

## Democracy Cannot be Imposed by Force

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"To go to war for an idea, if the war is aggressive and not defensive, is as criminal as to go to war for territory or revenue; for it is as little justifiable to force our ideas on other people, as to compel them to submit to our will in any other respect." With these words, written in 1859, John Stuart Mill stated limitations to intervention that are as valid today as they were then.

Is democracy promotion an exception to the rule? This question is at the heart of many current debates in the international system, not least of which is the war in Iraq. My answer is no, although I find this position problematic because I believe that democracy is the best political system of all those in existence. According to most political theorists, democracy at its most basic is rule by the people, which usually includes competitive elections, a constitution that protects individual rights, and a separation of powers.

Democratic governance provides the best chance for individual citizens to achieve their interests in relation to their fellow citizens. Those interests can include security, wealth, and even happiness. By giving individuals the right to participate in government, democracy provides a weak guarantee that a person's human rights will be respected. Democracy also provides some assurance that no single powerful individual or faction will be able to dominate the political system.

Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant in the late 18th century argued that democracies, or what he called republics, are more peaceful than other forms of government. Evidence from international relations theory supports Kant's claim, demonstrating that democracies tend not to go to war with other democracies. While democracies certainly use military force—the United States today, Great Britain and France in the first half of the 20th century being perfect examples—evidence compiled through various studies suggests that they rarely if ever go to war with one another.

While democratic states tend to protect their own citizens and tend to be more peaceful, does it follow that democratic systems ought to be imposed on communities by the use of military force?

The quote from J. S. Mill suggests that while some liberal theory might support the use of force to promote democracy, other traditions within liberalism are more opposed. Mill's argument, one shared by Michael Walzer in the first edition of *Just and Unjust Wars*, is that communities fighting to promote their own rights must rely on their own purposes.

The just war tradition, a body of thought that has developed over time to evaluate the use of military force, does not support the use of force to promote democracy. The established reasons for using force in the tradition are three: self-defence, retaking stolen property, and punishment. These do not include promoting democracy.

Justifications for using force in international law get closer to promoting democracy, but they also do not allow it. International law allows war for self-defence and has, over the past 20 years, begun to develop a justification for using force to protect human rights. If democracy is considered a human right, then perhaps it might be justifiable according to international law. I would argue, however, that democracy is not a human right, but, rather, it provides the best defence of human rights for individuals.

We have, thus, something of a dilemma. On the one hand, we see that democracy can be argued to be the best political system. On the other hand, we have a strong resistance to using force to promote democracy in liberal theory, the just war tradition, and international law. Is there any way out?

One possible avenue to escape this dilemma comes from the writings of the former Secretary General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros-Ghali. In 1996, as he was being forced out of office by the United States,

Boutros-Ghali published the last of his three Agenda documents, *Agenda for Democratisation*.<sup>[1]</sup> In that document, Boutros-Ghali argued that the United Nations, as representative of the international community, should actively promote democracy. During his tenure, the United Nations did exactly this, by helping to run elections in Cambodia.

But, importantly, Boutros-Ghali also argued that democracy is not something that occurs only inside states. Rather, democratization should take place among states at the international level as well. In other words, until the international community as a whole becomes democratic—i.e., decision making in various international bodies needs to be more inclusive and representative, and should have more balance among the powers—democracy cannot be promoted at the national level.

Turning Boutros-Ghali's idea into reality is challenging, for certain. One possible way to do this is through greater inclusion of NGOs in various international conferences—a strategy initiated by Boutros-Ghali during his tenure, when he invited various groups to Conventions in Cairo (on women) and Vienna (on human rights). While including NGOs does not ensure that democracy will flourish around the world, by giving these groups more of a role in international governance, they might have more of a role in domestic governance.

The current conflict in Iraq demonstrates the dangers of promoting democracy in an undemocratic international system. While many Iraqis are glad to be rid of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, they are loath to accept the presence of American guns and soldiers in their country to enforce a democratic system. Until the international community appreciates the point made by Boutros-Ghali, promoting democracy by war or otherwise will continue to generate resistance.

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1. See Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence and International Organizations* (WW Norton, 2001).