Democracy Bound

Lincoln A. Mitchell

AMERICAN FOREIGN policy identifies the ongoing spread of democracy around the world as a vital national interest, seeing other democratic states as "effective partners joining with us to promote global freedom and prosperity," in the words of the 2006 National Security Strategy. But events in the last few months of 2007—in countries as different as Pakistan, Kenya and Georgia—demonstrated that the challenges in spreading democracy are different than the ones the United States confronted more than a decade ago. It is no longer a clear-cut struggle between anti-Western dictators and pro-American masses struggling to be free, nor one of helping right-minded postauthoritarian leaders move their countries toward democracy. Instead, the challenge is now how to "develop better strategies for advancing democracy in semi-authoritarian countries, when the leaders do not want further democratization"—especially when those leaders may also be pro-American in their strategic orientation.[1] Trying to craft policy responses to troubling events—the street demonstrations and varying degrees of violence ranging from tear gas and rubber bullets in Georgia to political assassination and suicide bombs in Pakistan and widespread civilian casualties in Kenya—demonstrate how difficult these tasks can be.

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In Pakistan, the United States had supported a clearly undemocratic leader in hopes that Pakistan would remain, or become, a valuable ally in the war on terror. As Pervez Musharraf became increasingly undemocratic and unpopular, this position became more difficult for the United States. The Pakistani parliamentary elections in February 2008 demonstrated the extent to which the Pakistani people had become tired of their leader as Musharraf's party lost badly, further demonstrating the need for the United States to rethink its policy toward that key country.

Developments in Kenya and Georgia were especially troubling because the United States had invested high hopes that the success of democracy in these two countries would spread beyond their immediate borders and lead to further democratic breakthroughs across Africa and the post-Soviet space, respectively. But the 2007 Kenyan presidential election ended in charges from opposition-candidate Raila Odinga that Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki—who himself had come to power in an election assessed as reasonably free and fair in 2002 when he had run as the leader of an opposition coalition—had stolen the election. These accusations spilled into the streets and villages of Kenya, leading to wide-

[1] Lincoln A. Mitchell, "Beyond Bombs and Ballots," *The National Interest*, No. 88 (Mar./Apr. 2007).

spread civil unrest, and by conservative estimates, hundreds of civilian casualties. These events occurred in a country that many had viewed as one of the hopes for democracy in Africa. Efforts to broker a compromise between the two groups seem to be getting some traction, but the deeper issues there certainly remain.

In Georgia, a government which had come to power through a peaceful electoral breakthrough and had pledged its commitment to democracy and integration into Western political institutions relied on tear gas, rubber bullets, accusing opposition leaders of being Russian pawns and using emergency law to break up peaceful demonstrations. The story in Georgia became further complicated by snap presidential elections in which President Saakashvili was reelected with 53.4 percent of the vote, although this was down from the 96 percent he received in 2004.

All three of these countries highlight related problems in America's strategy of promoting democracy in countries of strategic import. Sometimes, democratic institutions do not show themselves to be as strong as they look at first from the outside—and individuals in whom the West places confidence do not always live up to their promises. Moreover, in each of these three countries, the cultivation of democracy must occur alongside the challenge of building an effective state. The problems of pursuing these two goals simultaneously should not be overlooked. Democracies that cannot construct effective state institutions—including those charged with guaranteeing law and order—and deliver essential services will not last. But this creates the very real temptation to focus on state building at the expense of further democratization, and to argue that strengthening the government, even at the expense of participation and accountability, is justifiable.

Finally, democracy itself needs to be balanced against other American interests—such as cooperation in the war on terror in Pakistan and Kenya or facilitating the West's energy security in Georgia. However, the recent events in the above three examples have demonstrated that de-emphasizing democratic development comes with a cost—even for America's core security interests.

OF THESE three countries, Georgia is perhaps the most intriguing, because it shows just how difficult it is, even under reasonably good circumstances, to consolidate democratic gains—as well as how strong the temptation to cut democratic corners in the name of expedience and state building is, even for those who claim, with some legitimacy, to be democrats.

The November 2007 images looked uncannily like those of the Rose Revolution of November 2003: thousands of demonstrators shivering on the wintry streets of Tbilisi, listening to firebrand speeches by angry radical leaders, being encouraged by an assertive and independent television station while the government seemed flummoxed and made vague allusions to shadowy Russian plots. But there was one major difference between these two Novembers. In November 2003, the demonstrators were protesting a failed, kleptocratic leader who had presided over more than a decade of corruption, economic decline and even the partial breakup of the Georgian state. In November 2007, the demonstrations were against a democratically elected leader who had reduced corruption, improved the country's economy and begun to put the Georgian state back together. The new Georgian state was stronger and less corrupt than in the past, but in key respects, less free and more dominated by one political group.

In truth, democracy has been stalled in Georgia for a few years. Georgia's impressive record of political reform, fighting corruption, reasserting sovereignty over the breakaway region of Ajara and Upper Abkhazia, or the Kodori Gorge,

improving the investment climate, reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and improving the energy situation should be recognized. However, the government's record on democracy issues which have direct bearing on the extent to which opposition voices are heard—the degree to which policy is debated and input is sought, how the government is kept in check, transparency and the like—is far less impressive. Georgia's democratic development since the Rose Revolution has been characterized by strong rhetoric and verbal commitments to democracy from both the U.S. and Georgian governments, but both governments have fallen short in their efforts to follow through on this.

Beginning with the constitutional reforms the new administration pushed through in the early part of 2004 that substantially weakened the parliament and concentrated more power in the presidency, a troubling lack of commitment to democracy on the part of the government began to emerge. This became clearer a few months later when previously lively and often-critical political talk shows were taken off the air and replaced by drier, less-controversial fare. The line between the new governing party and the Georgian state remained blurred as Saakashvili's National Movement consolidated its control over the government after handily winning the parliamentary elections in March of 2004. An independent judiciary never fully emerged as important court cases were said to be decided by the judiciary only after consultation with the executive.

Then there were the 2006 elections. Though they were determined to be democratic, their fairness was question-

able. First the dates and structure of local elections were manipulated to maximize the ruling party's representation. Then, later that year, a constitutional amendment was passed linking the date of the presidential election with the parliamentary election. Presumably, such a change was intended to give a boost to unpopular candidates from the government's party by allowing them to ride the coattails of a popular president.

Finally, since the Rose Revolution, Georgia has not had an impartial broadcast media. Both Rustavi 2 and Imedi, two major Georgian television stations, became highly partisan, one clearly supporting the government and the other clearly sympathizing with the opposition. This is the environment which produced the demonstrations and the reaction by the government in November 2007. The story became even more confusing when the president resigned on November 26 and called for a snap presidential election on January 5. The ensuing campaign period was marked by unequal access to media and state resources, altogether allowing for a free, but not necessarily fair, election.

Throughout these years, Saakashvili's rhetoric about wanting to make Georgia a strong and democratic country was taken at face value by the United States. If criticisms were made, they were expressed privately—as the official position of the United States was that democracy was sailing along in Georgia. U.S. funding priorities reflected this as support for Georgian civil society and political-party development gave way to programs aimed at strengthening and supporting the Georgian government. This silence on the part of the United States was interpreted, probably correctly, by the Georgian government as evidence that the U.S. government shared the opinion that making further progress on democracy did not need to be a high priority for the Georgian government.

THE BUSH administration has hailed post–Rose Revolution Georgia as one of its "success stories" in the freedom crusade—and as proof that the United States could "do both"—secure its interests while spreading democracy. And after Saakashvili was reelected on January 5, many viewed the relatively good election as evidence that democracy was back on track in Georgia. The warm feelings which characterized the March 2008 meeting between Bush and Saakashvili underscore this sentiment.

But are elections enough? President Saakashvili's remark that "this competitive election has once again shown that Georgia is a 'beacon of democracy' in the region" notwithstanding, reasonably good elections in January of 2008 were a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for strengthening democracy in Georgia. This, of course, is true in all democratizing countries, not just Georgia. However, when the West focuses so much attention on elections as a measure of democratic achievement in Georgia, or any other country, it creates an easy target for those who criticize democracy work as being too election centered. A more comparable case for Georgia might be Ukraine where a Western-oriented coalition narrowly won last fall's parliamentary election. In Ukraine, as in Georgia, the work of building democracy has more to do with institutions and civil society than with elections.

The broader problem with the strategy of settling for semidemocracies or polities that are "democratic enough" is that semidemocratic countries rarely deliver the stability they promise; and sudden changes in government can quickly change the relationship between the United States and a key ally. This is what we are now seeing in Pakistan and could potentially see in other parts of the post-Soviet world, most notably in central Asia.

So where did the policy go wrong in Georgia and how can this experience in-

form U.S. democracy policy more globally? First, we fell into the convenient trap of supporting individuals rather than institutions. Saakashvili's intellect, humor, passion, courage and English-language skills were particularly appealing in the United States where they were reinforced by a familiarity with the United States and its culture. The policy of the United States was that the government and specifically the president of Georgia were the democrats, so what they did had to be in the interest of democracy in Georgia. But tying the hopes of democracy to an individual is not a very effective strategy for assisting a budding democracy, not to mention antithetical to basic notions of democracy. Democracy rarely evolves simply because a democrat gets elected, yet U.S. policy too often reflects this belief. Yet this approach remained in place long after the Georgian government had begun to cut corners on democracy.

We also failed to reinvigorate Georgian civil society. In a poor country like Georgia, international support plays an essential role in civil society because there is simply not enough money domestically to support these types of organizations. Shevardnadze's Georgia saw the development of a strong and vibrant civil society, but that was due in part to American support for civil-society organizations.

Since the Rose Revolution, civil society has been much weaker. This is partially because a number of civil-society leaders have moved into the government or parliament, and partially because there are more jobs in the private sector than before, but it is largely due to the United States reorienting its democracy-assistance support. By reducing support to civil-society organizations—essentially because of the mistaken belief that democracy had been achieved with the Rose Revolution and that the remaining task in Georgia was largely one of state building—the United States has contributed to the withering of a key component of democracy.

If the U.S. government does nothing else in Georgia, they should substantially increase support for civil society there. A special fund should be created—either separately or within USAID—focusing on support for a broad range of advocacy, research, associational and constituency-oriented NGOs in Georgia. Though organizations critical of friendly or democratically oriented governments would inevitably also receive funding, such support is essential for creating pluralism and debate—two essential ingredients for consolidating democracy.

It also proved difficult for many in Washington, especially Georgia's numerous friends, to distinguish between "reform" and "democratization." Saakash-

vili's government succeeded in passing a broad array of reform legislation that reduced bureaucratic hurdles for those seeking to open a business, improved Georgia's business climate, made rational and necessary budget decisions, improved state apparatus, invested in the country's infrastructure and generally improved the quality of governance in Georgia. However, the way in which many of these reforms have occurred—with limited dialogue, parliamentary debate and public input—has contributed to the growing resentment of the government on the part of the Georgian people.

In any country, we must be aware that reforming government and liberalizing the economy are not the same as strengthening democracy. We might add, this is especially true when one considers the reform-oriented states of the Greater Middle East, especially the Gulf emirates. Strengthening democracy means increasing participation and accountability in all phases of governance and allowing for contestation at the legislative and policymaking levels. It does not simply mean passing reform legislation that is Westward looking and improving the business climate.

Finally, we found it easy to ignore two basic rules of politics—"don't overpromise" and "don't get spun." Saakashvili's weakness for overblown rhetoric caused him to overstate his accomplishments and consistently make unrealistic promises. The gap between the expectations to which this rhetoric contributed and the reality of life in Saakashvili's Georgia for ordinary people was a major factor contributing to the size and vehemence of the demonstrations in early November. Similarly, the rhetoric and policies of the United States overstated the degree of the changes in Georgia as well. In some sense we also overpromised to ourselves, causing us to overlook the flaws in Georgian democracy and to move away from policies aimed at ameliorating those flaws. Verbal commitments to democracy, no matter how eloquent and how good the English, on the part of the government should not have obscured problems with democracy—Washington could have been more rigorous in evaluating the development of Georgia's democracy.

Of course, difficulties in post-color-revolution consolidations of democracy point squarely at the problems caused by high expectations (especially if membership in lucrative international organizations, such as NATO or the EU, seemed to be just on the horizon). In Ukraine and in Georgia, the lack of any strategy designed to tap down short-term expectations—as well as the inability to give democratic leaders enough meaningful and immediate rewards that would resonate with their electorates—created serious obstacles to democratic consolidation.

FOR THE United States, it is time to make some decisions regarding the importance we accord to promoting democracy. Georgia will be an important case of America's resolve.

It is important to note here that a U.S. policy of supporting a stronger Georgian state at the expense of democracy is not in of itself a mistake. It is reasonable for U.S. foreign policy to reflect the notion that we are best served by a government in Georgia that is pro-Western, market oriented, supportive of U.S. foreign policy, reasonably popular domestically, but with only a lukewarm commitment to democracy. However, it creates problems when we claim that this government is fully democratic or even fully committed to democracy. As this assertion is increasingly contradicted by the reality in Georgia, it reflects poorly on U.S. foreign policy and the sincerity of our commitment to democracy. More importantly it plays into the hands of those who oppose the United States, and in some cases Georgia as well. Even though the states of democracy in the three countries are not comparable, our failure to criticize Georgia's semide-

mocracy has made our condemnation of far more repressive systems in the region such as Russia and Kazakhstan sound hollow at times.

So U.S. policy makers must decide whether or not democracy is worth pursuing in Georgia. If the answer is no, then we should quickly move away from rhetoric which emphasizes the ascendancy of democracy in Georgia and begin treating that country accordingly. If democracy should continue to play a key role in U.S. policy toward Georgia—and I believe it should because in Georgia democracy is the key to stability and because of Georgia's import with regard to democracy globally—the United States needs to sharpen its democracy policy toward Georgia as outlined above.

The policy decisions the United States makes with regard to Georgia will have relevance far beyond the borders of that faraway, resource-poor country. The need to balance democracy with other policy goals, the question of what kind of democracies we seek to support in the developing world and how willing we are to criticize democratic shortcomings in friendly countries are global.

Another way to phrase this question is to ask where democracy assistance fits into U.S. foreign policy more broadly. The current reality is that it is an important but not paramount component of our foreign policy and that its centrality varies from country to country. Georgia forces us to put this abstract notion into a more-concrete framework.

If our policy in Georgia is that it is "democratic enough" for the United States, it is hard to imagine we will push more aggressively for democracy among other allies that are even more central to energy and security issues. The notion that Georgia, because it is the strongest democracy in the Caucasus, should not be subject to criticism, but should be lauded for its accomplishments, also has a fair amount of support in Washington. However, this is a "tallest building in Topeka" argument. Nobody in Georgia, including the government, is satisfied with simply looking better than Armenia or Azerbaijan with regard to democracy.

Moving from supporting democracy to accepting semidemocracy would be a significant shift in our post-cold-war policy. Changing from a real commitment to trying to help countries achieve genuine freedom and democracy, and settling for tall Topekan buildings, would be walking away from a policy which has contributed to the expansion of democracy to places ranging from Eastern Europe to South America and southern Africa. Our support for these nascent democracies has contributed to improving the lives of millions and winning friends and allies for the United States.

In contrast, when there is a gap between U.S. rhetoric on democracy and actual policy, support for the United States wanes. This is the case even in Georgia. At one time, pro-American feeling was nearly universal in Georgia. This has begun to somewhat change—as manifested by protests in front of the U.S. Embassy and increasing charges levied by the opposition that the United States has chosen to support Saakashvili rather than democracy.

And if "semidemocracy" is the best the United States is prepared to offer, perhaps, in other countries now "in the middle" between authoritarianism and "full democracy," the Chinese or Russian state-corporatist models might begin to seem more appealing.

The Rose Revolution was at one time a source of hope that we might be seeing the beginning of a new wave of democratization. Less than five years later, those hopes seem somewhat quaint. The question we now face in Georgia and elsewhere, whether we choose to admit it or not, is whether or not the efforts of the last quarter century to help spread democracy to previously unimaginable corners of the world have finally run their course. □