

# The Arab Spring and the Future of Democracy Assistance

Lincoln A. Mitchell

September 30, 2011

It is difficult to believe that only a few months ago, the Arab Spring was broadly compared to the changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Today it seems as though stories of growing illiberalism in the new regimes in countries such as Egypt as well as the possibilities of Islamist forces taking a larger role in the near future have outweighed the sense of hope that dominated the Arab Spring narrative earlier in the year.

Nonetheless, it is still too early to write off the liberalizing potential of the Arab Spring. Democracy rarely comes quickly or entirely smoothly so while it will not be easy for countries emerging from decades of authoritarian rule to rapidly transition to democracies, slow but definitive democratic change is certainly within the realm of possibility in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere in North Africa.

While the Arab Spring presents an interesting moment for democratic development, they also present a critical test for the western democracy assistance project. Democracy assistance, in recent decades has demonstrated an impressive capacity to help bring about regime change, as in the Color Revolutions in the former Soviet Union, as well as to consolidate democratic gains in countries following the collapse of an authoritarian regime as in post-Communist Poland, Hungary, Estonia and elsewhere. However, democracy assistance policies have rarely been able to do both of these things in the same country, and may not be able to do either in North Africa. Following the Color Revolutions, democratic development proved very difficult in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan despite ample western democracy assistance. Similarly, the democratic breakthroughs which lead to the collapse of Communism were due largely to domestic issues and global political factors rather than democracy assistance per se.

With regards to North Africa, western democracy assistance proved to be a minor player in the recent breakthroughs. Although democracy assistance organizations were active in Egypt and elsewhere in the months and years leading up to the Arab Spring, support for these organizations was outweighed by such a substantial degree by western support for the authoritarian regimes, that the west, and the U.S. in particular, has been broadly viewed in the region, probably accurately, as being responsible for keeping the old regime in place for so long rather than for helping accelerate its downfall.

Although western democracy assistance may have played a small role in the Arab Spring uprisings, there is still ample time for these programs to have an impact on democratic transition and consolidation. For the democracy assistance project to be successful in North Africa and demonstrate its ongoing relevance after what has been a difficult few years not only must these countries move towards democracy, but democracy assistance must play a meaningful role in this process. If the initial potential of the Arab Spring gives way to a spate of new semi-authoritarian and authoritarian countries, perhaps with a larger Islamist influence, it will be a blow to the idea that democracy is still expanding, thus bringing into question the efficacy of

continuing to fund democracy assistance. Similarly, if one or more of these countries becomes notably more democratic, but does it while eschewing western democracy assistance, it will raise different, but equally significant questions about the necessity of the policy.

This test of the relevance and the impact of democracy assistance is exacerbated by a growing concern in the U.S. and Europe about the value and cost of various aspects of foreign policy. Although, democracy assistance programs are not expensive at all, this alone is no longer enough to justify their continuation to ordinary citizens and legislators alike. Democratic outcomes in which western democracy assistance play a real and visible role at least somewhere in North Africa may be an high threshold, even an unrealistic goal for democracy assistance organizations, but that may be what it takes to rebuild confidence in this work and its value.