Critical Mission

Essays on Democracy Promotion

Thomas Carothers

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Debating the Transition Paradigm
(2002)

In Partial Defense of an Evanescent “Paradigm”

BY GUILLERMO O’DONNElL

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THOMAS CAROTHERS HAS WRITTEN a timely and important essay that deserves wide attention. His goal is the healthy one of sparking discussion among both scholars and those who are “practitioners” of democracy—government officials, civil society activists, or professionals who work in the field of democracy promotion. Since I am a scholar, I will focus on what Carothers has to say concerning academic writings about transitions and democratization.

To begin with, I am in an odd situation. I am flattered that Carothers mentions me as coauthor of the “seminal work” on transitions. Since he follows this reference with a series of criticisms aimed at what he calls the “transition
democratic participation and accountability.” With apologies for the repetition, let me point once again to early concepts such as democradura and delegative democracy, for they show that at least part of the academic literature did not attribute such magical powers to elections. In addition, interested readers of the present exchange should consult the April 2002 issue of the Journal of Democracy for scholarly essays on hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism, electoral authoritarianism, delegative democracy, and other “gray-zone” cases. The authors of these essays do anything but wax naïve about what they see in a host of countries where elections are held, but where democracy itself remains tenuous or simply nonexistent.

Here I want to emphasize a point on which I side with the putative “transition paradigm” and against Carothers’s criticisms. I do think that fair elections are extremely important. This is not because such elections will necessarily lead to wonderful outcomes. It is because these elections, per se and due to the political freedoms that must surround them if they are to be considered fair (and, consequently, if the resulting regime is to be democratic), mark a crucial departure from the arbitrariness of authoritarian rule. When some fundamental political freedoms are respected, this means great progress in relation to authoritarian rules and gives us ample reason to defend and promote fair elections.

The existence of fair elections also helps us to draw a relatively clear line between what Carothers calls cases of “feckless pluralism” and what he calls cases of “dominant-power” politics. The former, as Carothers rightly notes, are afflicted by bad governance and often by widespread popular alienation. Yet insofar as they hold fair elections we can classify these cases (by definition, including Carothers’s) as democratic regimes. These may or may not be democratic states or countries that are under an appropriate rule of law; they are democratic regimes—no less and no more than that.

By contrast, Carothers’s “dominant-power systems” are not democracies. These are authoritarian regimes that may have an electoral base, but where elections are not fair and there are severe restrictions on political freedoms. We see that the presence or absence of fair elections is important not only analytically to scholars but also practically to democracy promoters. Because of this I agree with Carothers that we should know more about the characteristics and likely patterns of change in the kinds of regimes he sketches. I also agree that this task will become easier if mistakes such as assuming that there is one single path or sequence of change are cleared away—particularly if, as Carothers believes is the case, such mistakes are widespread. However, this necessary task is not likely to be helped either by attributing magical properties to all kinds of elections or by denying the importance of fair ones.

“Thoughtful Wishing” and Scholarship

The fourth assumption that Carothers attributes to the transition paradigm is one he puts this way: “underlying conditions in transitional countries... will not be major factors in either the onset or the outcome of the transition process.”

There is a bit of history to recount here. When my colleagues and I began our work on transitions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was not in response to democratization in Latin America. It was in anticipation of these processes, before any had occurred in this region (with the partial exception of Peru), and while the mid-1970s transitions in Southern Europe still looked very uncertain. A characteristic of the authors of the four Transitions volumes is that all of us, whether directly in our own countries or through international networks of solidarity, were committed to help the demise of the authoritarian regimes that plagued these regions—ours was academic work with an intense political and moral intent.

In what Schmitter and I co-wrote, as well as in many other chapters of the four volumes, we made a considered decision to stress political factors without paying much attention to what might broadly be called socioeconomic ones. We believed that this way of thinking might be useful for stimulating transitions away from authoritarian regimes. In those times, most of the literature told us that we had to wait a long time until our countries reached the level of economic growth, or of development of the productive forces, or of modernization, or of maturation of the political culture, that would enable us to aspire to democracy. We found this rather discouraging. Thus, unabashedly engaging in “thoughtful wishing,” we assumed that purposive political action could be effective, and that good analysis might be helpful to this end. So, yes, this initial literature is “political” in the sense criticized by Carothers, but the subsequent transitions did not entirely disprove it.

However, with regard to socioeconomic factors, let me recommend an excellent piece of academic research: the massive study recently completed by Adam Przeworski and his associates under the title Democracy and Development.9 One robust conclusion of this work bears on two important—and distinct—issues that Carothers mistakenly conflates. The first issue refers to the likelihood of authoritarian breakdown and the emergence of a democratic regime; the second issue pertains to the probability that such a regime will persist. As regards the former question, Przeworski and his collaborators show that there is simply no statistical correlation between a country’s level of socioeconomic development and the likelihood that it will experience an authoritarian breakdown followed by the onset of democracy. Yet when it comes to the question of democracy’s durability, socioeconomic factors are significant—the mortality rate of poor

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**The Democratic Path**

**BY GHIA NODIA**

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**WHEN I FIRST READ** Thomas Carothers’s essay, I agreed with all or nearly all that he had to say. But then a question began to nag me: What really was the target of his criticism? Or to put it another way: Did the sum total of the points that he made—and he was right to make them—add up to a demonstrated need for a "change of paradigm"?

Carothers offers an eloquent statement of the frustration that many feel as they look at countries that once were firmly authoritarian or even totalitarian and are such no more—yet that have not become fully democratic. This trend toward what Carothers calls the "gray zone" of ambiguity has replaced the optimism of the "third-wave" era, when democracy seemed to be going from strength to strength in region after region around the globe. Clearly there is a need to rethink the basic assumptions that we have been making about democratization for the last decade or so, and efforts toward this end have been attracting comment and arousing discussion. A few years ago, Fareed Zakaria made a splash by saying that democracy may not be such a great idea for some countries and recommended efforts to promote a supposedly more feasible "liberal constitutionalism" instead. This general conclusion was too much for many to accept, even if they recognized the accuracy of the criticisms that Zakaria leveled against the simplistic ways in which too many Western analysts and democracy promoters understood the democratization process.

Carothers is aiming at many of the same targets as Zakaria but reaches far more modest conclusions. In assembling his bill of particulars, Carothers tends to quote reports from the U.S. Agency for International Development rather than works by theorists and scholars. His major practical recommendations boil down to: (1) stop making countries that have been successful in their democratic transitions the focus of democracy assistance; and (2) stop expecting most countries now labeled "transitional" to fit that description anymore, because their positions in the "gray zone" will perhaps not change anytime soon, if at all. They might make progress toward greater democracy, or they might not. Neither eventuality should surprise us.

If by proclaiming "the end of the transition paradigm," Thomas Carothers means that being "in democratic transition" has become a more or less permanent condition for many countries, then I agree with him. But this observation is only a start. A number of intellectual and practical challenges emerge after we say what Carothers says. If "transition" is no longer an apt metaphor for what these countries are experiencing, how should we conceptualize their condition? And what, if anything, should we do differently because we have stopped calling them by one name and are searching for another?

Carothers analyzes certain assumptions that he attributes to the "transition paradigm" but makes no mention of other and even broader assumptions that we should revisit. The most basic contention that lay at the basis of third-wave optimism was the notion that democracy is now the only "normal" political regime—the only game in the global village, if you will. At the end of the day, democracy is the only political regime that is fully compatible with modernity. One can reject democracy, but this implies some kind of rejection of modernity itself. The Muslim world, whose main problem seems to be finding an adequate response to modernity, and which has also had the least success in embracing democracy, is the most obvious example. For a time, certain East Asian regimes seemed to be challenging the democratic assumption with quasi-official teachings about uniquely "Asian values" as the ideological basis for successful modernization, but democratic progress in Taiwan and South Korea weakened that argument. Currently the doctrine of "Asian values" seems to be fading out of fashion.

This is the context in which gray-zone countries find themselves—and with reference to which their situation should be understood. The gray-zone regimes that Carothers has in mind are not openly challenging the democratic model as the one singularly best suited to modern conditions, nor are they trying to pose alternative grounds of political legitimacy. What they are doing, rather, is one of three things: (1) trying more or less sincerely to adopt this model but failing; (2) making a pretense of trying; or (3) engaging in a mixture of both good-faith failure and mere "going through the motions."

Such regimes typically feel pressure to at least appear democratic from two quarters. One is the "international community," which uses a variety of
several times, after all, that the concept of transition makes sense only if it implies a process that goes through a consistently predictable set of stages.

My own view is that the positivistic approach is far from the only way to think about political transformations. The term transition makes sense not because its end result is teleologically predetermined, as if through a kind of social software or genetic coding, but because the idea of the right kind of end result—namely, democracy—is present in political discourse and exerts a powerful influence on events. Carothers does not deny that some gray-zone countries have abandoned outright dictatorship and introduced important elements of democracy, however incomplete. In other words, they have experienced political change that has been guided by the normative model of democracy. Is this not what is meant by a “democratic transition”?

The “muddling through” that we see today in many countries might be preparing them for further progress toward democracy, or it might not. We do not know, which is why we consigned them to the conceptual gray zone in the first place. But unless and until such countries come up with some kind of systemic alternative to democracy, it remains correct to try to understand their experience within the framework of democratic transition. Nor do I think that Carothers really proposes any other. He wants us to be modest in our expectations and skeptical about a positivist interpretation of the transition paradigm—both sensible attitudes, in my view—but he himself does not offer a new paradigm.

The truly important change toward which Carothers points us is the sober and fully conscious recognition of just how difficult a goal to achieve liberal democracy is. My impression is that political discourse within many a gray-zone country is replete with skepticism about whether the country is on the path to democracy, or even about whether it can actually become democratic. There often seems to be a tacit understanding that there are structural (or, if you like, “cultural”) impediments that stand in the way of the arrival of “normal” democracy as it is known in the West.

Recognizing the existence of such impediments may lead to either of two attitudes. The first concludes that “democracy is not for us.” This attitude will most likely express itself in the form of a nativist, and Western, or “antiglobalist” ideology: A regime informed by this attitude will probably not even try to appear democratic. If it does try to take on some formal features of democracy (including even elections, perhaps), it will do so in a palpably shallow and unconvincing way. The governments of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are like this. As Carothers points out, they are “out-and-out authoritarian systems” that use democratic rhetoric as window dressing.

There are many other countries, however, where most people acknowledge the presence of deep structural impediments to democracy but embrace it as a long-term goal nonetheless. It is these countries that are at issue here. Their major characteristics today are uncertainty and a sense of failure. Whether they are closer to “feckless pluralism” or “dominant-power politics,” both elites and the public agree that their regimes are unsteady, unfinished, and unconsolidated. That explains why it is hard to find a name for them: It is much easier to label something that looks like a finished product than something in constant flux. Perhaps we should call these cases “failing transitions” or, in line with Carothers’s terminology, “feckless transitions.” The reference to “failure” is apt because such faltering transformations often exist against the backdrop of failing or structurally weak states. Indeed, in some cases it is extremely difficult to tell whether the failure of democracy or the failure of the state itself is the more basic difficulty (I am inclined to think it is more often the latter).

In stressing these points, I find myself in full agreement with Carothers. The focus of democratic theory—at least with regard to gray-zone countries—should not be on “how to defeat tyrants” or “how to introduce good legislation,” but rather on how to deal with structural weaknesses such as a failing state or the malign legacy of an undemocratic political culture.

Proving the Pudding

Yet the question remains: Do we have a new paradigm? Perhaps the real proof of the pudding is whether we have new policy recommendations. Should the countries at issue be advised to give up the democratic experiment altogether and work on creating something else, as Fareed Zakaria seemed to be suggesting? I do not think that is what Carothers intends. His policy advice is to focus on helping political parties and on bridging the gulf between citizens and the formal political system. These suggestions show that he remains fully within the transition paradigm: Some steps have already been taken (such as the creation of more or less democratic “formal political systems”), and now it is time to work on filling the form with appropriate substance.

Such ideas are hardly revolutionary. More importantly—and I say this as someone who has lived on the receiving end of “democracy assistance” for more than a decade—I do not find them very practical. The first Western political consultants who came among us after post-Soviet Georgia announced its plans to democratize took on the task of helping to develop proper political parties. These consultants failed spectacularly. Why? Most likely because, to borrow an image from Jonathan Swift’s account of the Academy of Projectors in Gulliver’s Travels, trying to build parties artificially with almost nothing but outside help is like trying to build a house from the roof downward. I am at an
While Carothers could undoubtedly question other democracy-related programs in these countries, the above-mentioned activities are surely consistent with the approach he advocates: an analysis of “key political patterns” and the development of “alternative centers of power.” Moreover, not all programs are similarly run. Decentralization at USAID has resulted in dozens of USAID missions overseas, each of which approaches democracy promotion somewhat differently. A rigid conceptual framework, complete with indicators and strategic objectives, certainly exists, but it is not applied uniformly. Those who fund and implement democracy programs around the world are as varied as the political environments in which they operate.

Carothers’s article also questions the terminology used to describe democratic transitions. It is true that many democracy activists use language similar to that comprising Carothers’s “stages of democratization”—opening, breakthrough, and consolidation. But these are meant as shorthand descriptions of political situations—language used for organizing purposes—and not as immutable truths. For more than a decade, democracy practitioners have grown accustomed to working in what Carothers calls the “gray zone”—countries caught between authoritarianism and liberal democracy. This zone is hardly a new phenomenon that reflects a “crash of assumptions.” More than ten years ago, democracy activists discovered that “breakthrough” elections in places like Pakistan, Zambia, and Albania did not lead to a consolidation stage of democracy. If there was a period in which we believed in a linear path to democratization, it was many years ago and very brief. In fact, if democracy promoters truly considered the transition toward, and the consolidation of, democracy as a “natural process,” as Carothers asserts, we should have viewed our own program work—in fact, our very existence—as superfluous.

New Approaches

In his essay, Carothers makes a number of recommendations for new approaches to democracy promotion. His call for greater political party development is particularly welcome. Political parties serve a function unlike any other institution in a democracy. By both aggregating and representing social interests, they provide a structure for political participation. They act as training grounds for political leaders who will eventually assume governing roles. They foster necessary competition and accountability in governance. In the legislative arena, they translate policy preferences into public policies. And it is political parties, acting through the legislative process, that the public must ultimately rely on to design anticorruption measures and oversee their enforcement. It should come
As for the democracy promoters, we work in the Kosovos and Angolas and Algerias of the world not because we are the victims of faulty analysis, but because it seems right to have the same aspirations for Angolans and Algerians as we have for Serbians and Chileans—and for ourselves. People are driven to sacrifice time, money, and energy in the cause of democracy because, in the words of the late AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland, "It is simply the right thing to do."

Carothers asserts that "given how difficult democratization is, efforts to promote it should be redoubled." Moreover, he offers concrete ways to improve democracy programming. Yet these messages seem to become lost in his article, leaving many readers with the impression that, for Carothers, positive democratic change in most countries is a quixotic goal. Let us hope that his next article will place greater emphasis on the reasons why democracy-promotion efforts should be sustained and expanded.

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**Tilting at Straw Men**

**BY GERALD HYMAN**

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Although Thomas Carothers's critique of democracy promoters in the January 2002 Journal of Democracy was, in principle, directed at donors in general, all the examples and citations referred exclusively to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Carothers's critique would be trenchant, even devastating, if it accurately portrayed USAID's thinking on democracy. But it does not. The article characterizes USAID's democracy practitioners as uncritically adhering to an increasingly outdated "transition paradigm" based on five naive assumptions. That mischaracterization is a straw man, which is first created, then demolished. Undoubtedly, we at USAID are trying our best to promote transitions to democracy, but we do not adhere to any single transition paradigm and certainly not to the pastiche created by Carothers.

First, Carothers asserts that, notwithstanding the substantial and obvious evidence to the contrary, "democracy enthusiasts" continue to believe that "any country moving away from dictatorial rule is in transition toward democracy," and that the transition is inexorable. Furthermore, he argues that we have constructed a simplistic evolutionary scheme, and that our assistance programs are fashioned primarily to hasten the inevitable rather than to wrestle with a variety of possible outcomes, of which a successful democratic transition is only one, and indeed not a very likely one at that. No matter how optimistic we may be, no one who lives where we work could come to that conclusion. We are confronted day by day not only with successes but also with failures, setbacks, regressions, programmatic shortcomings, and "stagnant transitions." Since 1991, even that caution has been replaced by the sobering reality that countries can move away from greater democracy and that democracy promotion is almost never easy, let alone inevitable. Still, notwithstanding the obstacles, we are firmly committed to democracy promotion. There is no excuse for some of the inflated claims that have appeared in USAID documents (which Carothers rightly criticizes), but the supposed predominance of a "transition paradigm" does not explain them.

Second, since we are working to promote transitions to democracy and are charged by statute to "contribute to the development of democratic institutions and political pluralism," it is not surprising to find us thinking of ways to do so. Yet we certainly do not assume the "set sequence"—opening, breakthrough, and consolidation—that Carothers attributes to us as a second assumption. In particular, we see "openings" not as events but as long, difficult, hard-won, incremental processes. Our assistance programs are often designed precisely for crafting small "openings" rather than finding them full-blown. And when there are "breakthroughs," they do not always (or even often) occur as they did in Europe or Eurasia, or possibly Indonesia and Nigeria—with the sudden collapse of the old order. Rather, breakthroughs are more often gradual, piecemeal, and linked to particular sectors rather than systemic. Finally, consolidation is more often a goal than a state. Unfortunately, it is a goal achieved all too infrequently, and many of USAID's most important policy documents emphasize the fallacy of assuming "set sequences" of reform.

Nor do we subscribe to the third assumption, regarding "the determinative importance of elections." We make no apology for believing that there cannot
our recognition of the more complex reality upon which such a paradigm might 
as flawed democracy in which relatively free and fair elections result only in the alteration of power between 
corr upt, self-interested, and ineffective political-party elites who "seem only to 
trade the country's problems back and forth from one hapless side to the other."

In principle, feckless pluralism would seem to carry its own electoral anti-dote: Throw out one or both of the feckless parties. In practice, the barriers to entry for new parties and the barriers to leadership positions for reformers within the existing (often highly centralized) parties are both extremely high. Still, there remains a question of whether, how, and when foreign donors should act to "perfect" other countries' "flawed democracies." But perhaps the most serious danger in feckless pluralism is that an exasperated electorate will choose not more internally democratic and potent parties, but rather a systemic alternative much closer to the dictatorial pole, the pattern that Carothers refers to as "dominant-power politics": limited political space and contestation in which . . . one political grouping . . . dominates . . . [with] little prospect of alternation of power in the foreseeable future." That pattern is, unfortunately, all too entrenched, and far from ignoring it, we are deeply engaged in trying to do something about it.

More important, it is not clear from the article what kinds of programs would result from analyses based on these two "syndromes." Without more to go on, where do we go, strategically and programmatically, with "feckless pluralism" or "dominant-power politics"? It is a pity that Carothers did not spend more time addressing this question. In addition to these two, we have also been worried about alternative archetypes and processes over the past couple of years—for example, authoritarian regimes and military coups. None of these alternatives fits neatly into the "transition paradigm," nor do we think they do.

If anything, we have modulated substantially the emphasis on archetypes and typologies of states in favor precisely of looking at problems and processes. We have found that fitting countries into typologies often creates more disagreement and confusion than value. In the mid-1990s, we began developing and field-testing an analytical framework that embraced elements of four disciplines to analyze political dynamics and design appropriate democracy-promotion programs: political sociology and political anthropology to understand broad interactions of social structure, culture, and political systems; political economy to gain insights into the relations between actors and their interests, resources, choices, and strategies for maximizing gains; and institutional analysis to explore the design of institutional arenas, rules, and incentives in relation to which those actors operate.12 Archetypes of all sorts, gray or otherwise, play a relatively small role in that analysis. Political institutions, processes, interests, and incentives are the main determinants. That framework is now the recommended approach to analysis and strategic programming at USAID. We train our staff in it. We have used it in more than two dozen countries. We believe it is a better approach than either the "transition paradigm" or the "gray zone."

Dealing with Corruption and Conflict

We have also become increasingly concerned about corruption and conflict. Administrator Natsios has directed us to devise strategies that help deal with both. These are deep problems with profoundly deleterious (sometimes disastrous) consequences, heavily affected by the very social, historical, and cultural considerations that Carothers accuses us of ignoring. Moreover, President George W. Bush has just announced a New Compact for Development, a central component of which is a commitment to "good governance" that includes "rooting out corruption, upholding human rights and adhering to the rule of law." USAID is working with other U.S. government entities in designing how this element is to be measured.

Within USAID, Administrator Natsios has established a new office to deal with ways to better manage conflicts and, one would hope, to prevent or at least mitigate them. Everyone at USAID clearly understands the fundamental importance of social organization, culture, and history in shaping these pathologies. Our problem is to find ways of addressing them without being paralyzed by the complexity that these social (and other) considerations impose on us.

One way to address these issues is to isolate parts of their complex natures, propose some archetypal (albeit oversimplified) models to understand them, and then reassemble the parts and the archetypes. The models will almost certainly not fall neatly into the "transition paradigm," but they may well be informed by it, and they almost certainly will be similarly "simplistic." The alternative, once again, is to be paralyzed by complexity. The question is not whether we will simplify, but whether the simplification will be useful in helping us to disaggregate, and therefore to understand, the complexity. Of course, understanding the problem—getting the analysis right—is only the beginning. The bigger problem by far is finding ways to prevent conflict, reduce corruption, attenuate patrimonialism, and promote democracy. We have, in very early draft
A Reply to My Critics

by Thomas Carothers

The April 2002 issue of the Journal of Democracy contained four articles on "hybrid regimes," each of which explicitly or implicitly affirmed the main thesis of my article on "The End of the Transition Paradigm." In their estimable democratic fashion, the editors of the Journal have here assembled four contrary essays that take me to task in various ways. I wish to thank all four of these dissenters for engaging seriously with my ideas and the editors for giving me this space to reply.

Guillermo O'Donnell charges me with shortchanging the scholarly literature on democratization, and he highlights different ways in which literature does not conform to the transition paradigm that I criticize. In fact, however, there is little real difference between us. My article does not target the scholarly literature on democratization: it is about a set of ideas that many democracy-aid practitioners arrived at and began to apply in the late 1980s and early 1990s. That set of ideas was not derived, as O'Donnell writes, "in good measure" from his 1996 book (coauthored with Philippe Schmitter), Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Rather, as I said in my article, democracy promoters derived the paradigm "principally from their own interpretation of the patterns of democratic change taking place."

As I have written in more detail elsewhere, the scholarly and practitioner halves of the democracy world are noticeably, and probably unfortunately, separate. Democracy promoters occasionally dip into academic writings on democratization but not in any systematic or concerted way. They borrowed a bit from the first wave of transitiology literature in the second half of the 1980s, but it was largely a superficial transfer of ideas that got frozen into place around a few general concepts. For the most part, democracy promoters formed their paradigm around their own ideas about democracy and their observation of democratization as it was spreading in the world. On the other side of the fence, very few of the main theorists of democratization have delved in any depth into the world of democracy aid or integrated field-based insights from that domain into their work.

Thus O'Donnell may well be right about the important nuances and advances in the transitiology literature from the mid-1980s to the present. But this does not say much about the practitioners' paradigm that I am analyzing. For example, he mentions the important work by Adam Przeworski on the relationship between economics and democracy. Przeworski published his first major book on the subject in 1991. Yet it was not until the end of the 1990s that democracy promoters began exploring these connections in any serious way. The point is that the two worlds have not moved in tandem. In short, although O'Donnell's defense of the transitiology literature is well argued, it is peripheral to the central thesis of my article.

Just as Ghia Nodia initially found himself agreeing with most of the points in my article, I had the same experience when I first read his thoughtful reply. But upon a second reading I identified what I believe is the core difference between us. In rejecting my argument that reckless pluralism and dominant-power politics should be understood as alternative (albeit undesirable) outcomes rather than as way stations to democracy, he insists that "the conditions in which these countries [what I call the 'gray-zone countries'] find themselves still can only be understood in terms of how near or far they are from democracy" (emphasis added). I am certainly not against holding countries up to established democratic standards and highlighting how they fall short. Such evaluations, however, are of limited utility for understanding many aspects of their political life, such as how they got into such a state and how they might get out.

Consider, for example, Kuwait, Nigeria, Ukraine, and Paraguay. Using the most widely accepted tool for assessing a country's proximity to democracy, the Freedom House survey, all four of these countries are in the same position—a rating of 4 in political rights. Thus, as Nodia would have it, they are the same distance from democracy, and this is the only way their political life should be understood. Yet this rating, while useful for some purposes, tells us very little about many relevant political characteristics, such as the shape and nature of their main political power structures, whether their regimes are decaying, stable, or strengthening, and the prospects for and likely path of future change.

A different way to interpret Nodia's argument is that since democracy is the only broadly legitimate political aspiration in the world today, we have to consider gray-zone countries as transitional countries because that is how they understand themselves. There are two problems, however, with this view. First, many leaders have learned to manipulate the transitional language to pursue political projects that have little to do with democracy, while defending themselves against critics by emphasizing how hard transition is and the need for patience. Second, if a country's leaders or people believe it to be on the path to democracy but concrete signs clearly indicate that it is heading elsewhere, the importance of that self-conception becomes open to doubt.

Nodia argues firmly for preserving the notion of the "path to democracy." But I have not suggested banishing it, only applying it with greater care. I was
working on, analyzing, and writing about democracy-aid programs in every region of the world where they are carried out, including many hundreds of formal and informal interviews and conversations with aid practitioners and recipients.

Hyman’s central critique of my article is that the transition paradigm I outline is a straw man. In his opinion, to the extent USAID ever followed the paradigm, that time is long over. I received Hyman’s reply while traveling in Eastern Europe. The day after I received it I was in a meeting with two people who work for USAID on democracy programs in one of the countries of the region. Early in the meeting they brought up my article. With Hyman’s rebuttal fresh in my mind, I braced myself for still more criticism. Instead, they thanked me for writing the article, saying that it had been extremely useful for them in their recent efforts to convince some of their colleagues to move beyond what they saw as an outdated set of democracy programs in their country—programs firmly based on the transition paradigm. When I mentioned Hyman’s reply and outlined for them the essence of his argument, they waved it away, saying that Washington is far from the field and that no one person in Washington can speak for the realities of USAID’s work all over the world.

Therein lies my main reply to Hyman. He is one of a relatively small number of highly experienced democracy specialists at USAID in Washington who have been at the forefront of trying to improve and push ahead USAID’s work in this domain. Their work has been valuable and has helped USAID take some important steps forward. But the sophisticated, nuanced understanding of democracy that they have and that they put into some USAID policy documents and official declarations does not get easily translated into fact in the field. It is revealing in this regard that the evidence Hyman cites for USAID’s sophistication in democracy programming is all from policy documents rather than from examples of actual programs.

There are hundreds, probably thousands (if one counts those working at USAID’s partner organizations) of people involved in designing and implementing USAID’s democracy-assistance programs. They vary tremendously in experience, knowledge, and expertise. For Hyman to talk in confident, blanket terms about a collective “we” in characterizing this world, as when he says, “we long ago moved beyond the transition paradigm,” is not persuasive. The stubborn fact is that what Hyman sees as a straw man, I and other researchers keep meeting, quite alive and well, out in the world. There has certainly been an evolution in some places away from the most mechanical applications of the transition paradigm that were unfortunately all too common in the first half of the 1990s. But this evolution is hardly uniform or complete.

To cite just one recent example, in April, prior to my aforementioned trip to Eastern Europe, I was in a different part of the world and met with the USAID representatives in a country where USAID has been involved in democracy work for some time. They handed me an outline of the USAID democracy strategy in that country. It completely embodied the transition paradigm, starting with the generic strategic objective about democratic participation used by USAID in so many countries, through the four program clusters conforming exactly to USAID’s four thematic priorities in democracy and governance work, all the way down to the dispersion of the small amount of available democracy funds among the many standard areas on the traditional democracy checklist. They ruefully acknowledged that the strategy was more a reflection of bureaucratic process than real strategic thinking, but they noted in its defense that one of USAID’s top democracy experts had not long ago been out from Washington to help develop it.

Hyman himself makes clear the difficulty of the process of change within USAID even as he seeks to defend it. He mentions the analytic framework developed at USAID for assessing political contexts and developing democracy programs. This framework is a sophisticated tool and a valuable advance, but it has not yet been used in more than half the countries where USAID has been involved in democracy aid. And even where it has been used, it is only just starting to translate into significantly different programming. In sum, Hyman and I share many views about how democracy aid can and should evolve. What we disagree about is how far along USAID is on that path.

Notes

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