

Importing Democracy by Willemijn Verkoren

[Back to Previous Page](#)

The invasion of Iraq by the US and its allies has triggered a great number of moral discussions about issues such as whether democracy is the best system of government for all countries, who decides whether it is the best system, whether (or in which cases) it is justified to impose it, and if it is, which are the appropriate actors to do so. Instead of going into these moral questions, this article looks at the practical side: once a party, such as the US, has made the choice to introduce a democratic system into a country by force, what are its chances of success, and what are the factors determining the success or failure of its mission?

The histories of Germany and Japan since 1945 suggest that the forceful introduction of democracy by external actors is indeed possible. What made democracy last in these countries? And can their experience be replicated in a different time, place and historical context?

Factors affecting the success of an imported democratic system

A number of factors influence the success or failure of democratizing missions. One central factor is the acceptance of the system by the population. A term that is often used in this context is legitimacy. Defined by Alfred Stepan as the voluntary acceptance of an arrangement of power by both the rulers and the ruled, the latter of which accept the actions of the rulers because they see them as conforming to pre-established norms, legitimacy embodies popular support for (or acceptance of) a system. A lack of legitimacy can constitute an important weakness when a democratic system is installed from the outside rather than through an indigenous political process.

Two types of legitimacy can be distinguished. The first has been called "deep" legitimacy, which refers to an "intrinsic value commitment rooted in the political culture at all levels of society," in other words a widespread belief that democracy is in principle the best form of government. The second type of legitimacy is performance legitimacy, which means that public acceptance of a system depends on its performance in producing the desired outputs.

Experience in democratization efforts shows that popular support and legitimacy are conditioned by a number of factors. For example, deep legitimacy is affected by the way the installer of the new system is perceived. In the case of Iraq, the lack of international support for the Allied mission did not go unnoticed in Iraq itself, and a UN mission might have affected the legitimacy of the system more positively. However, there are many other factors that play a role. Demonstration effects from events in other countries, the potentially exemplary role played by popular leaders, local traditions, and positive experiences with political systems all have an impact on deep legitimacy.

Constitutional design can also play a role by influencing deep legitimacy. Aside from the type of political system (parliamentary versus presidential) and electoral system (proportional representation versus plurality) that is chosen, the process leading to the establishment of a constitution is also important. Of central importance is that the various population groups feel they are represented in the groups of people who draft the constitution.

How does culture affect deep legitimacy? First of all, no culture is inherently pro- or anti-democratic. Certainly, there are values that, if widespread, exert a positive influence on the consolidation of democracy. These include equality, consensus, trust, pragmatism, dialogue, tolerance, willingness to compromise, and accountability. But these values exist in many different cultures. Besides, cultures and value systems are not monolithic and

unchanging phenomena. They are constantly changing under the influence of changing circumstances. Negative experiences with dialogue or trust will reduce the value of those things. Welfare, the development of a civil society and the behavior of influential leaders all affect cultural values. As Diamond et al. wrote, "[p]erhaps the most important lesson our case studies teach us about political culture is that it is plastic and malleable over time." This does not mean that value changes cannot be influenced. Education and the media play an important role in conveying cultural values.

Performance legitimacy is affected, among other things, by economic development. Indeed, research has shown a very strong correlation between economic development and democracy. Broad-based development (as opposed to the kind of narrow, elite-centered economic growth that is characteristic of resource-rich countries including the oil states, in which the power base of regimes is only strengthened by their control over the oil incomes) also influences the works in favor of democracy more directly by creating economic power bases outside the state and a generally pro-democratic middle class and civil society. Civil society matters because it generally promotes a politics of issues and ideas rather than a politics of identity and exclusion, which is often what is promulgated by ethnically or religiously-oriented political parties.

A major factor: the rule of law

The importance of the rule of law can hardly be exaggerated. It is part of any successful and sustainable democracy. The ultimate guarantees of a rule of law are a strong and independent judiciary and an uncorrupted, politically neutral and capable police force. Fighting corruption and political influence in these sectors are therefore indispensable elements of strategies to install and consolidate democracy.

In earlier democratizing missions, such as those in Cambodia, Bosnia and Kosovo, most attention was paid to the organization of elections and it was insufficiently understood that these would not work well without a rule of law. This "failure to grasp that democracy works only when it goes hand in hand with the rule of law," writes Michael Ignatieff, was "one of the costliest mistakes in the Balkans," because "democracy means little if it is not buttressed by a separation of powers, an independent judiciary and the rule of law. Democracy without these constitutional supports just provides an opportunity for populist tyranny and financial corruption."

Ignatieff's conclusion is reinforced by that of Paddy Ashdown, the British politician who led the Bosnian mission:

We thought that democracy was the highest priority, and we measured it by the number of elections we could organize. The result even years later is that the people of Bosnia have grown weary of voting. In addition, the focus on elections slowed out efforts to tackle organized crime and corruption, which have jeopardized quality of life and scared off foreign investment... In hindsight, we should have put the establishment of the rule of law first, for everything else depends on it: a functioning economy, a free and fair political system, the development of civil society, public confidence and the courts.

The lesson, then, is that democratic elections require a certain measure of order, control and stability. In many cases, including Iraq, these constitute major problems. The recent decision to postpone the Iraqi elections is therefore justifiable and supported by democratization researchers around the world.

What should happen in Iraq?

It is clear that in Iraq there is still a long way to go. The "deep legitimacy" of the system that is being installed is lacking as of yet because many people question the legitimacy of the bringers of that system and the way in which they operate. "Performance legitimacy" lacks as well, as reconstruction and stability are not yet realized.

Nevertheless it is important that the country is not left in chaos and that the establishment of the rule of law receives top priority.

"This then is the paradox: to build democracy in Iraq the United States must stay on, but to demonstrate that it is not a colonial power it must leave," writes Fareed Zakaria. The solution? "Involving other countries in the process" in order to increase the legitimacy of the mission. This appears to be what is being done in Iraq at the moment, and in combination with the gradual transfer of powers to Iraqi bodies, this may increase the legitimacy of the democratizing project. Another part of the solution according to Zakaria is to postpone elections until the rule of law has been established. This advice, too, appears to have been heard.

In this way, democratization in Iraq is a continuous compromise between representation and "ownership" on the one hand, and stability and effectiveness on the other. And after all, no successful democracy has been created through purely democratic means. Communication with the Iraqi people, via the media, education and the production of tangible results to increase performance legitimacy, will have to sell the compromise to the population.

In the meantime the governors of Iraq will benefit if they devote attention to the factors (besides the establishment of a rule of law) that influence the consolidation of democratic systems. Installing democracy is a process that is much more than just political. Not only in political and military decision making, but also when economic and social measures are implemented should the potentially democratizing effect of such measures be understood and taken into account. Thus, economic development on a broad and local basis can have a democratizing effect. Similarly, policies aimed at education and the media can work positively in the medium term by influencing political culture, enlarging social capital and giving the population a chance to organize around issues (rather than identities) that are important to them. Truly coherent policy, then, would mean that each planned measure is checked for its impact on factors such as the acceptance of the political system by the population, the shaping of democratic institutions, the rule of law, political culture, economic development, social capital, the character of political parties, political leadership, the role of the army, and external factors - and via those factors on the consolidation of the new democratic system.

Willemijn Verkoren is with the University of Amsterdam's International School for Humanities and Social Sciences.

Economists for Peace and Security
<http://www.epsusa.org>