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Democracy and Peace: Greed or Grievance?

Are democracies effective in dealing with grievances? Not necessarily, says Belgian San-Akca. While they typically address surface-level complaints, they also ignore deeper 'opportunity structures' that lead to increased intra-state conflict.

By Belgian San-Akca for ISN

Democracy promotion is a major component of the foreign policy agendas of the US and the European Union, inspired to some extent by the findings of political scientists about the positive influence of democracy on peace and security. Although political scientists have mixed views about how the causal relationship between democracy and inter-state peace works, they agree that democracy has a dampening effect on inter-state war. When it comes to the effect of democracy on internal conflict, however, there is less consensus. On the one hand, scholars emphasize that democracies are less likely to experience internal conflict because they provide channels through which dissidents can express themselves peacefully. On the other hand, they state that this is only the case for full democracies. When it comes to transitional or semi-democracies, the empirical findings are mixed. Nevertheless, in the post- Cold War period, democracy promotion has gained a prominent role in world politics. Two developments in particular have contributed to the idea that democracy is the solution to all of the evils of world politics, including repression, genocide, state failure, civil war and terrorism: 1) the increasing recourse by states to repressive means of dealing with armed dissidence within their borders; and 2) the attacks of September 11. But why is democracy seen as a way of improving security? What is it about democratic regimes that hinders or facilitates armed dissidence and conflict?

Armed dissidence has historically been the main threat to states' domestic monopoly on legitimate violence. The goals of armed groups vary from the pursuit of political freedoms and liberties for specific ethnic and/or religious groups to political and territorial autonomy and secession. State responses to these groups have conventionally been examined through two types of factors: micro-level factors, such as the feelings of deprivation that motivate individuals to join dissident movements, and macro-level factors, such as the opportunity structure that encourages dissidents to organize and resort to violence. Thus, debates about the emergence and management of dissidence center on *grievance* and *greed*, referring to these two types of factors respectively. Comparatively less attention, however, has been paid to identifying the types of political institutions that are most effective in dealing with dissidence. Indeed, no common framework exists for understanding the relationship between democracy and dissidence motivated by greed and/or grievance. Nevertheless, both of these types of factors must be addressed if durable solutions to the various forms of conflict caused by armed dissidence are to be found. The following discussion emphasizes three aspects of

debates on the democracy-security nexus: the appeal of democracy as a form of government for dealing with dissidence, democracy's role in internal conflict, and its role in terrorism and counterterrorism.

On the whole, the pacific effects of democracy are somewhat ambiguous. While democratization effectively addresses conflicts motivated by *grievances*, it does not always address the deeper opportunity structures (or *greed*) that can also encourage conflict. Moreover, an increase in the number of nominal or semi-democracies in the post-Cold War period has been associated with an increase in civil wars and terrorism. Nevertheless, although democracies face unique constraints in dealing with terrorism and insurgencies, the argument that they are more vulnerable to these forms of political violence is probably overstated. Rather, the argument should shift towards identifying the types of political institutions that facilitate the peaceful expression of demands under the umbrella of democracy and away from pseudo-debates about whether grievance or greed drives certain groups towards the use of violence.

Democracy as a facilitator of peace

The appeal of democracy as a form of government rests on evidence that democracies tend to be less repressive of domestic dissidence and therefore less likely to commit atrocities, such as mass killings and genocide. Confronted with dissidence, government responses can range between two extremes: total repression (through violent means) and total accommodation (of all dissident demands). Since total repression and total accommodation by themselves only encourage further violence and instability, governments typically attempt to integrate the two, at least to some extent. Although democracy is not a uniform regime type, states that are considered democracies are expected to be more likely to pursue policies of accommodation. At minimum, as they move closer to the ideal of full democracy, societies tend to address grievance-related motives for conflict more effectively. When it comes to greed-related motives for conflict, however, democracy's record is less consistent. Because democracy is not uniform across all societies, internal conflict is common on the road to democratization.

Government responses to political violence must operate on both of these levels. While governments should try to address the grievances of dissident groups, they should also establish institutional mechanisms that alter opportunity structures in ways that radicalize or "outnorm" violence as a strategy of pursuing political goals. A recent example of this is the peace process between the Turkish government and the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party), an armed secessionist group active in the Southeastern part of Turkey since the early 1980s. Starting in 2002, the Turkish government began to address PKK dissidence in two ways. First, through the "democratic opening process," it addressed long-standing grievances by extending freedoms and liberties to the Kurdish minority (mainly linguistic liberties, such as operating Kurdish TV channels, adding Kurdish as a language to school curricula and increasing the autonomy of local governments). Second, it revised the opportunity structure by initiating negotiations with the higher cadres of the PKK, including the head of the organization, Abdullah Ocalan, who has been imprisoned since 1999. Overall, the economic growth that Turkey has achieved in the last decade has led to a shift away from demands for secession and towards demands for partial autonomy. Moreover, the Turkish government has been able to manage 'greed' motivations by addressing grievances to some extent. For example, the Kurdish political party is now allowed to run in elections and hold local government seats.

Democracy and internal conflict

In the post-1945 period, almost 94% of all conflicts around the world have involved at least one armed dissident group. 77% of all conflict occurred within the borders of a state and was instigated by an armed group with specific political objectives. Although the number of countries experimenting

with some kind of democratic regime has increased in this period, the number of internal conflicts continues to rise. The research on democracies and intrastate conflict suggests that the effect of democracy is not homogenous. Although the causal mechanism is still debated, there is a consensus that semi-democracies – i.e., states that have not completed their transition to full democracy – are the most prone to outbreaks of internal conflict. This is so because these states are relatively less constrained in the use of repression. Repression can guarantee the survival of a regime in the short run, but it fosters resentment that undermines the regime and encourages more dissidence in the long run, as the cases of Chechen insurgents in Russia, indigenous peoples in Mexico and the Kashmiri separatists in India have illustrated.

Democracy and terrorism

While there is no scholarly consensus on the effect of democracy on terrorism, democracies may be easy targets for terrorism because the freedoms and liberties they safeguard allow terrorists to recruit, organize and train within their borders. Furthermore, since democracy encourages political competition, it creates an opportunity structure that encourages armed groups to resort to violence to achieve their goals. In autocracies, by contrast, where no such competition exists, everyone knows that they will face repression if they oppose the regime or resort to violence. On the other hand, democracies help to channel the anger of dissidents towards peaceful means and allow them to voice their opinions. In autocracies people do not bother to voice their opinions because they implicitly understand that those opinions will not be noticed. This means that the empirical finding that democracies face more terrorism than other regimes may suffer from a selection bias on the part of those who live in democracies. Since democracies allow more room for dissidence, the odds that some dissidents will resort to violence also increases, as the cases of the IRA in Britain and ETA in Spain demonstrate. This selection effect is amplified by factors such as freedom of the press, which make democracies seem more prone to terrorist violence.

When it comes to counterterrorism, democracies must also ensure that they do not violate individual freedoms and liberties. Since democracies have a difficult time using repressive means to address dissident violence and terrorism, they tend to use the intelligence apparatus during counterterrorism campaigns. For instance, increased levels of domestic surveillance following the attacks of September 11 have meant that “spying on its own people” has now become a major criticism of the American government.

Conclusion

At present, this means that the “*pacific effects*” of democracy remain ambiguous. The largest gap in the literature on democracy and peace is a detailed examination of how autocratic governments handle dissidence. There is currently little empirical evidence to support the widespread belief that autocracies are more successful in deterring dissidence and do not bother to address grievances. Moreover, no account of the relationship between democracy and violence can be complete without a detailed analysis of micro-level motives. Whether it is civil war or terrorism, the factors that lead individuals to believe that the use of violence is a *just* way to pursue certain goals must be explained. Not every ‘grievance’ or ‘grievance’ leads to violence; some do, and under certain conditions. Furthermore, institutional mechanisms that alter opportunity structures and prevent grievances from being expressed in a violent manner need to be explored – in both democracies and autocracies. Otherwise, the research on democracy and peace runs the risk of overemphasizing the risks of the process of democratization and its potential to descend into intra-state conflict. At present, this serves to discourage democracy-oriented dissidence, while encouraging the use of violent and repressive means by all parties, governments and armed groups alike.

Further reading

Hegre, Håvard, 2014. "**Democracy and Armed Conflict**," Journal of Peace Research, Sage Publications, vol. 51(2), pages 159-172.

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