Debating the Transition Paradigm

TILTING AT STRAW MEN

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Although Thomas Carothers's critique of democracy promoters in the January 2002 *Journal of Democracy* was, in principle, directed at donors in general, all the examples and citations referred exclusively to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Carothers's critique would be trenchant, even devastating, if it accurately portrayed USAID's thinking on democracy. But it does not.[1] The article characterizes USAID's democracy practitioners as uncritically adhering to an increasingly outmoded "transition paradigm" based on five naïve assumptions. That mischaracterization is a straw man, which is first created, then demolished. Undoubtedly, we at USAID are trying our best to promote transitions to democracy, but we do not adhere to any single transition paradigm and certainly not to the pastiche created by Carothers.

First, Carothers asserts that, notwithstanding the substantial and obvious evidence to the contrary, "democracy enthusiasts" continue to believe that "any country moving away from dictatorial rule is in transition toward democracy," and that the transition is inexorable. Furthermore, he argues that we have constructed a simplistic evolutionary scheme, and that our assistance programs are fashioned primarily to hasten the inevitable rather than to wrestle with a variety of possible outcomes, of which a successful democratic transition is only one, and indeed not a very likely one at that. No matter how optimistic we may be, no one who lives where we work could come to that conclusion. We are confronted day by day not only with successes but also with failures, setbacks, regressions, programmatic shortcomings, and "stagnant transitions."[2]

Indeed, as early as 1991, USAID's democracy policy stated, in its

second sentence, what many considered obvious even then—that "progress toward democracy should *not* be expected to be 'linear, easily accomplished or effortlessly maintained.'"[3] Since 1991, even that caution has been replaced by the sobering reality that countries can move away from greater democracy and that democracy promotion is almost never easy, let alone inevitable. Still, notwithstanding the obstacles, we are firmly committed to democracy promotion. There is no excuse for some of the inflated claims that have appeared in USAID documents (which Carothers rightly criticizes), but the supposed predominance of a "transition paradigm" does not explain them.[4]

Second, since we are working to promote transitions to democracy and are charged by statute to "contribute to the development of democratic institutions and political pluralism,"[5] it is not surprising to find us thinking of ways to do so. Yet we certainly do not *assume* the "set sequence"—opening, breakthrough, and consolidation—that Carothers attributes to us as a second assumption.[6] In particular, we see "openings" not as events but as long, difficult, hard-won, incremental processes. Our assistance programs are often designed precisely for crafting small "openings" rather than finding them full-blown. And when there are "breakthroughs," they do not always (or even often) occur as they did in Europe or Eurasia, or possibly Indonesia and Nigeria—with the sudden collapse of the old order. Rather, "breakthroughs" are more often gradual, piecemeal, and linked to particular sectors rather than systemic. Finally, consolidation is more often a goal than a state. Unfortunately, it is a goal achieved all too infrequently, and many of USAID's most important policy documents emphasize the fallacy of assuming "set sequences" of reform.[7]

Nor do we subscribe to the third assumption, regarding "the determinative importance of elections." We make no apology for believing that there cannot be a true democracy without the general accountability of government to its citizens, and that elections are the only tested way to accomplish that. Simply put, there is no democracy without elections. Yet we do not believe that elections are determinative or that they are, by themselves, "a key generator of further democratic reforms." If anything, we have regularly urged in our documents and policy discussions against placing undue, unrealistic emphasis on (or faith in) elections. More than that, we have explicitly warned that, in certain contexts, elections can be premature and counterproductive from the point of view of both democracy and stability.[8] None of that is to gainsay the importance that we attach to elections and to political parties. In my opinion, however, we need to explore in greater depth why multiparty elections have not led more often to better representation or accountability, and to ask how we might craft strategies to achieve these ends.[9] We would very much welcome any help we could get in doing so.

Neither do we hold the fourth assumption attributed to us—that underlying economic, political, institutional, and social conditions "will

not be major factors in either the onset or the outcome of the transition process," and that each country's trajectory will fit a set mold. To be sure, we are looking for general patterns, but we are fully cognizant of the various forms that democracy can take; the variety of social, cultural, and historical environments that shape or impede democracy; and the many paths political development can and will take. That is why USAID has in-country missions, each of which is responsible for designing country-specific programs. Moreover, that is why almost all our technical and policy documents emphasize that approaches need to be country-specific, consistent with social and economic conditions, and based on local realities, not idealized visions.[10] It is also why USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios emphasized in his March 2002 address at Monterey, Mexico, that "you can't apply exactly the same matrix to every single country . . . local context always has to be taken into account." Yet it is probably fair to say that many of our programs in very different environments look quite similar. It is also fair to say, however, that similar-appearing programs may not really be so similar after all. The differences may be subtle, but that is Carothers's point—a point on which we all agree: Countries differ, sometimes subtly but nevertheless importantly, and democracy programs need to respond accordingly.

Finally, far from assuming that we are building inevitable transitions on "coherent, functioning states," we spend considerable energy trying to find ways to build precisely such states. The many meetings, external and internal, that we have held over the past few years on "failed states" and poor governance attest to our concern with this issue: For us, good governance is a problem, not an assumption. Indeed, we go Carothers one further: We do not limit our concern for good governance to the government or the state, but also include social institutions broadly defined, including those in civil society. To date, however, our concern has not been matched by adequate solutions, and we could use some assistance in addressing these problems.

As for the charge that our documents on governance list no examples of "work on fundamental state-building," we do substantial work on state institutions, particularly local governments. It is true that we do not work as much any longer on national public administration as we once did, but that is because other better-endowed donors (particularly the World Bank) do so, and also because we are reluctant to work on "state-building" where there is little political will for constructing a democratic state. Nevertheless, I believe we have substantially underestimated the general institutional decay in the countries in which we work, and I believe that work on national governance is an area we need to reconsider.

Committed Realism

So, to parody the kind of slogans we used to hear from China, we do not assume the one goal (inevitable democracy), the three stages, or the

five assumptions, even as we do our best to assist transitions to democratic governance. It is possible to be both deeply committed and seriously realistic, and we have tried our best to do so. Without a doubt, we need to address our failings, but they do not arise because we are besotted with the "transition paradigm" described by Carothers.

More importantly, although we find paradigms useful—while fully recognizing that they inevitably "oversimplify" their subjects—this has not, I believe, led to the shortcomings outlined by Carothers. Surely he agrees that analysis begins precisely by isolating—and thereby simplifying—admittedly complex problems. Analysis extracts, artificially, some elements or processes (preferably the fundamental ones), examines them in that artificial isolation, builds a conceptual model, then returns them to a more complex reality. This is hardly new. It captures the methodology of all science.[11] Clarifying our thinking by artificially constructing archetypes would hardly make us unique, even if those archetypes actually were "opening, breakthrough, and consolidation." The fact that reality is not fully captured by so simple a paradigm does not mean that even simple paradigms are not *useful* in thinking about a more complex reality. "To recognize, then, that the transition paradigm has outlived its usefulness," as Carothers argues, does not depend on some abstract notion of truth. It depends first on the purposes—the "usefulness" as he says—to which such a paradigm (however simple) is put, second on the limits of that utility, and third on our recognition of the more complex reality upon which such a paradigm might *usefully* shed some light.

The more useful paradigm, Carothers argues, would include a "gray zone" within which lie two "political syndromes"—feckless pluralism and dominant-power politics—that represent two of the "entrenched" alternatives to the inevitable transition paradigm. Neither is fully democratic or fully authoritarian, and neither is moving anywhere. They are not "rigidly delineated political-system types but rather political patterns that have become regular and somewhat entrenched." Feckless pluralism is a kind of flawed democracy in which relatively free and fair elections result only in the alternation of power between corrupt, self-interested, and ineffective political-party elites who "seem only to trade the country's problems back and forth from one hapless side to the other."

In principle, feckless pluralism would seem to carry its own electoral antidote: Throw out one or both of the feckless parties. In practice, the barriers to entry for new parties and the barriers to leadership positions for reformers within the existing (often highly centralized) parties are both extremely high. Still, there remains a question of whether, how, and when foreign donors should act to "perfect" other countries' "flawed democracies." But perhaps the most serious danger in feckless pluralism is that an exasperated electorate will choose not more internally democratic and potent parties, but rather a systemic alternative much

closer to the dictatorial pole, the pattern that Carothers refers to as "dominant-power politics": limited political space and contestation in which "one political grouping . . . dominates . . . [with] little prospect of alternation of power in the foreseeable future." That pattern is, unfortunately, all too entrenched, and far from ignoring it, we are deeply engrossed in trying to do something about it.

More importantly, it is not clear from the article what kinds of programs would result from analyses based on these two "syndromes." Without more to go on, where do we go, strategically and programmatically, with "feckless pluralism" or "dominant-power politics"? It is a pity that Carothers did not spend more time addressing this question. In addition to these two, we have also been worried about alternative archetypes and processes over the past couple of years—for example, authoritarian regimes and military coups. None of these alternatives fits neatly into the "transition paradigm," nor do we think they do.

If anything, we have modulated substantially the emphasis on archetypes and typologies of states in favor precisely of looking at problems and processes. We have found that fitting countries into typologies often creates more disagreement and confusion than value. In the mid-1990s, we began developing and field-testing an analytical framework that embraced elements of four disciplines to analyze political dynamics and design appropriate democracy-promotion programs: political sociology and political anthropology to understand broad interactions of social structure, culture, and political systems; political economy to gain insights into the relations between actors and their interests, resources, choices, and strategies for maximizing gains; and institutional analysis to explore the design of institutional arenas, rules, and incentives in relation to which those actors operate.[12] Archetypes of all sorts, gray or otherwise, play a relatively small role in that analysis. Political institutions, processes, interests, and incentives are the dominant considerations. That framework is now the recommended approach to analysis and strategic programming at USAID. We train our staff in it. We have used it in more than two dozen countries. We believe it is a better approach than either the "transition paradigm" or the "gray zone."

Dealing with Corruption and Conflict

We have also become increasingly concerned about corruption and conflict. Administrator Natsios has directed us to devise strategies that help deal with both. These are deep problems with profoundly deleterious (sometimes disastrous) consequences, heavily affected by the very social, historical, and cultural considerations that Carothers accuses us of ignoring. Moreover, President George W. Bush has just announced a New Compact for Development, a central component of which is a commitment to "good governance" that includes "rooting out corruption,

upholding human rights and adhering to the rule of law." USAID is working with other U.S. government entities in designing how this element is to be measured.

Within USAID, Administrator Natsios has established a new office to deal with ways to better manage conflicts and, one would hope, to prevent or at least mitigate them. Everyone at USAID clearly understands the fundamental importance of social organization, culture, and history in shaping these pathologies. Our problem is to find ways of addressing them without being paralyzed by the complexity that these social (and other) considerations impose on us.

One way to address these issues is to isolate parts of their complex natures, propose some archetypal (albeit oversimplified) models to understand them, and then reassemble the parts and the archetypes. The models will almost certainly not fall neatly into the "transition paradigm," but they may well be informed by it, and they almost certainly will be similarly "simplistic." The alternative, once again, is to be paralyzed by complexity. The question is not whether we will simplify, but whether the simplification will be useful in helping us to disaggregate, and therefore to understand, the complexity. Of course, understanding the problem—getting the analysis right—is only the beginning. The bigger problem by far is finding ways to prevent conflict, reduce corruption, attenuate patrimonialism, and promote democracy. We have, in very early draft papers, been addressing these problems, and we could certainly use help on both the analytical and the programmatic sides.

In sum, the disappointing thing about Carothers's article is that it sets up a straw man in place of our thinking and does not address some of the problems with which he knows we have been struggling. We long ago moved beyond the "transition paradigm" as described by Carothers. We are now struggling to find strategies to deal with the limited authoritarian states and the motion without movement that he describes as feckless pluralism. We are also struggling with "deeply entrenched" patterns such as corruption, patrimonialism, incipient conflict, failed states, poor governance, and inadequate political parties. We have long benefited from Carothers's thinking, and we would benefit substantially if he, and others committed to democratization, could help us find strategies for dealing with these challenges.

NOTES

I am indebted to many people who have read, commented on, and criticized this article, particularly to Michele Schimpp, who gave me constant help and support notwithstanding her insightful reservations.

1. Carothers's earlier critique of USAID democracy strategies similarly criticized an approach that USAID had already abandoned. See Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), ch. 5.

2. Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad,* 110.

3. *Democracy and Governance Policy* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, November 1991), 4.

4. An analysis of why such statements appear might have been more helpful than a simple recitation of them. This is not the place to explore those reasons in detail, but several are good starting points: the U.S. public disenchantment with foreign aid, the consequent search by every administration to find success stories, and the perverse interpretation of the Government Performance and Results Act. In addition, there are a variety of non-assistance foreign-policy considerations, as well as the tendency to emphasize the full half rather than the empty half of the glass and to give governments the benefit of the doubt in certain public documents, if only to nudge them into constructive action. None of these factors excuses exaggerations, and Carothers does us a service in pointing them out.

5. 22 USC §5401(b).

6. Carothers's position on both the first and second assumptions seems to be a bit ambivalent. As in the "The End of the Transition Paradigm," Carothers argues in *Aiding Democracy Abroad* that USAID has "a democracy template," "a core strategy," "a model of democratization," and "a natural sequence of institutional modeling" (pp. 85–92). Yet in the same volume he concedes that democracy promoters are more sophisticated and nuanced: "At the same time, democracy promoters are facing the fact that democratic transitions often do not follow an orderly sequence. . . . Democracy promoters are identifying various political trajectories that follow political openings and transitional elections: institutional stagnation, backsliding to semiauthoritarianism, electoral breakdown, postconflict recovery, and others. They are beginning to design democracy aid portfolios to fit the specific dynamics and obstacles of these various contexts rather than working on the assumption of a natural sequence" (p. 334).

7. See, for example, *Constituencies for Reform: Strategic Approaches for Donor-Supported Civic Advocacy* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, February 1996), 51; *Weighing in on the Scales of Justice: Strategic Approaches for Donor-Supported Rule of Law Programs* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, February 1994), 12; *Conducting a DG [Democratic Governance] Assessment: A Framework for Strategy Development* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, November 2000); and *Democracy and Governance Policy,* 14.

8. See, for example, Krishna Kumar, "Bullets to Ballots: Electoral Assistance to Post-conflict Societies" (Washington, D.C.: USAID, Center for Development Information and Evaluation, 1997, PN-ACA-900); and Krishna Kumar, ed., *Postconflict Elections, Democratization, and International Assistance* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

9. Specifically, we need to understand why parties are becoming increasingly marginalized, even reviled, and how we might devise a strategy that will help produce more effective and accountable parties, both as vehicles of contestation and vehicles of governance.

10. See, for example, *Democracy and Governance: A Conceptual Framework* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 1998), 3.

11. See, for example, the substantial literature employing Max Weber's concept of "ideal types" and the debate over Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

12. USAID, *Conducting a DG Assessment.*