

# Prone to Violence

## *The Paradox of the Democratic Peace*

Edward D. Mansfield & Jack Snyder

THE BUSH Administration has argued that promoting democracy in the Islamic world, rogue states and China will enhance America's security, because tyranny breeds violence and democracies co-exist peacefully. But recent experience in Iraq and elsewhere reveals that the early stages of transitions to electoral politics have often been rife with violence.

These episodes are not just a speed bump on the road to the democratic peace. Instead, they reflect a fundamental problem with the Bush Administration's strategy of forced-pace democratization in countries that lack the political institutions needed to manage political competition. Without a coherent state grounded in a consensus on which citizens will exercise self-determination, unfettered electoral politics often gives rise to nationalism and violence at home and abroad.

Absent these preconditions, democracy is deformed, and transitions toward democracy revert to autocracy or generate

chaos. Pushing countries too soon into competitive electoral politics not only risks stoking war, sectarianism and terrorism, but it also makes the future consolidation of democracy more difficult.

### *Difficult Transitions*

FROM THE French Revolution to contemporary Iraq, the beginning phase of democratization in unsettled circumstances has often spurred a rise in militant nationalism. Democracy means rule by the people, but when territorial control and popular loyalties are in flux, a prior question has to be settled: Which people will form the nation? Nationalist politicians vie for popular support to answer that question in a way that suits their purposes. When groups are at loggerheads and the rules guiding domestic politics are unclear, the answer is more often based on a test of force and political manipulation than on democratic procedures.<sup>1</sup>

When authoritarian regimes collapse and countries begin the process of democratization, politicians of all stripes have an incentive to play the nationalist card. Holdovers from the old regime realize that they need to recruit mass sup-

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<sup>1</sup>This section is based on Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

porters to survive in the new, more open political setting. Slobodan Milosevic, for example, opportunistically misled Serbs about threats from ethnic Albanians to win votes in the elections held after Tito's death.

Rising new political figures also have incentives to tout nationalism in the early stages of a democratic transition. Nationalist rhetoric often involves criticism of monarchs, colonial overlords, dictators or communist apparatchiks for ruling in their own interest, rather than in the interest of the people. Where ethnic or religious groups were oppressed under the old regime, the emergence of a new regime often emboldens them to demand a state of their own, which they think will protect them better than some hypothetical ethnicity-blind liberal democracy.

Elections in many newly democratizing states have been an ethnic census, not a deliberation about public issues. Ethnic leaders can quickly mobilize nationalist mass movements based on crony and clan ties, common language and cultural practices. It is harder for secular or "catch-all" leaders to forge new ties across groups. When Saddam Hussein's regime collapsed in Iraq, for example, Shi'a groups readily formed political parties and militias based on existing social networks and religious authority figures. Kurds did the same from their regional base, and Ba'athi remnants were able to mount a fierce insurgency among some elements of the divided but resentful Sunnis. In contrast, secular leaders worked futilely against the grain of the existing social timber to construct an army and credible political parties.

The earlier the elections come during the process of democratization in deeply divided societies with weak political institutions, the worse this problem is. In Bosnia after the 1995 Dayton peace accord, elections were won by nationalist parties representing the three major ethnic groups, because the power of ethnic

factions was not yet broken. Ten years later, they remain locked into this pattern. Early elections likewise reinforced the divisions in Iraqi society, reflecting the party organizations that could be fashioned quickly, rather than ones that might have fostered more effective governance but would have taken longer to forge. Even worse, the Iraqi electoral law, which was based on country-wide proportional representation rather than local districts, magnified the exclusion of the Sunnis from the political process, since the insurgency kept a disproportional number of Sunni voters away from the polls.

### *Democracy and War*

THE NATIONALIST and ethnic politics that prevails in many newly democratizing states loads the dice in favor of international and civil war. The decade following the end of the Cold War witnessed some peaceful transitions to democracy in countries where the preconditions for democracy were in place. Elsewhere, however, turbulent experiments with democratic politics led to bloody wars. In 1991 Yugoslavia broke up into separate warring nations within six months of elections in which ethnic nationalism was a powerful factor. In the wake of the Soviet collapse, popular nationalist sentiment expressed in the streets and at the ballot box fueled warfare between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. As Peru and Ecuador democratized fitfully during the 1980s and 1990s, troubled elected governments gained popularity by provoking a series of armed clashes that culminated in a war in the upper Amazon in 1995. Several years after the collapse of Ethiopia's Dergue dictatorship, the country's elected government fought a bloody border war from 1998 to 2000 with Eritrea, which had just adopted, though not yet implemented, a democratic constitution.

In an especially worrisome case, the nuclear-armed elected regimes of India and Pakistan fought the Kargil War in 1999. After the 1988 death of Pakistani military dictator Zia ul-Haq, a series of revolving-door elected civilian governments had presided over a rise in militant Islamic efforts to liberate majority-Muslim Kashmir from Indian control. In Kashmir itself, the restoration of elections after Indira Gandhi's period of "emergency" authoritarian rule (1975–77) had polarized politics and led to violent conflict between Muslims and the state. These turbulent processes culminated in the 1999 war, when Pakistani forces infiltrated across the mountainous frontier in northern Kashmir. The war broke out as Pakistan was taking steps toward greater democratization, including constitutional changes in 1997 that were intended to strengthen the powers of elected civilian rulers.

Democratization also played a catalytic role in the horrible slaughters that engulfed central Africa. The 1993 elections in Burundi—even though they were internationally mandated, free and fair—intensified ethnic polarization between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups, resulting in some 200,000 deaths. In neighboring Rwanda, an internationally orchestrated power-sharing accord that was intended to usher in more pluralistic and open politics instead created the conditions for the 1994 genocide that killed nearly a million Tutsis as well as some moderate Hutus.

In all of these varied settings, the turbulent beginning phase of democratization contributed to violence in states with weak political institutions. Statistical studies show that countries with weak institutions undergoing an incomplete democratic transition are more than four times as likely to become involved in international wars than other states, and that incomplete democracies are more likely to experience civil wars than either pure autocracies or fully consolidated de-

mocracies. Democratic transition is only one of many causes of war, but it can be a potent one.

### *Democratization "To Do" List*

THERE IS no reason to believe that the longstanding link between democratization and nationalist war is diminishing. Many of the countries that are still on the Bush Administration's "to do" list of democracy promotion lack the institutional infrastructure needed to manage the early stages of a democratic transition. The "third wave" of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s consolidated democratic regimes primarily in the richer countries of eastern Europe, Latin America, southern Africa and East Asia. A fourth wave would involve more challenging cases: countries that are poorer, more ethnically divided, ideologically more resistant to democracy, with more entrenched authoritarian elites and a much frailer base of governmental institutions and citizen skills.

Many Islamic countries that figure prominently in the Bush Administration's efforts to promote democracy are particularly hard cases. Although democratization in the Islamic world might contribute to peace in the very long run, Islamic public opinion in the short run is generally hostile to the United States, ambivalent about terrorism and unwilling to renounce the use of force to regain disputed territories. Although the belligerence of the Islamic public is partly fueled by resentment of the U.S.-backed authoritarian regimes under which many of them live, renouncing these authoritarians and pressing for a quick democratic opening is unlikely to lead to peaceful democratic consolidations. On the contrary, unleashing Islamic mass opinion through sudden democratization might raise the likelihood of war.

All of the risk factors are there. The media and civil society groups are inflam-

matory, as old elites and rising oppositions try to outbid each other for the mantle of Islamic or nationalist militancy. The rule of law is weak, and existing corrupt bureaucracies cannot serve a democratic administration properly. The boundaries of states are mismatched with those of nations, making any push for national self-determination fraught with peril. Per capita incomes, literacy rates and citizen skills in most Muslim Middle Eastern states are below the levels normally needed to sustain democracy. The richer states' economies are based on oil exports, which exacerbate corruption and insulate regimes from accountability to citizens.

In the Arab world, every state has at least one risk factor for failed, violent democratization: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, Syria and Yemen have annual per capita national incomes under \$2,000. Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen have rates of illiteracy above 20 percent among adults over the age of 15. The best bet for democratization by these indicators is Lebanon, a state that does not produce petroleum and where illiteracy stands at 13.5 percent and the average income is \$4,040. However, Lebanon is deeply divided among distrustful, armed ethnic and religious groups. Its electoral power-sharing institutions provide a rigid system for managing these divisions that locks in ethnic identity as the political trump card and prevents the formation of groups based on non-ethnic platforms.

Iran's experience over the past 25 years should serve as a cautionary tale. The theocratic, illiberal semi-democracy established by the popular Iranian Revolution relentlessly pressed the offensive in a bloody war of attrition with Iraq after 1981 and supported violent movements abroad. A quarter of a century later, Iranian electoral politics still bears the imprint of incomplete democratization. With liberal democratic reformers barred from

running for office, in 2005 Iranian voters looking for a more responsive government elected as president the religiously fundamentalist and populist mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a staunch proponent of the Iranian nuclear program. When elites manipulate the weak mechanisms of electoral accountability to rule out liberal alternatives, nationalism is often the only game in town.

Islamic democratization is hardly the only such danger on the horizon. A future democratic opening in China, though much hoped for by advocates of human rights and democratization, could produce a sobering outcome. China's communist rulers have presided over a commercial expansion that has generated wealth and a potentially powerful constituency for broader political participation. However, given the huge socio-economic divide between the prosperous coastal areas and the vast, impoverished hinterlands, it seems unlikely that economic development will lead as smoothly to democratic consolidation in China as it has in Taiwan. China's leadership cracked down on student pressures for democratic liberalization at Tiananmen Square in 1989, but party elites know that they need a stronger basis of popular legitimacy to survive the social and ideological changes that economic change has unleashed.

Nationalism is a key element in their strategy. China's demand to incorporate Taiwan in the People's Republic of China, its animosity toward Japan, and its public displays of resentment at U.S. slights are themes that resonate with the Chinese public and can be used to rally national solidarity behind the regime. At the same time, newly rising social forces see that China's leaders permit more latitude to expressions of nationalism than liberalism. Thus, some of the same intellectuals who played a role in the Tiananmen pro-democracy protests turned up a few years later as authors of a nationalist text, *The China That Can Say No*.

Like many other established elites who have made use of popular nationalist rhetoric, China's party leadership has walked a fine line, allowing only limited expressions of popular nationalist outrage after such perceived provocations as the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, anti-Chinese pogroms in Jakarta, the U.S. spy plane incident of 2001 and the Japanese bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2005. They realize that criticism of external enemies can quickly become transformed into popular criticism of the government for not being sufficiently diligent in defense of Chinese national interests. It is doubtful that they could maintain fine-tuned control over an aroused nationalist public if an incompletely democratizing China becomes embroiled in a future crisis with Taiwan.

### *The Oxymoron of Imposed Democracy*

**I**F A COUNTRY lacks the preconditions for democracy, can this infrastructure be forcefully supplied by an external source? Few would argue in favor of conquering countries simply to make them democratic, but democratic great powers—particularly Great Britain and the United States—have sometimes conquered countries for other reasons and then have struggled to remake them as friendly democracies before withdrawing. Those who are nostalgic for empire view this as a policy with a future. They point to the establishment of courts, a free press and rational public administration in British colonies, without which democracy would probably be scarcer in the developing world today, since most of the postcolonial states that have remained almost continuously democratic—such as India and some West Indian island states—are former British possessions. Still, other former British colonies have failed to achieve democratic

stability: Pakistan and Nigeria oscillate between chaotic elected regimes and military dictatorships; Sri Lanka has held elections that stoked the fires of ethnic conflict; and Malaysia has averted ethnic conflict only by limiting democracy. The list contains even more parlous cases, from Burma to Zimbabwe.

In part, this reflects the difficulty of establishing democracy anywhere the preconditions are initially lacking. However, it also reflects the counterproductive expedients of imperial rule while the institutions of democracy are being built. Until that task is completed, the empire must often govern through local elites whose legitimacy or political support is based on traditional authority or ethnic sectarianism. To retain power without devoting massive resources to the military occupation of the country, the empire plays the game of divide and rule, favoring groups who help them keep control at a manageable cost. Such short-run expedients hinder the long-run transition to stable democracy by increasing ethnic polarization. Even if the empire does not take active steps to politicize ethnicity, the act of unleashing demands for mass political participation that nascent democratic institutions often are not strong enough to manage is likely to increase the risk of a polarized, violent, unsuccessful transition. British imperialists repeatedly fell prey to these dilemmas between the 1920s and 1960s, even when their intentions were benign.

The United States risks falling into the same trap as it tries to promote democracy in the wake of military interventions. In Iraq, the United States must rule through Shi'a clerics and Kurdish ethnic nationalists. In Afghanistan, as a second cousin of President Hamid Karzai stated on the eve of the September election, the newly elected Parliament "will have tribal leaders, warlords, drug lords" alongside the new democrats. And this is the view of an optimist.

## *The Virtue of Patience*

**M**ILITARY OCCUPATION is a costly and risky method for promoting democratization. Other kinds of inducements and pressures can be helpful. The lure of potential membership in the European Union, conditioned on democratic reform and respect for minority rights, helped realign incentives for several multi-ethnic states—such as Slovakia, Croatia, Romania and the Baltic countries—that might otherwise have turned down the path toward nationalism and violence. The same incentives helped consolidate Turkey's democracy and improve the position of its ethnic Kurds, notwithstanding the rise to power of an Islamic party—although these achievements may or may not endure if the likelihood of EU membership fades. Likewise, the U.S. military umbrella and its leadership in constructing an open, stable trading system permitted states like West Germany, Taiwan and South Korea to create the preconditions for stable democracy despite their nations being divided by the Cold War.

A successful long-term project for promoting democracy globally by inducement would require the United States and Europe to work together. Separately, each has liabilities. The European Union, hobbled by its internal constitutional imperfections, has expansion fatigue and is balking at the inclusion of Turkey. The United States has acquired a reputation for recklessness that a more multilateral approach could rectify. Acting together, the United States and the EU would have adequate resources and political legitimacy to mount a program of encouraging preparations for democracy worldwide.

Such a program should combine inducements and measured pressures to establish the preconditions of democracy in the right sequence. Generally, the starting point should be to encourage authoritar-

ian states to move away from patronage and repression as the basis of their rule, and toward economic reform and the development of impartial state administration. Taking these steps strengthens the rule of law and provides the state with effective administrative arms, which is in the interest of any ruler. Once in place, these reforms create a state apparatus that in the longer term will be capable of carrying out the edicts of a democratically elected government and independent courts, when these institutions come to fruition. For the most part, this was the path followed by the former British colonies that democratized successfully, by Taiwan and South Korea, and by Chile, the Latin American country that had the most successful experience with democratization.

But even if an authoritarian regime undertakes these reforms to improve its own economic and administrative performance, why would it take the next step and allow broad political competition? Normally, this requires more than international cajoling: There needs to be a strong domestic constituency pushing for democratization. The labor movement, civil society groups or progressive business groups typically need to organize to reinforce the pressure to liberalize. Professionalized, objective journalists need the freedom to evaluate the regime's policies and rhetoric. Many international democracy-assistance programs do in fact try to develop these kinds of forces in civil society. However, in countries where the preconditions for democracy are not yet ripe, such programs should try to build the long-term capacity to organize for eventual democratic participation, not to demand immediate elections.

The phase of open contestation should come after institutional reform is well under way, especially in multi-ethnic societies. Otherwise, political rivalry is likely to degenerate into ethnicity-baiting, patronage-grabbing and election-fix-

ing. Indicators of readiness would include the growth of economic sectors other than oil, the curtailment of extreme corruption, and the beginnings of a capacity to offer effective legal redress to *individuals* who suffer ethnic discrimination. Malaysia, for example, is probably ready to democratize further; Pakistan and Iraq are not. Sometimes negative outcomes are unavoidable, but democracy promotion strategies should be sequenced to try to prevent them.

The danger is not just that the transition will be chaotic and violent, but also that anti-democratic groups and ideas will be mobilized and will become a long-lasting fixture on the political scene, as in much of former Yugoslavia and the Caucasus. Out-of-sequence, incomplete democratization often creates an enduring template for illiberal, populist politics—for example, the cycling between military dictatorship and illiberal democracy in Pakistan, the theocratic populism of Iran, and ethnic tyrannies of the majority in many transitional states. These political habits, once rooted in ideologies and institutions, are hard to break. Once an ethnic nationalist movement takes hold in a fairly literate society with a politically active population, that identity almost always becomes a permanent fixture of the political landscape. It is better to strengthen state institutions that can serve as the basis for an inclusive, civic form of national loyalty before spurring popular political action that could, in their absence, play into the hands of exclusionary ethnic national movements.

The United States, if it wishes to further the long-term goal of a democratic peace, needs a great deal of patience. This means recognizing the necessity of using the tools of diplomacy to protect its security interests in a world where non-democracies persist and where some democratic transitions are likely to proceed incrementally. President Bush had high praise for Natan Sharansky's book, *The Case for Democracy* (2004), which, among other things, argues the Israelis should not negotiate with the Palestinians until they are a full democracy of Sweden-like perfection. This is poor advice not only for Israel but for the United States as well. Diplomacy may be smoother between democracies, but it often works well enough between democracies and non-democracies to head off tensions and forge peace. After all, Israel's security was immeasurably enhanced by the Camp David accords with the undemocratic Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Israel has made no attempt to overthrow Sadat or Mubarak and replace them with a more democratic regime. Normal diplomacy can often maintain peace between democracies and non-democratic states, not to mention gradually reform states. After all, diplomacy worked without regime change to neutralize the weapons-of-mass-destruction and terrorist threats from undemocratic Libya.

Rarely are matters so desperate that there is no alternative to forced-pace democracy promotion at gunpoint. It is better to be patient and get the sequence right. □