

# Democracy, Democratisation and Peace – Lessons from Recent Experience

By Dan Smith, International Alert

It is generally acknowledged that democracy is good for peace. This has become an unchallenged truth, often expressed without important nuances. Support for democratisation is widely and rightly regarded as an essential component of building peace and stability but the lack of nuance means there is a persistent risk that the challenges involved in democratisation are ignored or at least under-stated. In particular, experience has shown that external actors seeking to support democratisation often have much too short a frame in mind. As a result, elections are often associated with increased risks of renewed violence in countries attempting to recover from violent conflict.

## Content

1.	<a href="#">The democratic peace</a>	1
2.	<a href="#">The democratic impulse</a>	2
3.	<a href="#">To travel is less blessed than to be there already</a>	2
4.	<a href="#">The burden of democratisation</a>	3
5.	<a href="#">Critiques of the ‘liberal peace’</a>	4
6.	<a href="#">The authenticity of democratisation</a>	4
7.	<a href="#">The limits of support for democratisation</a>	5
8.	<a href="#">Lessons learned</a>	6

## 1. The democratic peace

The emphasis on democratisation arose quickly after the end of the Cold War, as the UN and several rich country governments started to get more involved in what later became known as peacebuilding. It grew straight out of the normative emphasis on the value of democracy, based both on rights and on peace.

In the study of international relations, what has been called the nearest thing to an empirical law that the discipline has is the finding that democracies do not go to war with each other. When it comes to domestic peace, the picture is not so absolute but there are sound theoretical reasons backed by evidence for the view that established democracies are less prone to civil war and political instability. It is no coincidence that 27 of the top 30 countries in the Global Peace Index are established democracies.

This is not to say that all democracies are equally peaceful. Measured by violent crime, for example, the USA is less peaceful than one neighbour, Canada, yet considerably more peaceful than the other neighbour, Mexico – democratic countries, all three. Other political systems can also be peaceful. Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s USSR were not the only European totalitarian regimes of their day: Salazar’s Portugal and even Franco’s Spain, despite the violence of the Spanish civil war, showed far less inclination for war with other states. The non-democratic USSR was a more peaceful place in terms of both violent crime and political instability, than many of the countries that emerged from its break-up. Qatar, Kuwait and Vietnam are all in the top 30 places in the Global Peace Index.

Because democracy is not a universal component of either international or internal peace, it can be argued that it is not a *necessary* condition of peace. On the other hand, leaving all considerations of freedom to one side, democracy is broadly speaking more peace-friendly than the alternatives.

## 2. The democratic impulse

Of course, the consideration of freedom cannot be left to one side. Jaded witnesses of international politics may be all too aware of how the vocabulary of democracy can be used to justify almost any policy - invasion, repression, torture, opening a country's natural resources up for exploitation and more. But when freedom has been denied, government has been arbitrary, a narrow elite has grabbed power and wealth for itself, or peace has been disrupted, and then when the opportunity for democracy arises - people tend to grab it with both hands. The evidence is all around: the impulse behind the Arab Spring in 2011, the people who queued for hours in the boiling sun in South Africa in the first free election in 2004, those who queued under artillery bombardment by the Khmer Rouge in order to vote in Cambodia in 1993, the excited chaos of 110 parties standing in the 2011 elections in Tunisia, the embrace of parliamentary democracy by the people of Kyrgyzstan despite it being new in central Asia. Wherever we look, the onset of democracy brings hope and the excitement because it offers people the chance to be citizens rather than subjects and it offers their countries the chance of forward movement rather than *stasis*.

### Literature (among many other works)

Grasping the Democratic Peace  
Bruce Russett | 1993

[Towards A Democratic Civil Peace? Opportunity, Grievance, and Civil War 1816-1992,](#)

Håvard Hegre et al | American Political Science Review | 1993 | Vol 95, No 1 | pp33-48

Causes of War

Jack S. Levy & William R. Thompson | 2011

[Global Peace Index 2011](#)

## 3. To travel is less blessed than to be there already

There is, however, a problem. The finding about the positive relationship between democracy and peace applies to *established* democracies, those in which executive government power changes hands non-violently as a result of free and fair democratic elections. The situation of those countries that are on the way to that desired condition but have not arrived is radically different.

More dangerous than either democracy or dictatorship is the in-between condition, what is often called anocracy - a system of governance that is neither fully democratic nor wholly autocratic, and is not really a system at all, in fact. The rules of the game are unclear, political opposition is sometimes permitted by those who hold power, sometimes not, elections are held but are neither free nor fair, some opinions can be expressed freely even if the regime does not like them yet others are wholly forbidden. And of such 'systems', the most dangerous situation is to be found in those that are in transition from dictatorship to democracy.

The destination, then, is highly desirable but the journey is full of danger. It follows that the underlying commitment to democracy as a system of government that is desirable both in

terms of its recognition of citizens' rights and responsibilities and of its impact on the prospects for peace has to be nuanced by a recognition of the dangers of democratisation.

This key distinction is broadly understood within the communities of official and non-official actors in development, peacebuilding and support for democratic transition. But in the almost brutal simplification of concepts and discourse that can occur when high profile issues are debated and decided by political leaders, it is a distinction that can be all too easily lost.

## 4. The burden of democratisation

There is, nonetheless, a growing discussion and policy literature on the relationship between peacebuilding and statebuilding. This is broadly tending to the conclusion that these are not two separate tasks but a single one – building a peaceful state. That this is of fundamental importance is widely recognized, powerfully demonstrated through the statistic from the World Bank's World Development Report 2011 that 1.5 billion people live in conflict-affected and fragile states, and that in none of those countries has even a single Millennium Development Goal yet been achieved.

However, while this drives home the profound importance of the goal of building a peaceful state, there seems to be not much reflection about how much is being asked of states coming out of conflict when they are pressed to head off down this dangerous road.

At the same time as they are called upon to take the perilous road to democracy, these states are also being pressed by the international community to get their economic development moving so they are not too reliant for too long on international hand-outs. To assess how realistic the expectation behind this pressure is would take us into a discussion of the track record of economic development assistance – a rather different topic. For the moment, we can focus on the uncomfortable truth that economic development itself is a process that is full of conflict, producing winners and losers. Countries attempting to avoid relapsing into violent conflict thus face two massive tasks, each one holding great dangers. The fundamental tasks of peacebuilding and development are full of risk.

This perilous journey is worth it because of the benefits – freedom from want and fear. It is probably true to say that at the start of the new era after the end of the Cold War, the benefits were much more clearly perceived than the risks. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the process of preparing for the first democratic elections was compacted for American political reasons into less than a year from the signing of the Dayton Accord in November 1995 to the first election in September 1996. While the continuing heavy presence of international armed forces ensured there was no renewed outbreak of violent conflict, the election process itself did not result in much political renewal in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Not only the same attitudes dominated politics as before the war but also, with the exception of those who were indicted war criminals, the same political actors.

Perhaps the most decisive lesson learned from those elections and what followed was never to hold premature elections in conflict-torn countries. But the same criticism of prematurity could be directed at the first post-war elections in DRC in 2006 even though it had been three years since the peace agreement was signed and the transitional government instal-

### Links & Literature

[Building Peaceful States](#)

DFID | London | 2009

[Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility: Policy Guidance](#)

OECD | Paris | 2011

[International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding:](#)

[Conflict, Security, and Development: World Development Report 2011](#)

Worldbank | 2011

led. So defining what is premature is complex and there is no template or golden rule for calculating it. At the same time, delaying elections defies the impatience for elections and excitement at the prospect that the democratic possibility generates. Indeed, concern about the risks of democratisation is often interpreted as an excuse for non-democracy.

## 5. Critiques of the ‘liberal peace’

All this implies the need for democratisation to be carefully managed and directed. To see this as a technical challenge and consider what instruments should be deployed to meet it is the default mode in the international development community. Unfortunately, it completely misses the point.

The challenge is primarily political. Elections do indeed need technical preparation – electoral registers, officials trained in procedures, enough police to ensure security, educational material in appropriate forms and media so people know how to vote, laws for how to administer elections, and clear rules about acceptable modes of political campaigning, among others. The November 2011 elections in DRC – with 18,000 candidates and a complex system of proportional voting when many of the voters are not literate – underlines the importance of the technicalities. But focusing wholly on the technical preparations obscures the importance of changes in political culture so that democracy can thrive. Normally, with quick elections, the old elite becomes the new elite. After longer preparation, especially if citizenship has strengthened and political parties have absorbed a code of conduct, it is still possible that the old elite gets back into power but there is more chance it will be because of informed popular choice rather than through lack of alternatives or because the elections were illicitly fixed.

The importance of the shift in political culture that may be needed so free and fair elections can be held raises the question, if democratisation should be a carefully managed process, who should manage it? Who owns it? How can democracy be built by outside actors controlling the process?

This is one of the biggest dilemmas within what has come to be known – especially by its critics – as the liberal peace, the emphasis on support for building peaceful states. Starting from this challenge on ownership, what often comes next is a deeper rejection of democratic notions that are seen as a western imposition of a western pre-conception of how politics should be conducted.

## 6. The authenticity of democratisation

This critique challenges the authenticity of democratisation conducted with external assistance. It therefore can seem difficult to respond to. But there are many ways to pick it apart. To begin with, there is no single western conception of how politics should be conducted. Further, support for democratisation has not focused only on one system. But the most powerful rebuttal is the enthusiasm of ordinary people for expressing their rights as citizens through the vote.

It is nonetheless essential to engage with the issue of authenticity itself. Is the external actor supporting something that is authentically part of the society that is attempting to build a peaceful state? And how can the external actor know that is the case?

### Links & Literature

[A post-liberal peace: Eirealism and the Everyday](#)

Oliver P. Richmond | Review of International Studies | 2009 | 557–580

Best practice guidance from OECD-DAC talks of alignment with states – but how is this to be expressed in practice if the state is rudimentary? Or in the hands of an irresponsible elite fraction that is itself a major part of the problem of instability and risk of violent conflict?

Donor governments need bilateral counterparts whom they can assume are responsible. This is not always the reality and there is a danger that donor governments then assume that whoever holds the reins of power in the immediate aftermath of war is responsible.

While politics must lead, the technical aspects are important. For example, the transitional phase in Liberia from 2003 to 2005 was far better constructed than the transitional phase in DRC from 2003 to 2006, because in Liberia those who held power in the transition were barred from running for president. In Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the same was true for the interim President Roza Otunbayeva, who assumed power, was confirmed in post by the constitutional referendum and barred from running for President in November 2011. This simple safeguard allows time for a shift in political culture to begin to unfold but, of course, it must first be agreed to by those who have the power. There was no such agreement in DRC in 2003 and so those who had come to power at the head of insurgencies held power during the transition and contested power three years later with the inevitable effect of winner-takes-all. Whether the technical instrument of an insulated transitional phase such as Kyrgyzstan's or Liberia's is possible is ultimately dependent on politics pure and simple.

## 7. The limits of support for democratisation

If these reflections suggest some lessons learned and a fruitful path for democratisation support to take in the coming years, any conclusions must be hedged around with caution. To repeat, the issue of authenticity really does matter. If democratisation is working in Kyrgyzstan or Liberia, it is working primarily because of its Kyrgyz and Liberian drivers. If it is flawed, it is flawed primarily because of them. The dilemma for external assistance is that it can only assist – and as soon as it falls prey to the temptation to go beyond that, substituting for an absent political impulse, for example, its role becomes different and potentially damaging.

Again this emphasises that technical solutions are secondary to political solutions. The World Bank's World Development Report 2011 identifies 'adequately inclusive coalitions' as a key component of cases where states have successfully managed to undertake the self-transformative journey out of chronic instability. This would suggest that external actors including international organisations and bilateral donors should think of their role as being supportive of such a coalition in countries setting out on that same journey. It is possible and perhaps even probable that the government in a given country will itself be an 'adequately inclusive coalition,' in which case the assumptions embedded in the OECD-DAC's guidance will be operative. But there are also instances where that is not the case, when external actors can ally with a coalition of political and social forces that has not yet become the government – Egypt in November 2011 is a good example.

The further question arises here of whether political judgement would always mean supporting democratisation. There is an argument that when external actors drive democratisation in a country, they risk destabilising systems of power and authority that are working reason-

### Links & Literature

Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History  
Douglass C North, John Joseph Wallis and Barry R Weingast | 2009 | 557–580

nably well and offer a reasonable degree of social and political peace, with no guarantee that the democratic alternative will do any better or even as well.

An often missing but ultimately indispensable part of this discussion hinges on a distinction between countries that have governments that are responsible and responsive to what they perceive to be the needs of the country and its citizens, and countries that lack such good fortune. It is a distinction between governments that pursue a concept of the common good of their country, and governments that do not. On the one hand, a country such as South Korea pre-democratisation had a leadership with a clear sense of national duty; on the other hand, in many countries – both with and without natural resource wealth – democratic forms go along with nepotism, corruption and clan-based partisanship in government. There can be, in other words, responsible and responsive governments that are not democratic and formally democratic governments that are neither responsible nor responsive except to the demands of a very narrow group.

Thus, those who wish to aid democratisation have to make a political judgement. They need to decide whether democratisation is indeed the right path, who are its true supporters and whether they form an ‘adequately inclusive’ group. *Pace* the critics of the liberal peace, the starting point for this process of analysis and judgement has to be the normative commitment to a form of government that recognises human rights and political freedoms. It may permit more or less emphasis to be placed on individual rights or group rights – these are unresolved issues in political philosophy everywhere – but must have some underlying commitment to the idea of active citizenship and responsive government: a viable compact between those who hold power and those over whom it is held that respects the fundamental principle of the consent of the governed.

## 8. Lessons learned

FriEnt has been active for ten years. This is an incredibly short period for making judgements about what works and what doesn’t in the lifetimes of countries and states and thus for learning lessons. The *World Development Report 2011* suggests a successful transformation from approximately the condition of Haiti today to approximately the condition of Ghana can take 15-30 years. The history of development suggests that describes a successful transformation with a clear sense of travel throughout; historically, over 100 years was the norm. So if any lessons have been learned, they are limited, provisional and modest.

- One such lesson might be that the transition process is dangerous.
- A second might be to be careful of the fake legitimacy that democratic forms can bestow, especially when elections are held relatively soon after the end of open, armed conflict.
- A third lesson and closely related lesson could be that it is almost always the old elite – or a well-organised fraction of it – that is the beneficiary of fake legitimacy when elections are premature.
- A further lesson (but not only of the past decade – this lesson is as old as democracy itself) is that democracy can be as corrupt as dictatorship.

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- This suggests a fifth lesson that if a country is doing democracy, it should do it wholeheartedly, with transparency and anti-corruption norms, contract and property laws that do not favour the old power elite but treat all citizens equally, and policing and judicial systems that are well paid, well-trained and independent.
- But the sixth and final lesson about democratisation must ineluctably be: “it’s the politics, stupid”. That is to say, what matters is not only democracy for, though it expresses basic values, it is also a means to an end. What matters is the legitimacy of the process of self-transformation that a country goes through – legitimacy for its citizens.

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