

## CHAPTER 4

### DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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#### Introduction

In his testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on the role of non-governmental organisations in the development of democracy Ambassador Mark Palmer argued that 'achieving a 100% democratic world is possible over the next quarter century – but only with radical strengthening of our primary frontline *fighters of freedom*' (emphasis added). Palmer characterises these 'frontline fighters of freedom' (i.e. non-governmental organisations – NGOs) not only as having assisted 'a massive expansion in freedom' but as being the 'heirs of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Lech Walesa' (Palmer 2006). While few scholars of civil society would describe NGOs in such laudatory language, such thinking has fuelled democracy promotion efforts since the late 1980s. At that time, the idea that civil society is critical to development, democratisation and successful transition became quite prominent among donors and policy makers, because of their growing enthusiasm for the idea of civil society, a certain disillusionment with the over-concentration on aid to state institutions, and the belief that through civil society 'democratic forms' could be transformed into 'democratic substance' (Carothers 2000).

Civil society strengthening subsequently became a central part of democracy promotion programmes implemented in both transition and developing countries. Since 1989 very large sums of money have been spent by international development agencies, private foundations and other actors on strengthening, building, nurturing and supporting the institutions of civil society, training civil society activists and funding their projects as a means of promoting democracy. In the former socialist countries, the aims of 'democracy promotion' and 'programmes strengthening civil society' have been to assist the transition from socialism as well as to support good governance and free and fair elections, human rights and the rule of law. In developing countries, in addition to these aims, it was hoped that promoting democracy and civil society strengthening would also enhance aid effectiveness and support efforts to reduce poverty. In conflict or post-conflict areas, promoting democracy is

seen as a tool for preventing or reducing conflict (Kaldor et al. 2007: 110). In addition to all these aims, after September 11, democracy also came to be seen as vital in countering terrorism.

Since the early 1990s, programmes strengthening civil society, in particular American, have excluded political associations and parties (i.e. political society) in an attempt to appear non-partisan and to avoid accusations of 'playing politics' (Ottaway and Carothers 2000: 12). Instead, although donors have recently sought to expand the definition of civil society to include more actors than just NGOs, in practice civil society was often equated with the development and growth of NGOs and as a result, the infusion of donor funding and focus on civil society strengthening throughout the 1990s led to an unprecedented and exponential growth in the numbers of NGOs worldwide. Many have referred to this as the 'NGOisation' of civil society.

Nearly two decades have passed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall there is widespread acknowledgement that democracy promotion efforts in various regions, including the former Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, have failed to produce democratic regimes, and that the anticipated vibrant, independent civil societies do not exist. Even in countries where democracy promotion efforts are considered a success (for example, Eastern Europe) there is growing cynicism towards civil society (Hann 2004: 47). Furthermore, there is a rising backlash against democracy promotion as the euphoria and optimism that accompanied the collapse of Communism and the end of the Cold War have been replaced by disillusionment. In spite of the emerging pessimism and backlash, donors and policy makers describe democracy as a universal value and right (Ferrerro-Waldner 2006; McFaul 2004: 148; UN Democracy Fund [UNDEF] URL). Such is the popularity of democracy today that even 'despots' (Rieffer and Mercer 2005: 385) and 'tyrants' (McFaul 2004: 151) who are suspicious of Western-led democracy promotion, pretend to be democrats or claim they are charting an evolutionary (or revolutionary) transition to democracy.

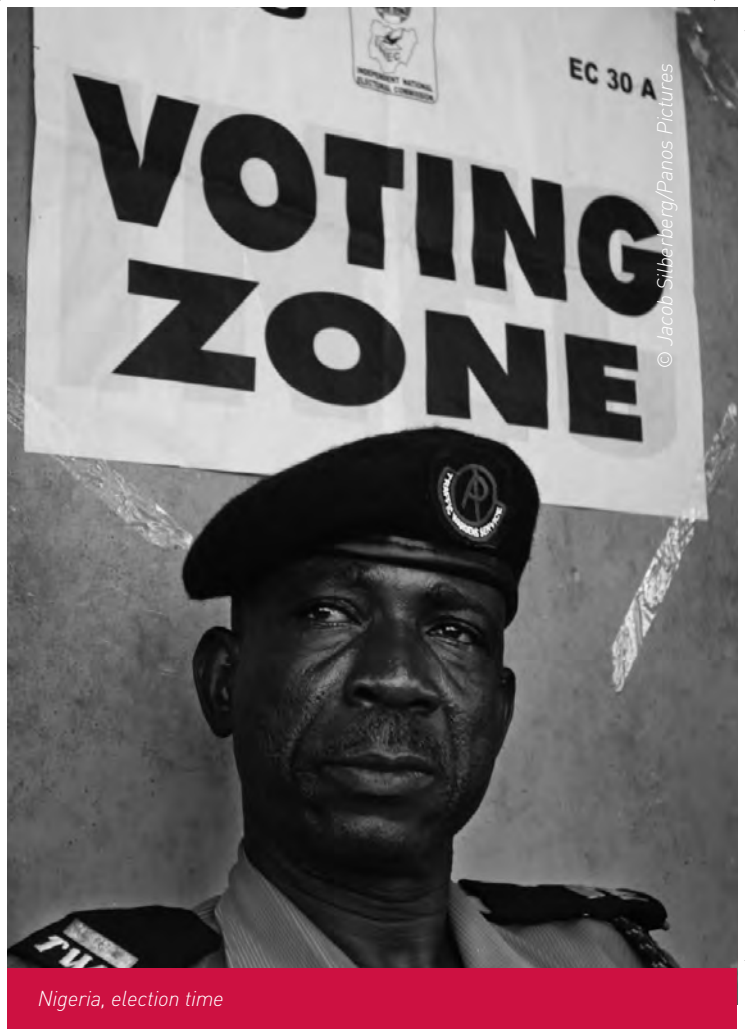
Of the various strands of democracy promotion, in this chapter I focus on civil society strengthening programmes and ask the following questions. First, can democracy be promoted through civil society strengthening, and second, given that democracy appears to have near universal appeal and acceptance (at least at the level of rhetoric), why has there been a backlash against democracy promotion that targets civil society? My reasons for focusing on civil society strengthening programmes instead of programmes that are aimed at election monitoring or state institution building are twofold. First, civil society strengthening was viewed as an end itself as well as a means of furthering the other components (such as human rights and free and fair elections) within the democracy promotion agenda. Second, the current backlash against democracy promotion is almost entirely directed at civil society strengthening programmes and involves legal and extralegal measures aimed at constraining, co-opting, coercing or closing foreign-funded NGOs (Gershman and Allen 2006: 38; Howell et al. 2007). Foreign funding of NGOs is increasingly being described as a form of interventionism and neo-imperialism, and as the creation of a fifth column.

I begin by examining why democracy promotion and civil society strengthening became a central part of donor aid programmes in the 1990s, before discussing the achievements and challenges of democracy promotion. In doing so, I consider several explanations and arguments suggested by policy makers and scholars as to why democracy promotion has not been as successful as anticipated and hoped for in the post-Cold War euphoria. I consider a range of arguments and although I recognise that authoritarian legacies and culture shape perceptions, understandings and practices, I argue that the manner in which civil society and democracy were defined and operationalised as well as the current conflation of democracy with regime change in certain contexts, such as Iraq and Venezuela, have significantly affected democracy promotion efforts.

### Why democracy promotion and civil society strengthening?

#### Academic debates

Although he did not use the term civil society, Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to attribute the importance of associationalism and self-organisation



Nigeria, election time

for democracy (Kaldor 2003: 19). In the late twentieth century, de Tocqueville's work became quite popular among some American scholars, including Robert Putnam, Francis Fukuyama and Larry Diamond, and it was subsequently also influential in policy circles. The neo-Tocquevillian position is that democracy is strengthened, not weakened, when it faces a vigorous civil society (Putnam 1994) and that successful transitions to democracy are possible only if civil society or 'something like it' either predates the transition or is established in the course of a transition from authoritarian rule (Perez-Diaz 1993: 40). The belief that civil society is a bulwark against the 'monstrous state' (Weffort 1989: 349) and a counterweight to state power (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992: 6) supported the emphasis on civil society promotion in US foreign aid programmes, and what some describe as the 'democracy aid industry' (Encarnacion 2003: 709). While these neo-Tocquevillian theories linking civil society to democracy became a key element of the post-Cold War zeitgeist and subsequently quite fashionable



*The public sphere: a space to discuss, learn and exchange*

among certain donor agencies, they are not universally accepted among academics.

On the contrary, there are scholars who argue that democracy can be weakened by civil society (Berman 1997; Bermeo and Nord 2000) and that the nature of civil society is far more important than the existence of civil society alone (Bayart 1986; White 2004). Sheri Berman, in particular, has pointed out the dangers of an active civil society, which can lead to illiberal regimes. Through an analysis of the collapse of the Weimar Republic, Berman argues that the active participation of citizens in civil society led to the weakening of democracy and the rise of the Nazi party (Berman 1997: 408). She maintains that middle-class tension and frustration sparked the growth and activism in voluntary associations and that their participation subverted republican virtue (Berman 1997: 417). She contends that what is needed is a shift away from the normative view of civil society to a more politically neutral view, in which civil society or associationalism are neither 'inherently good nor inherently bad, but rather dependent' on the wider political context (1997: 426–27).

David Rieff also criticises the 'dogma holding that civil society strengthening is the key to creating and sustaining a healthy polity' (Rieff 1999). He views the rise in popularity of civil society in the late 1980s and 1990s as being part of wider trend of the privatisation of the state and the shrinking of overseas aid budgets, and argues for a greater focus on the nation state than on civil society.

While the neo-Tocquevillian position was influential in donor policy circles, it should be recalled that the Latin American and Eastern European intellectuals, dissidents and activists were far more inspired and influenced by the ideas of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. For Gramsci, civil society was more than political economy. He questioned the economism of the Marxist definition and went on to invert Marx's vision by arguing that ideologies come before institutions and that ideology is the force capable of shaping new histories (Bobbio 1988: 88). Gramsci placed the emphasis on civil society's politically relevant cultural dimension (Cohen 1999: 214) and considered civil society as the space for the (re)production and contestation of hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic discourses. In both Eastern Europe and Latin America civil society referred to autonomy and self-organisation, with an emphasis on withdrawal from the state and the creation instead of 'islands of civic engagement' (Kaldor 2003: 193).

In the 1980s Jürgen Habermas' work on civil society also became quite influential in academic circles. Habermas' notion of the communicative public sphere envisaged a space where people could discuss matters of mutual concern and learn about facts, events and others' opinions (Habermas 1996). As opposed to de Toqueville's vision in which public opinion was treated more as 'a compulsion toward conformity', for Habermas public communication had the potential to provide the space in which the general or public interest could be rationally and critically discussed (Habermas 1992: 133). Although Habermas saw this potential in the ideal model of the public sphere, he also expressed concern with the colonisation of the 'lifeworld' that undermined the progressive potential of the project (Howell and Pearce 2002: 57). Nevertheless, Habermas went on to search for the emancipatory possibilities of civil society and subsequently triggered a debate, which continues today, about civil society, democracy and conceptions of the public sphere.

While scholars continue to debate the virtues, relationship and contributions of civil society to democracy (Chandhoke 1995), in the 1990s donors began actively supporting civil society strengthening programmes, driven by the belief that the relationship between civil society and democracy is natural and inevitable (Howell and Pearce 2002: 51). Driven by policy influenced by neo-Tocquevillian thinking, it was

believed that through financial and technical assistance to civil society, democracy could be built. When conducting interviews with donors in Armenia in 2002–3, I was struck by the fact that none of my respondents from donor agencies who were engaged in democracy promotion programmes ever questioned *whether* civil society should be strengthened as part of their democracy building efforts; the question was always *how* it could best be done. Indeed, as the transitions progressed in all the former socialist countries, the radical democratic ideas and visions of civil society that had emerged in the 1980s dissipated, giving way to more established and less revolutionary neo-liberal ones. Subsequently, civil society became a project that was implemented in the name of democracy building, which eventually led to the projectisation of civil society (Sampson 2002). While this approach has led to the phenomenal growth in the number of NGOs, it has not generated genuine participation or public debate. The following quote, cited by Timothy Garton Ash from an Eastern European colleague, sums up the projectisation which occurred in the 1990s: ‘We dreamed of civil society and got NGOs’ (Garton Ash 2004).

It is important to note that although most bilateral and multilateral donors have some institutional mechanism for engaging with or supporting civil society strengthening, not all explicitly focus on democracy building or democracy promotion programmes. In the next section I consider the different stances of the key bilateral and multilateral, as well as non-state donors that have been involved in civil society strengthening for democracy promotion.

## Donor approaches to democracy promotion

### US democracy promotion

Although the US has been engaged in democracy promotion since the 1980s through a focus on election monitoring, civil society strengthening became a significant part of US foreign policy following the collapse of the socialist regimes (Ottaway and Carothers 2000). Since then, civil society assistance has come to be considered ‘a centrepiece of America’s international outreach’ (US Senate 2006: 1) and ‘a matter of principle’ (Tobias 2007). This position is reflected in the fact that since the early 1990s, more money has been spent on civil society assistance than on any other sector of USAID democracy assistance<sup>1</sup>

(Finkel et al. 2006: 33). From 1990–2003, most USAID democracy assistance was sent to the countries in Eurasia (\$5.77 million) with the lowest levels of aid going to Africa (\$1.29 million) and Asia (\$1.29 million) (Finkel et al. 2006: 33–4). US-funded civil society assistance has largely been directed at NGOs, because the USAID position in the early 1990s was to provide vigorous support for local NGOs, which would ‘be a critical element of civil society strengthening’ (USAID 1999: v). Although the earlier strong focus on NGOs has shifted somewhat and civil society is now defined more broadly, the assumption persists that ‘a strong civil society is desirable and makes democratic practices and traditions more likely to flourish’ (USAID 1999: xi). As US Senator Joseph Biden stated in the 2006 Senate Foreign Relations committee hearing on NGOs, ‘we must understand that an election does not a democracy make...*A democracy must rest on the foundation of a strong civil society*’ (Biden 2006, emphasis added).

Funding in this area increased following September 11 when democracy promotion became a distinct national security concern and ‘key objective of US foreign policy’ (USAID URL). While the official US position is clear *vis à vis* civil society and democracy promotion, the approach of the European Union and various leading European bilateral donors toward democracy promotion in general and civil society strengthening in particular is more ‘vague’ (Schmid and Braizat 2006: 3) and ‘opaque’ (Youngs 2006: 8).

### European democracy promotion

While democratisation is by no means a new departure for the EU or European bilateral donors, Richard Gillespie and Richard Youngs contend that the US began focusing more systematically on democratisation slightly earlier than the EU and that effective co-ordination of EU democracy promotion efforts has been conspicuously absent (Gillespie and Youngs 2002). They maintain that until the late 1990s, the lack of mechanisms for marrying national initiatives to overall common guidelines on democracy presented a serious challenge to effective concerted European action (Gillespie and Youngs 2000: 6). Discussions on transatlantic democracy building efforts have

<sup>1</sup> For instance, while civil society aid was \$2,438.2 million from 1990–2003, governance and rule of law programmes received \$1,457.6 million and \$1,218.5 million respectively (Finkel et al. 2006: 33).





Police survey a public protest in Uzbekistan

intensified following September 11 (Schmid and Braizat 2006: 4), but as Jeffrey Kopstein points out, following the war in Iraq, many European leaders and the European public remain suspicious of democracy promotion, interpreting it as 'a repackaged commitment to the unilateral use of force as well as justification for war and occupation' (Kopstein 2006: 85).

Presently, the EU is intensifying its democracy promotion programmes. Of the three strands of EU democracy promotion that include enlargement, the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EIDHR is the EU structure that most specifically targets civil society. Created in 1994 and with a current annual budget of €100–130 million, the EIDHR supports human rights, democratisation and conflict prevention activities. EIDHR is seen as more flexible than other EU institutions and policies concerned with enlargement in that it can act entirely independently of national governments in partner countries and work with a wider range of actors, including parliaments, political foundations and civil society organisations, but it has been criticised for failing to have a real impact because it lacks administrative flexibility, requires long lead times and tends to favour the capital-based NGOs, known as the 'capital darlings' (European Foundation for Democracy 2006: 6).

A survey of European bilateral and multilateral democracy promotion policies from 2001–6 by the

Fundacion Para Las Relaciones Internacionales y el Dialogo Exterior (FRIDE) also found that there was sufficient complexity and diversity to make it difficult to speak of 'the European approach' (Youngs 2006: 25, emphasis in original). Of the seven countries surveyed (Denmark, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK), there was variation in the levels of 'democracy-related competence' and 'manpower allocated specifically to democracy promotion responsibilities remained limited', with Sweden having the most clearly articulated democracy promotion policies (Youngs 2006: 16–17). While various European bilateral donors, including the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA), actively support and engage with civil society actors through their programmes, they tend to view democracy as a means by which to eliminate or overcome poverty (DFID URLa; URLb) or as a means for achieving peace, justice and human rights (SIDA 1997). Democracy is not discussed as a matter of principle or centrepiece of policy, as in the US context discussed above.

Moreover, there is relatively less focus on civil society as a key pillar of democracy promotion among European bilateral and multilateral donors as compared to the US. Indeed organisations such as the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED) (URL), which focus heavily on civil society promotion, were

described as 'pushy' by some respondents in the FRIDE report (Youngs 2006: 18). Even the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights is far more focused on legislative processes, legal training, rule of law and political parties than on civil society.

### The UN approach

Even though democracy is not a precondition for UN membership and the word 'democracy' does not appear in the UN charter, since 2005 the UN has also made a foray into democracy promotion. According to Newman and Rich,

*It is not one of the stated purposes of the United Nations to foster democracy, to initiate the process of democratisation or to legitimise other actors' efforts in this field [democracy promotion]. (Newman and Rich 2004: 5)*

Although various UN agencies, including the UN Development Programme and the Office for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, have engaged with civil society through their programme activities or civil society consultative fora, including the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the UN (CONGO),<sup>2</sup> the establishment of the UN Democracy Fund<sup>3</sup> (UNDEF) in July 2005 was the first time that a separate structure was created in the UN specifically to promote democracy. Of UNDEF's six funding priority areas, three focus on civil society and provide funding for civil society empowerment, civic education and citizens' access to information. Although this demonstrates a focus on civil society in democratisation, there are concerns as to how UNDEF will decide on funding to NGOs and other civil society organisations that are critical of a member state's authority. According to the executive head of UNDEF, Magdy Martinez Soliman, active democracy

promotion is only a recent admissible part of the UN mandate and one that has been problematic because it can eventually go against the will of the non-democratic representative of a member state (Martinez-Soliman 2006: 2). There is concern with maintaining a balance between respecting national ownership on political transitions while providing external support to democrats and democratic values, so that democracy assistance is not seen as regime change or interference. For this reason, Martinez-Soliman argues that democracy assistance from the UN should be provided only at a member state's request, otherwise democracy promotion in hostile environments can create 'the kiss of death' – bolstering the authoritarians' argument that democrats are not representative of the national community and are supported from abroad.

### Non-state actors and democracy promotion

In addition to bilateral and multilateral agencies, non-state actors, including private foundations, Northern NGOs, private service contractors, political parties and others have been involved in democracy promotion. There are differences among these various actors in terms of their objectives and missions, as well as levels of financial independence and autonomy. Some organisations, such as the Open Society Institute (also known as the Soros Foundation) and the Ford Foundation, are funded by private endowments and consider democracy promotion as an integral part of their mission. They have been actively engaged in democracy promotion and civil society strengthening. Meanwhile NGOs or quasi-NGOs such as the US-based NED and National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, or the UK-based Westminster Foundation for Democracy (URL), which are also committed to promoting democracy around the world, have less financial independence than the aforementioned private foundations and are dependent on government funding.<sup>4</sup> For instance, NED receives an annual appropriation from the US Congress through the Department of State (NED URL), while the Westminster Foundation is an independent body that receives £4.1 million annual funding from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (URL). In addition to these various types of foundations, there are also

<sup>2</sup> *The Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the UN (CONGO) is an independent, international, not-for-profit membership association of NGOs that facilitates the participation of NGOs in UN debates and decisions.*

<sup>3</sup> *The UNDEF is a voluntary UN Trust Fund under the overall management of the UN Secretary General with an Advisory Board of 17 members, including representatives from the largest member state contributors.*

<sup>4</sup> *It should be noted that these NGOs are also engaged in raising funds from individual donors as well as corporations.*

political parties or organisations affiliated to political parties that engage in democracy promotion. In Germany, for instance, there are a number of organisations, including the Friedrich Ebert, Friedrich Naumann, Heinrich Böll and Konrad Adenauer foundations that are associated with various political parties and that have been active in democracy promotion. Finally, among non-state actors, there are the private service contractors or consulting companies (such as Planning and Development Collaborative International and Development Alternatives, Inc. url), which procure contracts and carry out democracy promotion, civil society strengthening and governance on behalf of and based on the specifications of their clients. USAID, in particular, provides a significant amount of contracts to such consulting companies and private service contractors. In 2004 alone it provided US \$8 billion to contractors engaged in carrying out international development projects throughout the world (USAID 2006).<sup>5</sup>

While the levels of financial and operational autonomy vary, it is important to recognise that similar to the bilateral and multilateral approaches discussed above, there tends to be a strong commitment among all the aforementioned non-state actors to the belief that civil society is important for democracy building. So, given the involvement of such diverse actors, what has been the impact of democracy promotion through civil society strengthening? Democracy promotion has had mixed results.

### **Achievements of democracy promotion programmes**

Many of the democracy promotion success stories are about the countries in Central and East Europe, although South Africa and the Philippines are also mentioned (Gaventa 2006; Hawthorne 2004: 5). The EU enlargement and accession process has come to be seen not only as the EU's first major experience of democracy promotion, but also as one of the most successful cases of democracy promotion in general. Integration into the EU is often described as an effective tool of democracy promotion because it provided incentives for the leadership of democratising countries to pursue internal changes

(McFaul 2004: 157). Certainly, great strides have been made and many democratic institutions and practices have been established in the countries of Central and East Europe. However, this did not happen overnight and enlargement is not an approach that can be replicated elsewhere. Moreover, the 'return to Europe' has been more complicated than would initially appear. Examining democratisation processes in Central and Eastern Europe, Mary Kaldor and Ivan Vejvoda recognise the establishment of formal democratic institutions and maintain that there is hope for the development of substantive democracies in these countries. They contend that the process of democratisation, in substantive terms, is 'underway' (Kaldor and Vejvoda 1997: 80). While acknowledging the successes of Eastern European countries in establishing democratic institutions and practices, it is important to also recognise that the development of democracy and the growth of Eastern European civil societies (namely, an increased number of organisations) has not necessarily been translated into greater citizen engagement or participation (Celichowski 2004: 77), or led to greater benefits for various social groups (Hann 2004: 46).

The exponential growth in numbers of NGOs worldwide is also often cited as evidence of the success of democracy promotion efforts. Indeed, there has been a 'global associational revolution' (Salamon and Anheier 1997) and the number of civil society organisations has dramatically grown worldwide since 1990. Civil society organisations, and in particular NGOs, are actively engaged with governments and intergovernmental bodies on issues of global and national importance through awareness raising, advocacy and lobbying. These organisations work on a wide spectrum of issues, including poverty reduction, debt relief, human rights, women's rights, the environment and others. Although there are questions about civil society impact on policy making, the ability of civil society actors to introduce issues onto national and global political agendas, to influence public debates, and to name and shame actors who do not deliver on their promises, should not be underestimated. Consultations with NGOs, as well as the growing complaints about the power of NGOs from politicians and business leaders, attest to the fact that civil society organisations are actively engaged in public debates and policy advocacy at the national and global levels.

<sup>5</sup> The report did not indicate how the \$8 billion was broken down among programme areas.

While the growth and presence of NGOs is undeniable, increased activism should not necessarily be seen as the result of democracy promotion programmes for two reasons. First, much of the civil society activism at the global level comes from organisations based or operating in the global North; far fewer Southern organisations are engaged in lobbying and advocacy at the global level. It still tends to be the 'usual suspects' (that is, well-established, Northern-based organisations) that are engaged in global activism and included in consultations with intergovernmental organisations. For instance, only 251 of the 1,550 NGOs associated with the UN Department of Public Information come from the global South; the remainder are NGOs from the global North (Wild 2006).

Second, although the numbers of NGOs have dramatically increased in developing and transition countries, the reality is that the vast majority of these NGOs are almost entirely dependent on foreign support. This dependence not only raises concerns about their long-term sustainability and impact but also raises questions about their legitimacy, probity and accountability. In other words, are these NGOs considered legitimate actors locally? These considerations are often ignored and the growth in the number of NGOs is frequently cited by donors as a sign of success. This is due to the fact that it is easier to count the number of organisations and to cite increased numbers as evidence of the impact and success of donor programmes. For instance, the 'Lessons in Implementation: The NGO Story' report published by USAID in 1999 examines the lessons learned in 'building civil society in Central and Eastern Europe and the New Independent States'. The report acknowledges that the immense amount of aid led to an 'explosive growth of local NGOs' (USAID 1999: 3), citing growth as one of the eight success indicators.<sup>6</sup> The need for demonstrating success is driven by the pressures on all actors engaged in democracy promotion, whether donors or recipients, to

<sup>6</sup> Other indicators include the increased managerial competence of local NGOs, the establishment of regional linkages, strengthened sectoral infrastructures, improved prospects for NGO financial sustainability, improved legal and regulatory frameworks governing NGO sector operations, learning by local NGOs of professional grant making systems and procedures and, finally, the benefit to women and minority groups as well as reflecting social concerns and public policy issues important to women and minorities through the establishment of NGOs (USAID 1999: 5-6; see Box 4.1).



Women and men queue separately to vote in Afghanistan

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demonstrate effectiveness and to give account to their own funders. However, since it is difficult to measure the impact of democracy-building efforts on people's behaviour and attitudes, often what is considered and presented as signs of success are the formal or procedural democratic mechanisms and institutions.

The minimalist or procedural definition of democracy is identified as originating with Joseph Schumpeter (1947), who argued that democracy at the conceptual level is the existence of citizens holding their rulers accountable and the existence of procedures by which to do so. This narrow approach focuses on the formal institutions of democracy and does not consider social and economic inequalities and how they affect participation, access and decision making. While procedural democratic institutions and mechanisms are necessary and in fact represent an *a priori* safeguard against the abuses of power and for the development of substantive democracy (Kaldor and Vejvoda 1997: 63), there are many managed<sup>7</sup> democracies where the procedural elements are present but where substantive democracy is absent. Consequently while recognising the successes, we must be cautious in prematurely proclaiming the triumph of democracy promotion efforts, consider the challenges and ask why a backlash against civil society strengthening is emerging.

<sup>7</sup> 'Managed democracy' (*upravlyayemaya demokratiya*) is a phrase that was introduced by the Russian authorities in the early 2000s and is now being increasingly used to describe the situation in other former Soviet states (such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). It refers to a situation in which the formal/procedural institutions and practices (for example, elections) of democracies exist but are controlled and managed by the authorities (Colton and McFaul 2003).



**Box 4.1: En-gendering democracy: the 2002-04 anti-domestic violence campaign and democracy building in Armenia**

Following the collapse of communism, support for women’s organisations in the post-socialist states in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union became a significant component of democracy promotion and civil society strengthening programmes. Donors, including USAID, the Ford Foundation, the German Marshall Fund, the Eurasia Foundation and the Open Society Institute, shared the belief that there was a direct link between democratisation and women’s advocacy groups (Ghodsee 2004; Hemment 2004; Henderson 2003; McMahon 2002; Richter 2002). Furthermore, the pressure to liberalise the economy and to privatise state welfare delivery often meant that women, traditionally involved in caring for children, the disabled and the elderly, assumed a greater share of this burden in the face of shrinking public services. By the end of the 1990s, women’s NGOs represented a significant proportion of NGO activism in the former Soviet countries (Berg 2004; Hemment 2004; Henderson 2003; Ishkanian 2004; Olson 2003; Richter 2002; Tohidi 2004), and at the same time domestic violence became a popular funding initiative among donors. In September 2002 the USAID Mission in Armenia made available US \$476,367, which was divided among six Armenian NGOs. This funding was part of the USAID Democracy Program (USAID 2002: 32–34) and the six grants represented the first direct USAID grants to Armenian NGOs (USAID 2002).

Although the issue was being discussed in global forums and funding was becoming more readily available in the mid-1990s (Sen 2003), domestic violence was still a taboo subject in many post-Soviet countries, including Armenia. Unlike in the USA or Europe, where the issue of domestic violence was first raised and addressed by local women’s organisations and groups of battered women (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 174), in Armenia there was no broad-based grassroots movement pushing for recognition of the problem. Most of the women’s or human rights NGOs that worked on the issue did not begin doing so until the announcement of large grant programmes (Ishkanian 2004).

Domestic violence had not been recognised locally as a social issue that could be addressed by law enforcement, hotlines and shelters until it was identified as such by Western donors and experts; and therefore the problem, as well as the proposed solutions (i.e. hotlines, shelters), were perceived as being artificially imported and imposed. This perception led to widespread civil society criticism of and resistance to the efforts of the six NGOs involved in the 2002–04 USAID-funded campaign. Although much of the criticism was directed at specific policy solutions, such as shelters, the metanarrative of the critique was directed at the influence of donors and the post-Soviet transition policies (i.e. liberalisation and privatisation) more generally.

As the campaign unfolded, the greatest challenge for these NGOs became countering the persistent civil society resistance to and critique of the campaign, which alleged that the issue was being imposed by donors and that the six NGOs’ involvement was motivated by greed and grant-seeking. This led the six NGOs to devote a significant amount of time demonstrating the existence of domestic violence existed in Armenia, arguing that they were not working on the issue because of the grant money, and explaining that they considered local cultural practices and beliefs while designing their programmes. In addition, they sought to legitimise their work by framing domestic violence as a human rights issue and maintaining that addressing the problem was a critical component for democracy building. The crux of their argument was to define domestic violence as a human rights violation and to contend that since the protection of human rights are a necessary, if not obligatory, component of democracy building, the anti-domestic violence campaign was contributing to democratisation processes in Armenia. During interviews, in public addresses, and in their publications the leaders of the six NGOs often made the connection between their work and the larger goal of democracy promotion.

When I visited Armenia in 2005 I found that donor interest had shifted to other topics and that all but one of the shelter programmes had closed due to lack of funding. One of the six NGOs involved even denied any involvement in the 2002–04 campaign (Ishkanian, forthcoming). There was broad consensus among the other NGOs involved that, even though the anti-domestic violence campaign had not fully overcome the resistance and criticisms encountered from the outset, at least it had accomplished the difficult task of introducing the topic to the public and generating discussion about the issue. Less successful were the technical solutions, such as shelters and hotlines, employed by NGOs to try to combat the problem.

Hotlines were not successful in Armenia for a number of reasons, including the costs of phone calls (there were no toll-free numbers during the campaign); the absence or poor provision of telephone services in some rural areas; the lack of privacy in most households; and the fact that sharing problems with a stranger over the phone is an alien concept. Meanwhile, shelters, which may be successful in developed countries with welfare systems that provide public assistance, unemployment benefits, health insurance, subsidised housing and free schooling, did not work in Armenia, where these provisions are either not present or not functioning. All that a shelter can do in Armenia is to provide counselling and housing for up to four weeks, leaving the question of what happens to a woman when she leaves a shelter unanswered. Without viable employment, affordable housing and subsistence benefits, often the only options for women are to return to their husband or their parental household. The lack of alternatives and public assistance meant that shelter programmes were viewed by many women as untenable.

The technical solutions such as hotlines and shelters that were implemented ignored the socio-economic problems, including poverty, unemployment and multi-generational households living in cramped conditions, which exacerbate and at times provoke incidences of domestic violence, as well as the fact that Armenia has a weak social welfare system. They were thus implemented in the place of more ambitious programmes that would address the structural and economic inequalities and provide more long-term and sustainable solutions. Unless the broader issue of access to services and a more robust welfare system are addressed, short-term, temporary, technical solutions such as shelters will not solve the suffering of the victims of domestic violence.

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## Challenges and obstacles to democracy promotion

### Cultural barriers

In analysing why the transitions to democracy have not yielded the expected results, a common claim is that a society's propensity or 'fitness' for democracy is predicated on its cultural and geographic proximity to the West (Nodia 2002; McFaul 2002). Ernest Gellner (1994), for instance, argued that the concept of civil society is inapplicable in certain contexts, including in non-Western patrimonial societies and in tribal societies (Gellner 1994). He questioned whether civil society could exist in Islamic societies. Others, such as Elie Kedourie or Serif Mardin, have also claimed civil society is a Western dream that does not translate well into Islamic terms (Mardin 1995, quoted in Sajoo 2002) or that Muslims have nothing in their own political traditions that is compatible with Western notions of democracy (Kedourie 1992). Meanwhile, in the context of the post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe, 'transitologists' often 'invoke "culture", that amorphous, omnibus concept' as an explanation for why certain Western policies or blueprints have been resisted (Burawoy and Verdery 1999: 14). For instance, in Bosnia, culture or ethnic mentality were cited as reasons for the inability to embrace civil society development and democratisation. David Chandler discusses the disparaging ways in which the Bosnian people and society were viewed by some international actors and internationally funded local NGOs. They perceived Bosnian society as 'deeply sick', 'feudalistic' or as 'the flock' (Chandler 2004: 240–1). He argues that this focus on the perceived incapacities of Bosnians is only one side of the story and that greater attention must be paid to the 'failing within international democratisation practice itself' (Chandler 2004: 228).

Such sweeping generalisations and claims that blame culture for the lack of democracy or progress are hardly new; they are examples of the interpretations that have been used to explain the failure of development and modernisation programmes since the 1950s. Michael Herzfeld criticises the 'misuse of the culture concept' in the media and among some academics who decry 'Balkan nationalism' and 'religious fundamentalism', all the while failing to recognise their own, Western cultural fundamentalisms. Yet, as Herzfeld adds,

rejecting the essentialisation of other cultures does not legitimate meting out the same treatment to the 'West', and for treating the West as a generic bogey (Herzfeld 2001: 152). Such views, Herzfeld maintains, not only essentialise the 'other' but they also essentialise 'the West'. For this reason it is important to recognise that the culture concept is also (mis)used by authoritarian leaders who argue that democracy or human rights are incompatible with local traditions and values.

From African dictators in the 1970s to Asian government officials in the 1990s there have been two sets of arguments: first, democracy is a luxury that can and should only come after a certain stage of economic development and stability has been achieved; and second, democracy is a Western individualistic value that is not compatible with more 'traditional' or kin-based societies. These arguments held great sway in the 1990s until the financial crisis in Asia undermined the 'Asian values' position and silenced most of its supporters (Thompson 2001: 154).

While I would argue that cultural beliefs and ideologies are certainly important and do affect individuals' understandings and behaviour, I am sceptical of the essentialising discourses that view culture as an unproblematic, monolithic and static entity. Furthermore, I find quite problematic the tendency in some of the works on culture as a mitigating factor to democratisation to speak of the 'other' as being affected by culture, whilst claiming to be objective and thereby ignoring how one's own behaviour and understandings are also influenced by cultural beliefs. I argue that if the cultural argument is to be applied, it is necessary to examine critically the cultural attitudes and biases of both donors and recipients.

### Authoritarian legacies

In addition to arguing that culture is a barrier to democracy promotion, some policy makers and scholars have maintained that the authoritarian legacies in various countries mitigate the development of a vibrant civil society and democracy (Brzezinski 2002: 196; Gershman and Allen 2006; McFaul 2002: 264; Nodia 2002: 203). In an article co-written with Michael Allen, the President of NED, Carl Gershman, suggests that the failures of and backlash against democracy promotion are a 'by-product of so-called hybrid regimes' (Gershman and Allen 2006: 37).



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'Pure Victory' reads the fruit juice advert above Russians commemorating the 1917 October Revolution

Hybrid regimes, according to Gershman and Allen, are those that have certain formally democratic procedures, including the holding of relatively free (if not fair) elections and allowing civil society organisations to function. In other words, hybrid regimes are procedural democracies where the substantive elements are either weakly constituted or missing. Clearly, societies do not exist in a vacuum and it very important to examine and understand how the past has influenced and continues to influence the present. In discussing the lack of civic participation or democracy in Arab countries, there is a tendency to argue that decades of authoritarian rule have left a legacy of 'widespread political apathy' (Hawthorne 2004: 10). Meanwhile, in the post-Soviet states certain practices (such as corruption and clan-based rule), which were common under Communism, persist and have influenced how the current policies have been interpreted, adapted, and operationalised.

While recognising the importance of history, I would argue it is important not to attribute all of the present problems to the legacies and memories of the past. In the field of democracy promotion in particular, Cold War ideologies have influenced and shaped the design and implementation of policies and practices. In the 1990s these ideologies had engendered the notion that everything created prior to the collapse of communism was either 'not true civil society' or

that it was polluted and contaminated by the Communist legacy and had to be purged before true civil society and democracy could flourish (Mandel 2002). The reality is far more complex and it is worth considering how the past is interpreted and instrumentalised by different parties under different circumstances.

For instance, in recent years there has been growing selective remembrance (that is, forgetting about the political repressions and lack of freedoms) and intensifying nostalgia for the 'stability' of the Soviet past and a questioning of the benefits of democracy, which is linked in the minds of many post-Soviet citizens with the introduction of the shock therapies that led to poverty, gross inequality, social exclusion, gangster capitalism and the rise of the oligarchs (see Box 4.2). Democracy promotion in Eastern Europe was also affected by the close association between democracy and market reform programmes. Because the rapidly implemented market reforms and shock therapies of the early 1990s led to vast inequality, poverty and social exclusion, people soon became disillusioned, not only with the market reforms but also with the associated programme of democracy building.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Mary Kaldor for drawing my attention to this point.



## Box 4.2: *Nashi (Ours)*

### What is Nashi?

*Nashi* (Ours) is a pro-government, patriotic Russian youth movement that was created in March 2005. Since then, it has rapidly grown throughout Russia and presently has over 200,000 members, of which 10,000 are regular activists or Nashi 'commissars' (Konovalova 2007). The majority of Nashi members are in their late teens or twenties and for some membership is a path to career advancement. The movement's activities include organising voluntary work for members in orphanages and helping restore churches and war memorials, organising educational and training programmes, and organising demonstrations and rallies. Critics, including Russian opposition activists as well as Western observers, argue that the movement is the Kremlin's attempt to co-opt the youth, control dissent and to prevent a 'colour revolution' from occurring in Russia. Given that youth groups played an instrumental role in organising mass demonstrations in Serbia in 2000 (*Otpor* – Resistance), Georgia in 2003 (*Kmara* – Enough) and Ukraine in 2004 (*Pora* – High Time), the establishment of and support for Nashi is seen as a pre-emptive measure, especially in view of the 2008 presidential elections. Although Nashi has been described as a neo-*Komsomol* (Communist Youth Movement) movement that, similar to its Soviet predecessor, trains and grooms its members for leadership positions, it does so by using the forms (demonstrations, sit-ins), techniques (master classes, trainings), and language (of rights, participation) of civil society organising.

### Sovereign democracy and the Nashi manifesto

According to its manifesto, Nashi's aims are to support Russia's development as a global leader in the twenty first century through economic, social and cultural means rather than through military and political domination. The key theme throughout the manifesto is sovereignty, which is interpreted as the freedom and independence to set the 'rules of the game' in one's own country and the rejection of Western (i.e. American) hegemony. The manifesto also rails against and calls for the liquidation of 'oligarchical capitalism', crediting President Vladimir Putin as the first to have challenged the oligarchs' power, for strengthening the state, and for turning Russia into a global power. Nashi pledges its support for Putin's policies and vows to work toward these goals in a variety of ways, including through the creation of a 'functioning civil society'. Criticising the existing 'liberal' civil society as being the 'worst advertisement for democracy', the manifesto claims that Nashi will promote civil debates, work with multiple stakeholders (such as government, business, etc) to promote Russia's economic and social development, fight against fascism and intolerance towards ethnic minorities, campaign against violence in the army, and restore people's faith in Russia's future (URLa).

Nashi's manifesto is greatly influenced by the work of Kremlin ideologue, Vladislav Surkov, and his idea of sovereign democracy (*suverennaya demokratiya*), which rejects the notion of a single type of democracy (i.e. American) and argues that each country should have the freedom and sovereignty to develop its own form. Indeed the only 'sources' cited on the movement's website are Surkov's works (URLb). The concept of sovereign democracy is a critique of Western democracy promotion efforts which were implemented following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The idea of sovereign democracy as espoused is currently spreading beyond Russia. In July 2006 the Nashi Rossiya-Uzbekistan movement was established in Uzbekistan (Saidazimova 2006). Meanwhile, Dariga Nazarbaeva, the daughter of President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, praised sovereign democracy as sign of freedom. She said:

*For a long time, we trod a path to democracy guided by maps prepared in the West. But times are changing. We see more and more countries and peoples in the world refusing to live according to identical patterns set up for them by someone else. Even the failure of the European constitution, was in defence of the national and the home-grown... In defence of sovereignty (Kimmage 2006).*

### Demonstrations, mass mobilisations and education

While opposition groups, including members of the 'Other Russia' (*Drugaya Rossiya*) coalition, have faced harassment from police and had their rallies and meetings disrupted by security forces, in contrast Nashi's actions, such as mass mobilisations and educational activities, have not been obstructed and have instead received support.

In the past two years Nashi has organised numerous high profile demonstrations. In 2006 members of Nashi spearheaded a campaign against the British Ambassador in Moscow, Anthony Brenton, because he had attended an opposition conference organised by the 'Other Russia' coalition. Brenton's appearance at this conference sparked a series of protests led by Nashi including demonstrations in front of the Ambassador's official residence and disruptions at public events where Brenton was due to speak. Nashi claimed it wanted Mr Brenton to apologise for having shown support for what the movement defined as extremist and nationalist groups.

On 17 December 2006, over 70,000 Nashi members dressed as Father Christmas, Snow Maiden or elves took to the streets of Moscow to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Soviet victory against the Nazis in the Battle of Moscow. The day before, a rally was held with heavy police reinforcements to commemorate more than 200 journalists killed in Russia in the past 15 years. Only 200 people attended this commemoration.

In April and May 2007, Nashi members began to hold daily protests in front of the Estonian embassy in Moscow following the removal of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn statue. The removal of this statue is described on the group's website as evidence of state-sanctioned fascism in Estonia.

In addition to these high profile demonstrations, Nashi provides educational and ideological training to its members. Those who successfully complete the training and pass the exams become Nashi commissars. The commissars are the most active members who receive even further education and training, and are groomed for leadership positions. In the various provinces Nashi activists also organise master classes, lectures, and educational competitions for high school students.

### Nashi and democracy promotion

Nashi is growing against the backdrop of criticism in Russia about how the country fared in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and what it perceived as its humiliation and loss of status globally. According to Steven Pifer, a senior adviser with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington:

*Moscow's combative stance is widely seen as a reaction to the humiliation many Russians felt in the 1990s, when the country was emerging from the Soviet collapse...Russia was also subject to frequent Western lectures about how best to rebuild its society and government. There is this lingering perception that in the 1990s the West somehow took advantage of Russia. (Whitmore 2007)*

Indeed there is a growing backlash against democracy promotion and civil society strengthening in the way it was introduced by Western donors and NGOs in the 1990s (Carothers 2006; Howell et al. 2007). While derided for his autocratic policies in the West, Putin currently enjoys widespread public support in Russia. His popularity is based on the perception that he has restored Russia's pride and place in the world and that he is challenging the hegemony of Western powers including the US and Britain. In a scathing critique of democracy promotion, Putin made the following remarks at the G8 Summit in St Petersburg:

*If you look at newspapers of 100 years ago, you see how, at the time, colonialist states justified their policies in Africa or in Asia. They talked of their civilising role, of the white man's mission. If you change the word 'civilising' to 'democratisation', you find the same logic, you can read the same things in the press today. (BBC 2006)*

According to Russian political analyst, Pyotr Romanov, one of the implicit items on the summit's agenda was the issue of the independence and sovereignty in relations between democratic countries. He writes, 'In a unipolar world dominated by the United States and its desire to be "generous" to humankind by forcing the North American worldview on it, this issue was bound to surface at bilateral talks within the G8 and during joint discussions' (Romanov 2006). Such criticisms of Western democracy promotion are becoming more widespread in Russia and other former Soviet countries (including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, etc.) and Nashi, which draws on Soviet and post-Soviet era models of organising, is both a recipient as well as purveyor of these neo-Cold War ideologies.

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### Genetically-engineered civil society

Katherine Verdery (1996) contends that since the demise of communism, Western capitalist societies have come to believe that they have a monopoly on truth and can therefore dispense wisdom about how to build the 'proper' forms of democracy and capitalism. This, the critics charge, led to the promotion of a single (i.e. Western) model of civil society that ignores other traditions and understandings (Parekh 2004: 22). According to Thomas Carothers, 'Democracy promoters pass through these countries [in Africa, Asia and the Middle East] on hurried civil society assessment missions and declare that "very little civil society exists" because they have found only a handful of Westernised NGOs devoted to non-partisan public-interest advocacy work on the national side' (Carothers 1999: 248). Since donor-defined civil society (that is, professional NGOs) did not exist in many places or was believed to have been tainted, donors engaged in a process of building society from scratch (Mandel 2002: 282).

This led to the promotion of a particular model of civil society and democracy, and encouraged the creation of what I refer to as 'genetically-engineered civil societies.' With the injection of external funding (the growth hormones), these genetically engineered civil societies experienced spectacularly rapid growth that would have not occurred organically. Similar to genetically modified crops, they also began to colonise and squeeze out all indigenous competitors, becoming the dominant type in their environment. In the process, in many places existing civil society lost its diversity and was reduced to professionalised NGOs that were engaged in advocacy or service delivery and that supported, in theory if not in practice, liberal Western values. Through this approach, which has also been termed 'institutional modelling' (Carothers 2000), organisations and actors were rewarded on the basis of their success in imitating that particular model and its associated discourses.

Subsequently, groups that did not replicate these practices and discourses, such as nationalist organisations and activist groups, were ignored or marginalised by donors and soon came to view themselves as real civil society, in contrast to the donor-created and- supported NGOs. In Latin America, as Jenny Pearce (2004) discusses, this led to divisions between organisations that considered

themselves builders, and those that considered themselves critics, of democracy building. The critics (social organisations) not only view the builders (professionalised NGOs) as having been co-opted by the state, but also consider them as advocates of the neo-liberal economic agenda (Pearce 2004: 63). Sabine Freizer also differentiates between the donor-supported 'neo-liberal' and the 'communal' civil societies that have developed in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and discusses the lack of mixing of goals and approaches between these parallel forms (Freizer 2004). She points out the lack of grassroots support or recognition for such neo-liberal organisations. Such developments have led to discussions about the unintended consequences of civil society strengthening programmes in many parts of the world and concerns that NGOs are donor driven, upwardly accountable and disconnected from their own communities and constituencies (Abramson 1999; Adamson 2002; Bruno 1997; Glasius et al. 2004; Hann 2004; Helms 2003; Hemment 2004; Henderson 2003; Howell and Pearce 2002; Ishkanian 2003, 2004; Mendelson 2002; McMahon 2002; Pearce 2004; Obadare 2004; Sampson 2002; Wedel 2001).

In addition to the funding of projects and organisations, a major component of the technical aspect of democracy promotion programmes involved the capacity building and training of trainers. Capacity building has been used to teach individuals a series of skills, including how to create and manage NGOs, how to apply for grants, how to prepare reports and so on. Having participated in a number of capacity building exercises designed for NGO activists in Armenia, I found that training, in addition to teaching a particular skill (for example, how to fundraise) also implicitly communicated the donors' expectations by teaching local actors which topics were open to discussion and which kinds of knowledge and discourses were considered valuable. While never criticising them publicly, many NGO members I interviewed in Armenia complained that the training often provided superficial, one-size fits all answers to problems, and information that was not applicable to the local context. They also resented the large sums spent on the trainers' per diem, their five-star hotel stays and business air travel. In neighbouring Georgia, where many of the same policies and trainings were also implemented, a Georgian NGO leader writes,



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Teaching democracy? Representatives of NGOs in the Democratic Republic of Congo learn about democracy and elections

*Some [Western] specialists come without the slightest knowledge of the countries they are advising. The latter generously share the American experience in organizing election campaigns and fundraising for candidates for state legislatures, or perhaps the Indian experience of community-building in traditionally caste-bound villages. I do not deny that all the information may be of some theoretical interest to some local specialists, but I will say that in Georgia the practical use of all those lectures, seminars, and training sessions was pretty much nonexistent ... Expert knowledge of India, combined with complete ignorance of Georgia ... was both insulting and humorous, neither facilitating the learning process nor contributing to the reputation of the international experts. (Haindrava 2003: 77)*

The popularity of capacity building continues unabated. The following excerpt from the USAID (2004) 'A Year in Iraq: Building Democracy' report demonstrates the importance ascribed to capacity building. As part of the US democracy promotion effort in Iraq, a former official from Colorado was asked to write a guide explaining how to run a meeting, how to encourage people to speak and contribute, and how to resolve disagreements and reach decisions through compromise. The guide was translated into Arabic and distributed to all members of local councils in Iraq. In order to assess how these lessons had been absorbed, a district council meeting was observed. According to the report:

*At the district council meeting, the Iraqi experiment in democracy seemed to be running off the tracks when a couple of council members began shouting their opinions around the table, appearing to be angry enough to come to blows. (USAID 2004: 12)*

The USAID observer was told not to worry by an Iraqi council member, who explained that the shouting was only theatrics and that it would not disrupt the process. While seemingly accepting that this was 'the Iraqi way', the authors express their satisfaction that 'the shouting soon gave way to constructive debate; the council agreed on some issues and deferred others before it adjourned peacefully' (USAID 2004: 12).

Although donor policies are indeed an important factor, we must not disregard the agency and the role of the NGO leaders and members in developing or transition countries who, for various reasons, ranging from a sincere belief in the values of civil society and democracy to the more banal, pragmatic need to make a living, embraced the models, discourses, ideologies and projects promoted by donors. In the context of economic upheaval, impoverishment and crises, this led to some opportunistic use of aid funding. The misuse of aid money is hardly a shocking revelation: however, the actual misappropriation or perceived misuse of funds intended for democracy and civil society promotion not only has a negative impact on how NGOs are perceived (such as corrupt and opportunistic), but also on how the ideas they promote are received.



### Box 4.3: Civil society and democratisation in the ‘colour revolutions’

The ‘colour revolutions’ were a series of protest movements that emerged in several post-socialist countries following fraudulent elections by authoritarian governments. They took the form of massive street demonstrations that led to the overthrow of the ruling regimes by new coalitions committed to political reform and democratisation.

The revolutions are so-named because of their non-violent resistance and the symbolic use of colours or flowers by supporters. NGOs, in particular youth and student activist groups, played a key role in organising the street demonstrations and creative non-violent resistance. The colour revolutions refer to the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005). Some scholars also consider the Serbian Bulldozer Revolution of 2000, which led to the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, as an influential forerunner of the colour revolutions. This revolution was led by *Otpor* (Resistance), which became an important knowledge source for, and trainer of, the subsequent movements.

In Georgia, following fraudulent elections in November 2003, and galvanized by the *Kmara* (Enough) youth movement and the Liberty Institute, protestors thronged the streets of Tbilisi carrying roses – a symbol of non-violence. Georgia’s Rose Revolution forced President Eduard Shevardnadze to resign; and he was replaced by Mikhail Saakashvili after new elections in March 2004.

In Ukraine, as rumours of fraudulent second round elections circulated, opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko called for mass public protests. Wearing orange or carrying orange flags, the colour of Yushchenko’s campaign coalition, demonstrators poured onto the streets and squares. The youth movement *Pora* (High Time!) coordinated the mass protests, acts of civil disobedience, sit-ins and general strikes during the Orange Revolution. The movement resulted in a re-run of the election and Yushchenko’s victory.

Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution of 2005 was led by a new movement, *Kelkel* (Renaissance), which was modelled on *Otpor* and *Pora*. In the wake of fraudulent elections, activists seized control of several towns in southern Kyrgyzstan and called on President Askar Akaev to resign. The demonstrations spread to the north of the country, and when a 10,000 strong demonstration, led by *Kelkel*, was attacked by Akaev supporters, a riot broke out and the presidential palace was stormed. The violence of the Tulip Revolution, in which at least three people were killed, contrasted with the peaceful change of the other colour revolutions.

#### Common features

The experiences of the first democratic revolutions offered a model, which was spread by NGOs and adapted according to local circumstances by social movements. Four key characteristics of the colour revolutions have been identified:

1. civil society organisations’ use of fraudulent elections to mobilise against regimes
2. foreign support for the development of local democratic movements
3. the organisation of radical youth movements using unconventional protest tactics and non-violent resistance
4. the importance of transnational linkages (Beissinger 2005).

1. All of the colour revolutions were electoral revolutions, and used the occasion of a stolen election to organise mass protests led by a coalition of civil organisations. For example, the Orange Revolution’s central civic organisation was *Pora*, whose yellow wing - named after the colour of their symbols - formed part of the Freedom of Choice Coalition, which was active in election monitoring. This coalition organised massive protests in cities across Ukraine; the largest, in Kiev’s Independence Square, attracted an estimated 500,000 participants, which was unprecedented.

2. The financial support of foreign donors and mainly American NGOs was critical to the emergence of local democratic movements (Wilson 2006). Through the democracy promotion programmes in Ukraine prior to the Orange revolution, the United States spent an estimated \$65 million, which was channelled mainly

through foreign NGOs to Ukrainian NGOs and social movements (Beissinger 2005). In Georgia, the local branch of the Soros Foundation supported Kmara's election support programme with \$350,000, and other NGOs also received significant financial and organisational support from the National Democratic Institute (Stojanovic 2004).

3. The rise of radical youth organisations influenced the tactics of the movement. Due to the young age composition of NGOs, the internet became a major location, not only for mobilisation and the diffusion of information, but for humour and ridicule of the authorities (Kuzio 2006). For example, the intellectual abilities of Ukrainian presidential candidate Victor Yanukovich were ridiculed in youth NGO circles and on websites after it emerged the 'Professorship' listed on his CV was fictitious (Chornuhuza 2005). In addition to this humour, the Ukrainian movement's activities were infused with a carnivalesque atmosphere; for instance, the hymn of the Orange revolution was downloaded 1.5 million times from the internet in 2004 (Kuzio 2006). Non-violent resistance was common to all the colour revolutions – a tactic inspired by the work of Gene Sharp (1993), the guru of non-violent resistance in the West, and then disseminated by NGO training centres (Beissinger 2006).

4. The successful operations of the main NGOs could not have developed without the experience of others, and the transnational linkages that allowed those lessons to be shared. For instance, the Soros Foundation supported a trip by Georgian civil society activists to Belgrade where they met with Otpor activists and learnt about non-violent resistance techniques. This inspired the creation of Kmara, which grew into a broad-based movement of 3000 students (Beissinger 2006). Before the Orange Revolution, 14 Pora leaders were trained in Serbia at the Centre for Non-Violent Resistance, an organisation created by Otpor activists to teach youth leaders how to organise a movement, how to motivate voters, and how to develop mass actions. Pora also provided summer camps in civil disobedience training for its members (Yablokova 2004).

### Diffusion

The success of each revolution provided impetus for neighbouring countries in the post-Soviet region. Democratic youth groups such as 'Walking Without Putin', the Red Pora or the Orange Moscow, were formed in Russia, while in Belarus, the youth movement Zubr (Bison) became more active in this period. Similar movements emerged later in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, the activists trained often by Pora. Youth movements modelled on Otpor were also created in Albania, Egypt, and Zimbabwe. The so-called 'Cedar Revolution' in Lebanon also gained some inspiration from the Orange and the Rose Revolutions.

Despite the spread of the colour revolutions, the role of NGOs in the emergence of these revolutions has been highly criticised by academics on one side, and governments in the region on the other. The primary critique has been that NGOs are foreign agents of Western democracy promotion; for example, some argue that the Orange Revolution was 'made in the USA' (Wilson 2006: 3). The colour revolutions have also engendered a backlash against civil society in several authoritarian regimes (Carothers 2006; Howell et al. 2007), with the result that some NGOs have been closed down by the authorities. For instance, the Soros Foundation no longer operates in Belarus, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan because of the growing hostility of those governments towards what is perceived as assistance to 'revolutionary organisations' (Beissinger 2005). Finally, some analysts doubt that in the long term these revolutions will influence the process of democratisation significantly. Before the national elections in Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbaev criticised Western interference through NGOs:

*They [parliament] have seen the dangers that arose in neighbouring countries when foreign N.G.O.s insolently pumped in money and destabilized society. The state was defenceless against this.* (Karajkov 2005:1)

A Russian law passed in 2006 portrays 'NGOs as imported, unnatural, un-Russian implants' (Kuzio 2006: 12). In 2006, Kazakhstan modified its law on NGOs to control their activities and require consent for foreign

financing (Wilson 2006). Similar legislation and regime propaganda is also evident in Belarus. The increasing isolation of authoritarian regimes and the greater oppression of civil society organisations offers little chance for a successful democratisation in the region.

However, others argue that unless there is a genuine domestic mass movement against an authoritarian regime, foreign support will have little effect (Wilson 2006). Moreover, most of the original protest campaigns were funded domestically. The majority of the foreign finance went on training and maintenance. According to Amchuk (2004) the cost of organising the protest in Kiev's central square was equivalent to US \$3.8 million, which was raised without foreign support. Beissinger (2006), Herd (2005) and others agree that the financial support of Western countries and NGOs was crucial, but that these revolutions emerged from domestic dissatisfaction and were not instigated from abroad.

Finally, some critics argue neither the goals nor the outcome of the colour revolutions were revolutionary, or led to dramatic regime change (Jones 2006). In the Rose Revolution people did not expect the resignation of Shevardnadze; they were more concerned with transparency of the government, removal of the old nomenclature and more reforms. After the revolution, changes including new constitutional amendments in favour of the executive, and increased accountability of the administration, did not lead to radical transformations. As Jones says: 'And has the Rose Revolution over the last two years transformed itself into a 'Rosy Revolution', based on public relations rather than genuine democratic change?' (2006: 7). The long-term impact of the colour revolutions on democracy building remains to be seen.

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I recognise the diversity of civil society actors' motivations and I do not wish in any way to portray all NGO actors as being driven by economic incentives. However, the fact remains that in the 1990s, creating or joining NGOs became an economic survival strategy from countries as far apart as Albania to Zambia, thanks to the influx of donor aid (Celichowski 2004: 75; Ishkanian 2004; Mandel 2002: 286; Obadare 2004: 159; Sampson 2002: 307). These so-called 'grant-eaters' (Ishkanian 2003: 29), 'civil society entrepreneurs' (Obadare 2004: 159) or 'profiteers' (Kaldor et al. 2007: 111) cashed in on the 'gold rush' by engaging in civil society strengthening programmes. Of course individuals adapt, manipulate and negotiate ideologies, discourses and projects to fit their needs, but within the context of aid encounters they very rarely publicly question the validity of these approaches and ideas, even if they do so privately and off the record. Whereas I understand the potential costs of speaking out (including losing funding and being labelled a troublemaker), unfortunately, silence has often been interpreted by donors as a sign of acceptance of the *status quo*.

Therefore I argue that donors' definitions of democracy and civil society, and the operationalisation of civil society, have affected local processes of democracy and have raised questions about the viability of externally driven democracy promotion programmes.

### Conflating democracy promotion with regime change

Finally, in recent years the crisis of democracy in the West has made democracy promotion much more difficult as claims of undemocratic behaviour in others are met with charges of hypocrisy. The *ex post facto* justification for the Iraq war as a form of democracy promotion has meant that democracy promotion has been confused or conflated with regime change. At present, suspicion about and resistance to US democracy promotion activities in developing and post-socialist countries is at an all-time high (Carothers 2006). Far from having won hearts and minds in the Middle East, it appears that the US justification for the war in Iraq has 'given democracy promotion a bad name' (Halperin 2006). The perceived presence of the US 'shadowy guiding hand' in the colour revolutions has also intensified the criticism and scepticism toward democracy

promotion in the former Soviet states. Four years on from the first colour revolution (that is, the Rose Revolution in Georgia), optimism has declined and democratic development remains under serious question in all the countries that experienced a colour revolution (Beissinger 2006; see box 4.3). Following these revolutions, allegations of interventionism and imperialism have intensified as the authorities in many former Soviet states attribute the 'directive' and 'top down approaches' to foreign meddling in what they consider internal political affairs.

Such criticisms are not limited to Iraq or the former Soviet states. For instance, US support for the NGO *Súmate* (Join Up) in Venezuela, which has received support from NED and USAID, is described by critics as having been created with the sole purpose of getting rid of President Hugo Chavez and replacing him with someone who is on friendlier terms with the US (Gindin 2005; see Box 4.4). William Robinson describes the objectives of US democracy promotion in Venezuela as undermining authentic democracy by

*gaining control over popular movements for democratisation, keeping a lid on popular democracy movements, and limiting any change that may be brought about by mass democratisation movements so that the outcomes of democracy struggles do not threaten the elite order and integration into global capitalism.* (Robinson and Gindin 2005)

Although at times these critics tend to ignore some of Chavez's authoritarian policies, they do articulate the growing questioning of the motives behind American democracy promotion.

Increasingly there are arguments that democracy promotion and civil society aid are beginning to be used in the way that human rights became a cynical tool in the Cold War, where violations in Brazil under military rule or Pinochet's Chile were ignored because these regimes were anti-Communist and part of the 'free world' (Kaldor 2003: 52). Today the double standards of supporting 'friendly tyrants' in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt, as well as claims about extraordinary rendition and the use of torture in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, are compromising democracy promotion efforts and feeding into the emerging backlash against civil society and democracy promotion.



## Conclusion

'Democracy is not instant coffee' stated Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the European Commissioner for External Relations and ENP in a recent speech (2006). Her comment represents the pragmatic attitude that has replaced the euphoria and optimism of the early 1990s. After nearly two decades of democracy promotion, donors remain committed to civil society strengthening, but they are re-evaluating their earlier approaches and formulating new strategies. In this period of reckoning, we are faced with questions of how and whether democracy should be promoted through externally funded programmes. Is continued civil society strengthening the way forward? What about support to state actors? Or political parties?

The results of democracy promotion thus far have been varied. Indeed, democracy has been (re)established in many countries. Moreover, if we consider the spread of formal or procedural democracies, then democracy promotion programmes can be and are deemed a success.<sup>9</sup> However, if we consider the development and spread of substantive democracies, then it is clear that donor-supported democracy promotion and civil society strengthening programmes have not met with great success because, although the mechanisms and institutions have been created, we are not witnessing greater civic participation, engagement and inclusion. It is not uncommon to hear about 'virtual' and 'managed' democracies. In many instances donor civil society strengthening programmes, while leading to the exponential growth of NGOs, have also thwarted natural political processes and imposed a particular model of democracy and civil society. This tendency has led to an 'abortion of local processes of change' (Hann 2004: 46) and tamed social movements (Kaldor 2003). Some even suggest that donor civil society strengthening programmes risk 'inhibiting and ultimately destroying the most important purposes of civil society ... the freedom to imagine that the world could be different' (Howell and Pearce 2002: 237).

These concerns, however, are only part of the story. The reality is far more complex because, in spite of the taming, co-optation, and backlash, there is still much emancipatory potential left in civil society and it is important not to deny the agency of civil society actors around the world for challenging hegemonic discourses and powerful actors, as well as contesting oppressive regimes.

As the development of civil society and, indeed, democracy is no longer solely restricted to national boundaries, outside actors, be they foreign donors, diasporic networks or global civil society activists, cannot be excluded from the equation. Global actors are implicated in and shape national/local processes in a multitude of ways, including providing financial assistance, training, and supporting exchanges and education abroad. Actually existing global civil society is complex and contradictory (Kaldor et al. 2007: 119); it can contribute to peace, stability and justice just as it can foment conflict, instability and exclusion. While some global civil society actors (such as NGOs) are engaged in democracy promotion through civil society strengthening programmes, this is not the most important contribution of global civil society. The greatest contribution of global civil society is its potential to enhance communication by creating 'islands of engagement' (Kaldor 2003: 160), where diverse actors will find opportunities for discussion, participation and debate. If global civil society can do this and also encourage greater self-reflection by Northern actors about the state of their own democracy (and not only discussions about the status of democracy in the South), then it will go a long way in revitalising and reinvigorating democracy and of course, civil society.

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, a recent USAID-commissioned study, 'Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building: Results of a Cross-National Quantitative Study,' used Freedom House and Polity IV measures to examine the impact of US democracy promotion programmes worldwide. As one of the authors of the study said, 'We found that when the United States spends money to promote democracy in foreign countries, it works' (Finkel et al. 2006). The authors of the report attribute the growth of democracy to US assistance and write, 'USAID Democracy and Governance obligations have a significant positive impact on democracy, while all other US and non-US assistance variables are statistically insignificant' (Finkel et al. 2006: 83, emphasis added).

#### **Box 4.4: *Súmate* (Join Up): promoting and defending democracy in Venezuela**

*Súmate* (Join Up) is a private non-profit association, founded by opposition activists, Alejandro Plaz and María Corina Machado, and a group of Venezuelan citizens in 2002, with the objective of promoting individual liberty and the free exercise of citizen's constitutional rights. Today, the organisation has more than 30,000 volunteers.

Plaz and Machado were employed in the private sector until they founded *Súmate*, Plaz was a senior partner for McKinsey & Company in Latin America, and Machado worked for a car parts manufacturer (National Review Online 2006).

According to Golinger (2005), *Súmate*'s mission is to 'promote a recall referendum against President Chávez, a participatory instrument introduced in Venezuela's Constitution of 1999, with the support of the Chávez government. However, *Súmate* describes its mission as being to '...promote, defend, facilitate and support the complete exercise of political rights the Venezuelan Constitution grants to every one of its citizens' (*Súmate* URL). Its stated goals and values are:

- The guarantee of civil and political freedom and rights
- Impartial and independent citizen participation in democratic processes
- Professional volunteerism with a high level of citizen participation
- Organisational transparency and efficacy

*Súmate* has engaged in a number of activities in its effort to promote and defend democracy in Venezuela, including the collection and processing of signatures for the recall referendum; the collection and processing of the signatures for a constitutional amendment; and the design, planning and coordination of the *Firmazo* (the Big Signing) of February 2003. In addition, *Súmate* runs several projects that include the consolidation of the national web of volunteers, the diagnosis and analysis of the permanent national electoral registry, the planning and execution of the parallel manual counting of the votes to strengthen transparency and trust in electoral processes, and educational projects implemented through its numerous volunteers (*Súmate* 2004).

Because of *Súmate*'s open objections to the many steps President Hugo Chávez has taken to consolidate his power, the organisation has been described as an 'enemy of the people' by the Venezuelan government (O'Grady 2005). Both founders, Plaz and Machado, are being accused of a conspiracy 'to alter the Republican order' under the Venezuelan Penal Code, and are currently awaiting trial. Other active members, such as Luis Enrique Palacios and Ricardo Estévez, face the same charges, but as accomplices. The Prosecutor Ortega Díaz has requested the maximum penalty for the crime of conspiracy, which is 16 years.

Critics argue that *Súmate* is not an impartial organisation, even though *Súmate* describes itself as a civil association that is not concerned with who governs but rather with safeguarding democracy in Venezuela. The criticism surrounding *Súmate* stems largely from the perception that it is funded and influenced by foreign actors. The conspiracy charge mentioned above, for instance, is linked to the grant received by the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED). In September 2003, *Súmate* signed a contract with the NED for a US\$53,400 grant for the implementation of a programme of non-partisan elections education. However, only \$31,000 was used by the organisation to develop its educational project and the rest of the grant was returned to the NED. (O'Grady 2005).

In addition to the NED grant, *Súmate* has also received funds from the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation, USAID and the Canadian Embassy (interview with *Súmate* 2007).<sup>1</sup> The USAID grant was part of the agency's programme, launched in August 2002, to provide assistance to maintain democratic stability and strengthen Venezuela's fragile democratic institutions (USAID/OTI 2006).

*Súmate*'s director, Alejandro Plaz, says that only 5% of the organisation's total funding comes directly from foreign entities. In an interview held in May 2007, he said:

*Súmate's funding comes primarily from Venezuelan citizens concerned with the current situation our country is living. Deposits are made through several national bank accounts the organisation owns, for as little as \$1, if desired, by any one who wishes.*

Aside from the arguments about foreign funding, critics point to the relationship between *Súmate*'s leaders and the Bush administration. For example, a meeting between Machado and President Bush in the White House in 2005, caused an outcry and criticism from the government in Caracas. Venezuela's foreign minister, Alí Rodríguez Araque, called the meeting 'a provocation', and the interior minister, Jesse Chacón, called Machado 'a puppet of the CIA', continuing the heated rhetoric that has characterised the relationship between the Bush administration and Venezuela's president (Ceaser 2005).



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A protestor demonstrates against President Hugo Chavez

Golinger (2005) states the Venezuelan government believes the promotion of a recall referendum against the President, though within the constitutional rights of all Venezuelans, is inherently a partisan act. According to the Venezuelan government, *Súmate* was specifically 'promoting' and campaigning for a referendum against President Chávez, with the goal of prematurely terminating his mandate, utilising the funding from the NED, along with additional grants from USAID and funds from the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, both entities financed by NED and USAID (Golinger 2006).

The recall referendum held in August 2004 was defeated with a 59% 'NO' vote, and even though the US based Carter Center (2005) concluded the results were accurate, the European Union observers could not monitor the referendum because of the restrictions imposed upon them by the Venezuelan government (de Cordoba and Luhnnow 2004). An exit poll by Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates (PSB), in which *Súmate* personnel participated, predicted Chávez would loose by 20%, whereas the election results showed him winning by the

same percentage. Schoen said of the referendum, 'I think it was a massive fraud' (Barone 2004).

The Venezuelan democracy, *Súmate* points out, was set up with a separation of powers, an independent judiciary, civil rights and provisions for free and fair elections. *Súmate* believes that the electoral processes under Chávez have not been transparent and fair, stating that the Venezuelan National Electoral Council (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*, CNE) is biased and controlled by the government. They also believe the Venezuelan state does not possess a clear separation of powers, which further complicates the issue of transparency in electoral and other democratic processes (interview with *Súmate* 2007).

Venezuela's National Assembly approved a preliminary draft NGO law with provisions similar to those in Uzbek and Russian legislation. Venezuela would require all local civic organisations to register as legal entities with a new regulatory body, in addition to complying with existing civil code and tax laws. Registered groups would have to provide detailed information on donations and donors. The Venezuelan government would monitor and control all international contributions to civil society groups. Instead of using state banks, the government would establish a regulatory board to filter donations. This 'agency for international cooperation' would have full discretion to issue or withhold funds based on the government's own criteria. It could also give money to causes that donors never intended to sponsor (Johnson 2005). Huguette Labelle (2006), Chair of Transparency International, states:

*strong democracies are built on a solid foundation of freedom: freedom to speak out, to organise and to operate without government interference. This law's excessive regulation would undermine those basic rights. The role of civil society, to help protect the interests and rights of society in general, would be hindered.*

According to Amnesty International, President Chávez 'must respect the right of non-governmental human rights organizations to carry out their legitimate work, such work is underpinned by international human rights treaties which the Venezuelan government has willingly pledged to uphold' (Amnesty International 2004).

*Súmate's* experience illustrates the pertinent and often contentious issues for civil society organisations seeking to promote democracy: donor interventions, agendas, and influences; and sovereignty and nationalism (Howell and Pearce 2002). If an NGO is partly funded by international institutions with clear links to the US government does it mean a foreign government is meddling in another's internal affairs, thus breaching its sovereignty? Where does one draw the line between promoting democracy and foreign intervention on domestic affairs?

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