combine in support of technical programs. However, regional organizations may offer more *political* opportunities.

The role of such organizations in defending democracy has developed rapidly in the last decade. The African Union has tried to reverse a series of coups around the continent. Sub-regional organizations in southern and western Africa have agreed principles on good governance – although in cases such as Zimbabwe, they are often divided over how to apply them. Nonetheless, these principles act as points of reference for civil society. Although there is no equivalent organization in Asia, ASEAN has taken unprecedented steps to condemn recent Burmese human rights abuses. These regional openings contrast positively with the confrontational debates at the UN, allowing for greater innovation.

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<sup>10</sup> Alex Evans, "We now have a full partner in Pakistan", [www.globaldashboard.org](http://www.globaldashboard.org), 22 April 2008.

## 6. Conclusion: three tracks of action

How can democracy supporters regain momentum during the financial crisis? It is important to realize that, just as the 1970s did not mark the end of democracy, this crisis holds opportunities as well as risks. To benefit from these, it is essential to link democracy support to economic recovery. This requires three tracks of action:

### a. Direct response to the financial crisis

Democracy supporters will be judged on the credibility of their ideas on resolving the downturn, and protecting political space during it:

- Governments and NGOs alike should give their support to those movements and organizations that represent the economically vulnerable – even if, as in the case of Islamist movements, they may have ideological differences. Support can take the form of (i) capacity building for emerging organizations; (ii) legal support to campaigners fighting landmark labor cases; (iii) assistance to individual rights defenders specifically concerned with labor rights, the unemployed and proposals for economic regeneration.
- Support to transnational trades union networks. Trades unions in the developed world, NGOs and foundations should increase their support to unions in poor areas – especially those with strong regional agendas.

### b. Specific focus on young democracies

It is essential that young democracies are supported to avoid returning to autocracy:

- Governments should aim to **boost the economies of emerging democracies** through offering favorable trade options and aid to promote economic innovation. Conversely, they should limit potentially destabilizing military aid to young democracies to ensure a strong focus on civilian priorities.
- Support to political parties. Political parties in established democracies, and related foundations and think-tanks, should increase support to their counterparts in emerging

democracies. There are strong models for how to do so from the later Cold War, including personnel exchanges and training.

### c. Strengthening international organizations

Democracy supporters should focus on three levels of international organizations:

- Governments (and associated NGOs) should aim to ensure that questions of political, economic and social rights are addressed consistently across financial institutions, the G20 and bodies like the ILO. These must be framed in a renewed argument that political space, individual rights and the rule of law are associated with growth, in both advanced and developing economies.
- At the UN, democratic governments should continue to engage in forums like the Human Rights Council, but should prioritize practical work with non-Western democracies through mechanisms like the UN Development Programme.
- Lastly, governments and NGOs should maintain assistance to **regional organizations** with developing agendas that favor democracy, like the AU. This can involve deeper support to programs aimed at defining how to implement existing principles, and support (intellectual, organizational and financial) for drafting new frameworks on democracy and human rights.

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