

International organizations and the promotion of democracy

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In the last years, populism has advanced in many consolidated as well as in young democracies. As highlighted by the latest Freedom House's report, global freedom is experiencing an unprecedented stagnation. For the 13th consecutive year the countries who suffered a retreat outnumbered those who registered a democratic gain.

Democratic partisans have proposed several strategies to face this issue, most of which are centred on the implementation of national reforms. However, international organizations could also contribute in several different ways to safeguard and democracy promotion in authoritarian countries as well as to improve it in consolidated democracies.

Two interconnected democratic deficits

It has become more common to talk about democratic deficit, but the term can be referred to two different situations. The first is about the fact that not all nations are democratic while the second acknowledges that global decisions are not taken democratically. Decisions about combatting climate change, controlling financial speculation and managing migration flows are not subject to democratic control or input from global citizens.

These deficits are interconnected. An international organization with predominantly undemocratic member states will have trouble to democratize and national democratization is complicated if it takes place within an undemocratic global system.

While democratic deficits remain a stark reality, we can also report good news: in the past sixty years, the quality and quantity of democracy has grown across the world. Unfortunately, the progress in the democratization of international organizations was limited, despite the fact that the scope and impact of global governance has increased.

Making international organizations more democratic

There are those that argue that international organizations are inherently democratic because they are based on international law which makes them subject to the rule of law, they have procedural means of addressing controversies, many of their activities are transparent and because they are accountable to member states (and thus to global citizens to some degree). These are certainly good aspects of international organizations but do not qualify them as democratic. To be considered fully democratic, international organizations need to implement various reforms.

Firstly, these organizations would have to opt for transparent and accountable forms of governance rather than secretive structures and agreements. This will strengthen accountability to global citizens. To further increase transparency and accountability, parliamentary assemblies within these institutions need to be created. Unlike existing international parliamentary assemblies, the parliamentary institutions proposed here should have citizen-elected members and must not be limited to an advisory capacity. So far, only the European Parliament is directly elected by citizens. Moreover, these international parliamentary assemblies should get real powers. In addition, there also need to be procedures in place that allow for a judicial review of these organizations and their actions or inactions. Lastly, but certainly not least, there should be effective ways for NGOs and civil society to participate.

Promotion of democracy at the national level

International organizations may be influential in promoting democracy at the national level. We can label this the ‘external lever’, i.e. methods that these international organizations can take to activate democracy within nations (including imposition, good example, socialization and conditionality).

Within this context

- **imposition** refers to using military intervention to overthrow authoritarian governments;
- **example** refers to using the successes demonstrated within democratic countries to illustrate the benefits of democracy to non-democratic states;
- **socialization** refers to the possibility of nations with different institutions to learn from each other, especially when democratic countries interact with countries in transition towards democracy;
- **conditionality** refers to urging authoritarian states to implement democratization via punishments and rewards.

International organizations may use positive conditionality to promote democracy e.g. through setting aside funds to foster democratic governance and sustain democratic reforms. The United Nations Democracy Fund is an illustration of this approach.

Furthermore, as far as socialization is concerned, international organizations may provide a platform for socialization and offer capacity building and training to help transform the internal structures and systems of transitioning countries (e.g. via training of police, the judiciary and other law enforcement authorities).

International organizations may also play a significant role when outgoing autocratic governments are concerned, i.e. by providing a safe framework that helps guarantee outgoing governments and the opposition a non-violent transition.

Mixed results

However, it must be acknowledged that these methods may produce mixed results. For instance, negative conditionality and imposition may bear little fruit and garner little to no support as citizen participation and autonomy is often stifled. On the other hand, positive conditionality and socialization has proven to be more successful in promoting democracy. As such, these methods should be applied with caution and sensitivity. So far, the carrot has worked better than the stick in democracy promotion.

If the external lever is to be strengthened, then international organizations must ensure that they leverage incentives that will urge member countries to adopt more democratic approaches whilst limiting imposition. These organizations should also be explicit about the support for democracy and democratic approaches

whilst fostering stronger connections with NGOs to help them adequately advocate for democracy at a state level.

International organizations have a large role to play in closing the democratic deficit at both levels, nationally and globally. However, this will require a commitment towards reform as well as increased participation, transparency and accountability where citizen representation and civil society is concerned. Their promotion of democracy is only credible if they embrace democratic reforms themselves.

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