

Karsten D. Voigt  
Coordinator of German-American Cooperation  
Federal Foreign Office, Berlin

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***The New Distemper about Democracy and its Promotion***

Panel Presentation at the Conference "Supporting Democracy"

by the FES and the Century Foundation

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Dear guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

First, I would like to thank our host the Century Foundation and the FES for hosting today's event and inviting me to this panel on the complexities of democracy promotion. The subtitle of the conference is "Pressing the Re-set Button in International Policy". Well, the new US government seems to be pressing a whole lot of reset buttons in foreign policy: on cooperation with Russia, relations to Iran, the stance on climate change, on disarmament and arms control, and also on the promotion of democracy.

Of course, nobody can reasonably be against democracy or its promotion. As Winston Churchill famously quipped "democracy is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried." Obviously, it would be desirable to have democratic governments all over the world. After all, empirical evidence shows that democracies are usually more peaceful, stable and prosperous than countries with repressive governments. Consequently, Germany after World War II never formulated its foreign policy along the lines of narrowly defined national interests alone, but always tried to embrace European and global values, too.

Yet, there are a number of difficult questions attached to our enthusiasm for spreading the liberal type of democracy which we enjoy in North America and the European Union:

- What priority should be given to the promotion of democracy in proportion to other foreign policy priorities, such as non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, fight against international terrorism and climate change etc. ?
- In which cases and by which instruments should we promote democracy?
- Where are the boundaries of trying to change domestic situation of other countries with foreign policy measures from outside?

- What if not only the leadership of a country, but also the majority of the population is against or places little importance on democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights?
- What if the majority of the population considers an authoritarian regime a better safeguard against violent conflicts in their country?

Many observers argue that with the invasion of Iraq, the torture cases at Abu Ghraib and the Guantanamo detention camp, the Bush Administration severely damaged the credibility of the U.S. as a champion of democracy, weakened the legitimacy of the very concept of democracy promotion and evoked distrust about the West's "real intentions", particularly in Arab countries. Critics also point to the fact that the U.S. has very close relations with useful, but autocratic States such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Vietnam while for instance rejecting the elected leaders of Iran.

It is evident that the credibility of the Western policy needs to be restored. In the first weeks of his presidency, Obama has already contributed decisively to the restoration of lost credibility. Not democracy itself has been tainted by the inconsistencies and failures of our past approach, but rather our one-size-fits-all attempt at transplanting it into distant and very different societies. Experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown us the limits of our objective possibilities to shape foreign countries according to our preferences and to transplant Western ideals of political philosophy to regions where they have no historical roots and where our influence on the local culture and traditions is small. Wars can change political power structures rapidly. It takes decades, however, to change the political culture of a country.

The following quotes reveal the recent development in official US policy on this topic in a striking way. The first is taken from former President Bush's State of the Union Address of 2005, in which he said: "America will stand with the allies of freedom to support democratic movements in the Middle East and beyond, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world". The second remark was made by President Obama a couple of weeks ago, when he spoke about the future engagement in Afghanistan. He soberly diagnosed that "we are not going to be able to rebuild Afghanistan into a Jeffersonian democracy. What we can do is make sure that Afghanistan is not a safe haven for al-Qaeda...and that it is not destabilizing neighbouring Pakistan."

This is quite a shift. While the US-government formerly explained military missions at least partly with the resolve to spread democracy and human rights, now immediate security interests seem to be of prime concern. This is the consequence of the – at best – mixed results of democratization efforts in recent years: In Iraq the US and its coalition partners managed to topple Saddam Hussein's regime and stabilize the security situation. For this, the US troops and the Iraqi population paid an enormous cost in human lives. Large waves of refugees and violent ethnic conflicts were consequences of the war. And still, I would not call Iraq a full-

fledged democracy and certainly not a model that would inspire its neighbours to democratize, too. In Afghanistan we have not got very far seven years after the Taliban government was toppled. Today there is an elected government, but its performance is far from perfect and the security situation is worsening. After World War II, the United States helped Germany to develop into a stable democracy. However this success also depended on strong German traditions in democracy and rule of law dating back from the time before the National Socialists came into power.

Obviously, American post-War successes in Germany and Japan were not so easy to repeat in Iraq and Afghanistan. I will not even speak of places like Iran, Zimbabwe or Myanmar (Burma), where anti-Western, authoritarian governments have managed to cling to power despite Western pressure and sanctions regimes. Ironically, those countries often call themselves democracies, while Western governments have called them “rogue states” or “outposts of tyranny” (C. Rice). Therefore, some political observers speak of sobering evidence that in fact democracy in the Western sense is in retreat<sup>1</sup>. The post Cold War euphoria about the inevitability of democracy has been replaced by the chilling conclusion that “democracy is neither inevitable nor irreversible”.<sup>2</sup>

In the past, Americans were more optimistic in their expectations about the worldwide spread of democracy than Europeans were. This is certainly due to our different historical experiences. While Americans have had an uninterrupted history of democratic rule over more than 200 years, Europeans experienced a succession of wars, repeated destruction and oppressive regimes on their soil. I believe this is also why Americans generally have a much more positive view of the human nature than Europeans (particularly Germans) do. While for Americans, democracy is the natural state of humanity, for us Germans it is a cultural achievement. The Bush administration honestly believed democracy in Iraq would flourish from the bottom up once Saddam Hussein was toppled<sup>3</sup> whereas Germans by nature see democratization as an uphill battle, which demands a long-term commitment.

In my opinion, there is no quick fix for the lack of democracy in the world. Sometimes even the holding of elections, one of the main ingredients of democracies, is of little help. In a number of countries, relatively free elections have brought leaders into power whose democratic credentials can be questioned (Ahmadinejad in Iran, Chavez in Venezuela, Hamas in the Gaza strip etc.). When Hamas won the elections in the Palestine, the West responded with sanctions and non-recognition. Truly free elections in countries like Egypt and Algeria might also lead to fundamentalist and anti-Western governments. The poor in those countries feel neglected by their governments and are attracted to movements that promise them a better

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Diamond: The Democratic Rollback, in: Foreign Affairs, March/April 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Marina Ottaway: Democracy Promotion in the Middle East: Restoring Credibility, in: Carnegie Policy Brief 60, May 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Kopstein: “The Transatlantic Divide over Democracy Promotion”, in: The Washington Quarterly, Spring 2006.

life and a political system without corruption. In other parts of the non-Western world, people vote for parties and leaders, who simply represent their ethnic or religious group. Often elections are rigged by undemocratic leaders in order to provide their regime with the varnish of democratic respectability.

Even though free and fair elections form a very important element of democracy, they are obviously not the only one. It is equally important that the people really participate in the political process of their nation and their community. It is about education and economic opportunities for the citizens and about basic civil and human rights for everybody irrespective of gender, race, religion and social class. This, of course, is exactly what the United Nations should stand for. Through its institutions and programs the UN has worked for decades to promote human development in all its facets.

Our biggest successes have been in Europe over the last years. Drawing Central and Eastern Europe successively closer to the Euro-Atlantic institutions of the European Union and NATO and finally accepting them into these organizations has been the most successful democratization strategy in history. This success was possible for various reasons:

- the people of these countries identified with the purposes and values of EU and NATO and wanted to join these institutions,
- they are historically and culturally related to us and
- those countries are located in our neighbourhood, where the EU- and NATO member states have political influence, commercial ties and close societal contacts.

A comparable success is much more difficult to achieve in regions like the Middle East, Africa and Asia, which are simply more distant from us – geographically, politically, culturally, and economically. There we need an even more incremental and long-term approach. Instead of wanting everything at once, we should try to convince autocratic governments that economic stability, social development and the rule of law are in their own interest. When we provide incentives, some governments will realize the opportunities that lie in economic and legal reforms and in providing space for civil society. Electoral and constitutional changes may follow at a later stage.

Some countries will not be open for such a cooperative strategy. Maybe in those places the time for democratization has not yet come. In any case: if our declared strategy in a particular country is regime change, all avenues for cooperation and compromise with the government are closed. But if we are honest, we can only use this strategy where, in the final end, we have the will and the power to topple the government by force. If that is not the case, we should refrain from tough talk, which would only lead to a stabilization of authoritarian regimes, as it was the case with the roll-back rhetoric during the Cold War.

My experience tells me that it is very difficult to change foreign societies from outside. What we can do is support aspirations for democratic change that emerge from within a society.

Often this needs to be done discreetly. At a closer look, repressive countries are usually less monolithic than they seem. Often there are local religious groups, entrepreneurs, doctors, journalists, social workers and others who understand the need for change and who know exactly how far they can go at a given time. Our cautious support can help them to develop into potential democratic leaders and agents for change. During the Cold War our strongest agent of change in the societies of Eastern Europe was not our military power, but our attractiveness as pluralistic and prosperous Western democracies.

We should also take note that exile groups that have close contacts to our Western governments and advocacy organizations may not always have any impact or credibility in their own country. If we finance or otherwise support exile movements we should do this quietly and efficiently, and only if they act responsibly.

When we assist foreign countries in gradually becoming more pluralist and tolerant of individual rights, we must also pay respect to their cultural, social and economic circumstances. Otherwise we will fail regardless of our good will. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the West had many misconceptions about tribal structures, the balance of central and regional power and the functioning of local economies.

In my opinion, Western **governments** do have their role to play in long term democracy efforts. They can maintain contacts to democracy activists within repressive countries, quietly finance support activities, and gather information about the inner workings of undemocratic regimes. However, for the type of grassroots, low profile and developmental work that I have mentioned I see **non-governmental organizations** particularly as particularly suited. In the American system a couple of organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the American Bar Association and the Open Society Institute have been involved in international democracy work. Germany has the system of Political Foundations like the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation and a couple of others that have been active in democracy work for years. They have engaged with workers unions, businesses, oppositional parties, minority rights groups, environmental activists and also governments in countries as diverse as Portugal, South Africa, Brazil, Russia and China, to name but a few, and helped to gradually open them up to change. Their work often remained outside the public eye, but was effective nevertheless.

To sum it up, I would like to present a few recommendations for democratization, which I hope we can discuss on this panel:

1. **Do no harm:** this concept which we know from development policy can also be applied to democratization. We should be aware of the consequences that our actions have in a foreign country. We should do nothing that might please our domestic audience but endangers the life and security of local human rights defenders. The use of force should only be a means of last resort.

2. **Be humble in your aims:** Realism often seems boring and unspectacular. Yet we must honestly assess our influence, our capabilities and the extent of our willingness to engage in foreign societies. Only if we have a strong interest, we can justify our engagement before the critical eyes of our domestic constituencies.
3. **Be honest:** Do not speak of democracy if you have something else on your mind. In the past years, US democracy promotion was too closely associated with the so called “War on Terror” (a term, which Secretary of State has just unceremoniously declared obsolete) and became entangled with Western security interests. To many Muslims it seemed more or less as a pretext and excuse for Western dominance.
4. **Be careful with words:** Instead of “democracy promotion” use a more viable term, for instance “democracy support”, “democracy work” or the like. “Democracy promotion” sounds like proselytization and tends to incriminate local partners in civil society who work with foreign institutions. Repressive governments fear nothing more than “regime change” and typically react with paranoia to any attempt to promote foreign ideas.

Thank you very much.