

Is it a good idea to democratize fragile states?

Foreign interventions into failing states ranging from foreign aid, humanitarian intervention to shared sovereignty are often accompanied by the expectation of the state becoming democratic.. This essay will argue that democratizing is not a sustainable or the most appropriate way to help fragile states, at least not as a default framework or approach. The essay will follow three primary arguments. The practical limitations on democracy will be argued on the basis of the fact that democratization only works in places where certain contextual economic and political preconditions are met. This will be countered by examples of low income countries that manage to democratize successfully but that does not extend to other socio-political preconditions that stay robust to this critique. The second argument that dismantles democracy in theory, focuses on how it is theoretically hypocritical in nature. This does not, however, diminish the potential argument of it being the best alternative of those available. Hence, in order to counteract this, the third and final argument is the presentation of possible alternatives to democracy and successful case studies that bolster them. This is also followed by a consideration of the shortcomings of alternative regimes but how those are not always a priority in the context of fragile states.

For the scope of this essay, democracy will be defined as the process of electing positions of power through free, fair and competitive elections. In the context and scope of fragile states, electoral procedures with competitive, multiparty elections are at the forefront of a democracy. Other countries that claim to have different forms of democracy will be considered as alternative forms of government entirely.

Firstly, it is important to consider the practical limitations of democratizing, because unless a failing state already has certain democratic preconditions, democratizing is unlikely to stay sustainable and can lead to further destabilization and conflict in the region. For example,

Alexander Downes states ‘more than 40 percent of states that experience foreign-imposed regime change have a civil war within the next ten years’. ¹Fareed Zakaria supports this claim by suggesting that if fragile states transition to democracies too early, before they experience sufficient financial growth and develop other institutional infrastructures they can experience further instability and spark violent conflict. He claims that, ‘In societies without strong traditions for multi-ethnic groups or assimilation...political competition that is so divisive can rapidly lead to violence.’ ² The United States’ aim to democratize Iraq and Afghanistan are prime examples of how attempting to democratize states with no prior exposure to this form of governance prematurely can ‘sap the capabilities of the to maintain order, reducing its ability to respond to internal opposition’ which can potentially lead to civil war. ³When the country is not ready with suitable preconditions, the impositions of a democratic regime is more likely to exacerbate existing conflict as opposed to extinguishing it.

These ‘preconditions’ can be discerned through analysis of successful examples of democratizing like Japan, Germany and Panama. They were successful because they had stable economies that meant lesser conflict over competition over resources, strong institutions and constitutional implementation that allowed accountability for governing systems and lesser pre-existing inter group conflict, which multiparty competition can exacerbate. ⁴These were the primary differences between regions that successfully democratized and those that failed

¹ ¹ “Regime Change Doesn't Work,” Boston Review, June 26, 2012, <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/downes-regime-change/>.

² Zakaria, Fareed. “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy.” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>.

³ “Regime Change Doesn't Work,” Boston Review, June 26, 2012, <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/downes-regime-change/>.

⁴ “Regime Change Doesn't Work,” Boston Review, June 26, 2012, <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/downes-regime-change/>.

(in this context led to instability and conflict), bolstering the idea that specific context-dependent conditions are needed for democratization to be successful.

Larry Diamond argues the converse, that making countries democracies is what gives rise to stable institutional structures and subsequent economic growth, without any 'preconditions'. He thinks that the adversarial nature and accountability produced by democracies give rise to institutions that provide for the people (voting community). He supports this idea by focusing on countries that democratized without a stable economy or minimum economic threshold. In support of this claim, he discusses the case of Mali, 'If democracy can emerge and persist in an extremely poor, landlocked, overwhelmingly Muslim country like Mali...then there is no reason in principle why democracy cannot develop in most other very poor countries.'⁵ Further examples of this are Bangladesh and Sri Lanka who transitioned to democracies very early in their development process before they reached economic stability.

However, the idea of 'preconditions' are not limited to just economics. While an economic minimum or stability may not always be necessary, there are other pre-existing conditions like pre-existing pluralism of different ethnic groups or demographics, which Mali had, that are needed for a successful transition to a democracy. Hence while a concession can be made about economic preconditions alone, the idea that states need certain socio-political preconditions remains robust to this critique.

However, analysing examples of incomplete or failed democratization in practice is not enough to determine whether it could still be a plausible theoretical alternative with more sophisticated implementation. Hence, it is important to understand that even theoretically,

⁵ Larry Diamond, "Can the Whole World Become Democratic? Democracy, Development, and International Policies," eScholarship, University of California, April 17, 2003, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bv4b2w1>

what the democratic procedure promises to achieve and the subsequent consequences are often misaligned due to the overemphasis on electoral democracies. Fareed Zakaria claims that from the perspective of intervening countries, especially the United States, elections are the primary if not only stipulation for a state to be considered democratic.⁶ Daniel Bell argues that by only focusing on elections, democracies do not achieve their intended outcomes of representation, accountability and liberal practices which are the assumptions associated with democratizing fragile states.

Bell attributes this shortcoming to the tyranny of the majority, tyranny of the minority, tyranny of the competitive individual and tyranny of the voting community. The problem with an overemphasis of voting is that it gives a sense of control and equal representation whereas it can provide an avenue for manipulation and control. While voting was meant to represent what the majority of the populous wants, it becomes a problem in states with ethnic and religious majorities who use this representation to suppress minority voices. Furthermore, in terms of fairness, countries with high income inequalities, powerful and wealthy minorities often have more control in representing their interests than the general public opinion. In terms of equal representation, democracy only focuses only on the voting community (which excludes foreigners, future generations and often even communities that do not have easy access to vote). Lastly, the adversarial basis of competitive elections can lead to parties running for elections capitalizing on ethnic conflicts, creating more divide and instability in certain societies.⁷ Hence, if the theoretical foundations and focus on electoral democracy itself have obstacles to producing their own promised outcomes, the justification for imposing this regime on fragile

⁶ Zakaria, Fareed. "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>.

⁷ "The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of ... - JSTOR," accessed December 21, 2022,
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1xrbj>.

states reduces significantly. I will concede that these limitations apply primarily when the emphasis is on multi-party elections which is limited but the hegemonic interpretation of democracy in the context of state failure.

On the other hand, it can still be argued that every political system has its flaws and that democracy is the best alternative available for fragile states. Technically, ‘three fifths of the world states are democracies’⁸ and the so-called waves of democratization perhaps speak to the fact that it is more legitimate than the existing form of government, prompting states’ desires to transition to it. For example, the Islamic State which was broadly recognized as one of the few other persistent alternatives have faced their own waves of democratization, ranging from the Arab Spring (a series of Arab countries protesting for democracies) to modern-day Iran. Does the (so-called) majority’s desire to get a democratic government bolster the idea of democracy as the best alternative to the status quo in these regions? Diamond argues that this is the case because, ‘the countries where civil liberties and the rule of law are best respected are democracies, and the human rights (and humanitarian) emergencies are invariably to be found in non-democracies.’⁹

These counter-claims, however, ignore three important factors. Firstly, the violent fall-out of the Arab Spring where countries devolved into conflict, indicates even the majority of the people in the state may not be able to accurately predict the long-term consequences and needs of the state and their own welfare. Perhaps the Western proposition and popularisation of democracy informs these needs. Secondly, Zakaria’s exploration of illiberal democracies provides numerous examples of democratic countries that have had repressive regimes and

⁸ Larry Diamond, “Can the Whole World Become Democratic? Democracy, Development, and International Policies,” eScholarship, University of California, April 17, 2003, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bv4b2w1>.

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humanitarian emergencies like Haiti and Kazakhstan, indicating that being a democracy (based on the presence of multiparty elections) is not the primary discerning factor in determining the human rights' situation of the state.¹⁰ Lastly, the claim that democracy is the best available alternative cannot be made without an investigation of possible alternative forms of governance and what advantages they can provide.

Therefore, it is important to consider examples of fragile states that achieved sustainable stability, economic and social welfare with alternative forms of governance like China, Rwanda and Singapore. Bell demonstrates that China's model of governance can achieve the same advantages that democracies claim to, while also ensuring welfare and stability of the state. The Chinese government claims to have their own form of democracy closely linked to their socialist principles. Their central government is not elected, but is a multi-party coalition to increase representation without adversarial background. Furthermore, local governments work democratically based on generating local consensus and then send feedback from grassroots upwards to the centralized powers, who then take the needed action because if 'the CCP doesn't do so, it will lose much of its legitimacy.'¹¹ This model of seeking accountability or consensus is considered atypical in hegemonic discourse but given the diverse nature of the massive population, it is a fitting and clearly effective approach in the given context. China's economy grew from one of the poorest in 1978 to the second biggest economy in the world, accompanied by a sustained increase in living standards, social stability and gradually increasing the liberties afforded to its citizens.¹²

¹⁰ Zakaria, Fareed. "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>.

¹¹ "Records of Press Conference of State Council Information Office," *2020 Press Conference Records of Ministry of Ecology and Environment, the People's Republic of China*, 2022, pp. 11-420,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-9061-7_2.

¹² "The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of ... - JSTOR," accessed December 21, 2022,
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1xrbj>.

Rwanda and Singapore follow a similar model with an emphasis on economic development as opposed to political freedom, referred to as 'liberty for prosperity.' Specifically in the context of fragile states, Rwanda brought themselves from the brink of collapse after their genocide by focusing on building their economy and protecting their political stability through so-called authoritarian means by the President Paul Kagame restricting protests, free speech and other forms of expression. Like China, their form of governance was adapted based on their regional history. Given that ethnic conflict drove the genocide, one of the prime focuses of the government was to heavily restrict avenues of dissent and expression in case it turned violent.¹³ However, the country has one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, it's GDP rising from 1.25\$ per capita to 800\$ per capita and has shown a marked improvement on all development indicators since their genocide in 1994 with the prevention of any large-scale community violence.^[14] Similarly in the case of Singapore, the staggering economic development from being a third-world country to the 10th richest country in less than a lifetime, occurred largely due to political stability. This political stability also came with restrictions on freedom of speech, press and a low rank in the democracy index.¹⁴ This clearly demonstrates that alternative forms of governance can produce economic prosperity and the stability that democracies tend to promise.

The above example gives rise to a two-fold counterclaim. Firstly, the emphasis on economic success ignores the importance of the trade-off between economic prosperity and other important civil rights and liberties. The above case propagates an almost unchecked power to

¹³ How Well Has Rwanda Healed 25 Years after the Genocide?," The Economist (The Economist Newspaper), accessed December 21, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/03/28/how-well-has-rwanda-healed-25-years-after-the-genocide>.

¹⁴ Wendoverproductions, "How Rwanda Is Becoming the Singapore of Africa," YouTube (YouTube, March 19, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xX0ozxrZIEQ>.

single, centralized bodies which can certainly pose risks to individual's rights. Rwanda's President Kagame has been accused of violently suppressing political opposition. Additionally, in China, although the people appear to value social harmony and the current government, given the heavy censorship in the region no claim made on the population's behalf can be considered seriously. Secondly, it is possible that these cases can be considered as certain anomalies or lucky examples of successes using alternative forms of governance, which is not sufficient enough to make a ubiquitous claim about any framework alternative to democratization being more successful.

In response to the first counterclaim, it is important to delineate that this is not a discussion about the morality of different forms of governance, rather their function and purpose as responses to the issue of fragile states. In this case, one can examine whether the priorities of these fragile states are their access to certain democratic liberties and the ability to contribute to their political systems or their ability to access basic welfare and improve their quality of life (in terms of provision of needs). Fragile states are considered as such based on their political, economic and social instability often accompanied with large-scale violence and conflict. Hence, reduced suffering, stability and peace in the aforementioned areas can be considered as the immediate concern. For Rwandan's experiencing genocide and extreme poverty, not being able to openly speak up against the President who's governance raised their life expectancy from 28 to nearly 70 can be considered a small sacrifice.¹⁵ These countries successfully responded to the needs of their population based on their geopolitical situation at the time. With regard to the second counterclaim, of how these heterogeneous case studies are not enough to make a claim, the use of these cases was merely to demonstrate that non-

¹⁵ "How Well Has Rwanda Healed 25 Years after the Genocide?," The Economist (The Economist Newspaper), accessed December 21, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/03/28/how-well-has-rwanda-healed-25-years-after-the-genocide>.

democratic alternatives are legitimate. They can provide countries with stability and prosperity along with more democratic promises of accountability and development of stable institutions. The point was not to create a homogeneous framework involving non-democratic options, but to expand the scope of possible alternatives of which democratizing is just one.

These case studies also help dispel the idea that democratizing is the best alternative because clearly for the above cases, it was not the most suitable. This further reinforces the idea that democratizing is heterogeneous and heavily context dependent. Attempting to narrow down potential political interventions or regime changes to one type of governance is reductive and ignores the heterogeneity of the issue of fragile states. And after understanding the complications in practical implications, limitations in the theoretical foundations and the robustness of alternative solutions, this essay demonstrates that democratization can only be used successfully in very specific contexts, and certainly not as a default method to help fragile states.

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