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Quo vadis democracy promotion?

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Bonn, 7 November 2011. The elections in Tunisia are so far one of the clearest indications of a democratic awakening in parts of the Arab region. But how is the West to support this process and encourage further transformation in which a moderate Islamist ruling party plays a major role? These and similar questions arise not only in the context of Tunisia or the Arab Spring, but also for other countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America and form part, to a particularly normative degree, of western foreign policies, namely with respect to democracy promotion.

Democracy promotion can range from extreme measures, usually controversial, such as military intervention, through economic sanctions imposed on dictatorships, to the promotion of civil society and audit offices in infant democracies. The effects of military intervention and sanctions are highly controversial in this context; democracy promotion by civil means appears to work best, especially in countries that have already taken initial political steps towards liberalisation of their own accord. And it would therefore surely be thought that the events of the Arab Spring would trigger a new boom in civil democracy promotion. Indeed, the reports of the international development cooperation professionals, which make it seem they are always busy, have a great deal to say about propitious democracy promotion strategies and instruments – and this not only in the Arab region.

Nonetheless, the self-assurance underlying the activism in democracy promotion with which western governments sought to disseminate their form of governance has given way to a remarkable degree of uncertainty. No wonder! For, whether in New York, Athens, Madrid or Chile, the citizens of the democracies affected by the financial crises or by persistent social imbalances are themselves now increasingly questioning the efficiency and even the legitimacy of their political systems. This has made it more difficult for western leaders and bureaucracies to stand up for democracy else-

where. Yet the international scope for aggressive democracy promotion has also shrunk. Quite a few European and North American countries have not only lost legitimacy as the main pillars of democracy promotion, because the recent economic performance of their systems has been unconvincing; they no longer carry the same economic and political weight in the regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America as they did 10 or 20 years ago.

The shifts in the international system and the economic and political rise of many emerging economies – with China in the lead – mean a loss of leverage for western democracy promotion. The western democracies might compensate for this by acting more consistently, adopting a more coordinated approach and opting for harmonised democracy promotion strategies. Are they doing so? Far from it. So far at least, their relative loss of importance in the international system has not caused the democracies of Western Europe and North America to move closer together. In democracy promotion this is reflected in the continuing difficulty of developing and then actually implementing joint strategies and instruments. This is evident in the Arab Spring context, not only from the lack of agreement on appropriate military strategies in Libya or Syria: the situation in democracy promotion under development policies is less visible, but similarly lacking in unity. And, given its potential for action, Europe presents a particularly sad picture in this context. Unable to subordinate national interests that appear increasingly trivial in the international system to the idea of a European Union capable of action, the leading EU Member States are revealing a tendency to focus on the bilateral small scale in civil democracy promotion.

On the other hand, the difficulties western countries are having in compensating for their waning international importance by taking more joint action does not mean that the spread of democracy is not going well. In fact, receptivity to democratic principles continues to grow in the de-

veloping countries and emerging economies. Elementary education and urbanisation are increasing, just as the middle classes have grown in most countries of the South in the past two decades. This has led to the development of societal structures that provide better social conditions for the emergence and persistence of democratic structures. The globalisation of information flows – deficient structural features in certain cases notwithstanding – is making it increasingly difficult for dictatorships and autocracies to manipulate them to their own advantage. In the last two decades a number of regional powers have made considerable progress in their efforts to democratise: Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa. Although these democracies of the South have not yet become active democracy promoters, they can all be said at least to have a preference for the spread of systems based on the rule of law and the principles of democracy. Russia and China remain as the most important regional bulwarks of authoritarianism. But from many Chinese interlocutors it will be heard in confidence that, in the medium to

long term at least, the Chinese system will not be able to avoid political liberalisation if it is not to be destroyed by political and social conflicts.

All in all, then, the present situation is rather unusual. While uncertainty and limits to action in the West are tending to increase where democracy promotion is concerned, the international environment outside the OECD member states has become, in general terms at least, more receptive to democracy. Perhaps the time has come for democracy promotion no longer to be seen as a primarily unilateral export measure, but rather as a reciprocal form of international cooperation. The West would undoubtedly increase its credibility in the South if it took an explicitly self-critical look at the deficiencies which have become so obvious in its own systems. And despite such reflection, it can, of course, refer with self-confidence to the advantage of democratic systems, the fact that they explicitly allow criticism and protest, from which they derive their flexibility and ability to change.



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