Promoting Democracy in Central Asia: What's Needed and Why It Won't Happen

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Abstract: This paper examines barriers to US and EU democracy promotion in Central Asia from an unusual angle. It focuses on constraints that stem from shortcomings in the practices of the democracy promoters themselves. This focus is particularly pertinent given the current »backlash against democracy promotion«. Three main issues are explored in the context of democracy promotion in Central Asia – motivation, legitimacy and commitment – all found to be lacking. Democracy is based on a set of norms and values, yet if democracy promotion itself does not uphold these, then its own credibility is undermined. In the Central Asian case, the principled pursuit of democratic reform is unlikely, with democracy promotion either trumped by competing foreign policy objectives, or regarded as instrumental and thus disposable. Likely consequences are antithetical to democratisation in the region, with the outcome of democracy demotion not promotion.

Keywords: democracy promotion, Central Asia, foreign policy analysis, EU and US

1. Introduction

Promoting democracy is stated as a key foreign policy goal of both the United States (US) and the European Union (EU), including in their policies towards Central Asia. This emphasis on democracy promotion in foreign policy has been evident since the end of the cold war, but has received a significant rhetorical boost since the events of September 11th 2001, with its linkage to security issues. This linkage has been influenced in particular by the Bush administration's belief that democratic reforms will alleviate the conditions of political repression and stagnation that themselves give rise to support for radical Islamism and terrorism. Post 9/11, the strategic location of the five Central Asian Republics (CARs) has enhanced their importance in Western eyes, with greater attention paid to them by both the US and the EU, inclusive of the stated goal of promoting democracy. Current US policy in Central Asia focuses on what described as »three mutually reinforcing pillars«, political and economic reform, security co-operation and energy and commercial interests, with democracy promoted »not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it creates conditions that lead to greater political and economic opportunity« (Boucher 2006). The »over-arching objectives« of EU co-operation with Central Asia is stated as »to foster respect for democratic principles and human rights and to promote transition towards a market economy« (European Commission 2002), with such objectives replicated in Articles 1 and 2 of the bilateral Partnership and Co-operation Agreements (PCAs) signed between the EU and individual Central Asian republics.

Yet, the goal of promoting democracy is easily stated, but less easily achieved, with a number of barriers to external democracy promotion in the five CARs. While such obstacles vary between countries, it is recognised that Central Asia is generally a challenging environment for the promotion of democracy and human rights. However, rather than examining such apparent difficulties for external actors, this paper highlights a different set of constraints, those that pertain to the practices of the democracy promoters themselves. To clarify, this paper does not look at the internal character of Central Asian regimes as obstacles to democracy promotion, but rather it aims to identify the barriers to effective democracy promotion that the external actors erect themselves through shortcomings in their own practices.

This focus is particularly pertinent given the current »backlash against democracy promotion« highlighted by Thomas Carothers. Here Carothers (2006: 56) noted the recent trend for relatively authoritarian governments to denounce Western democracy assistance as illegitimate interference in their internal political affairs and to place restrictions on the foreign funding of NGOs and political parties. Russia is the key country he highlights, but three of the other four countries he mentions are in Central Asia – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. (The fourth is Belarus). Clearly one key explanation for the backlash is a fear on the part of autocratic rulers of being undermined by powerful external actors, the »fear of orange« as Carothers (2006: 56) puts it, referring to the role of Western support for the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. But I also wish to argue that the practices of the democracy promoters themselves have contributed substantially to the distrust and unease about democracy promotion that has emerged in different parts of the world, notably in the former Soviet space. There are three main issues that I wish to explore: motivation, legitimacy and commitment. The general argument is as follows: democracy is based on a set of norms, values and principles, but if democracy promotion does not straightforwardly uphold such values and principles, then its own credibility is undermined.

2. Motivation: normative or instrumental?

How *genuine* are democracy promotion efforts? Is democracy promoted in a principled manner as an objective in itself, or is it pursued for *instrumental* reasons, as a means towards other, perhaps more unscrupulous ends? There are two ways

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in which an instrumental agenda could be perceived, one political and one economic.

2.1 Democracy and Security

The relationship between democracy and security has received particularly close attention in the post 9/11 world. The current conventional wisdom is that democracy is the most likely guarantor of security, with a remarkable likeness between US and EU policy, doubtless influenced by the democratic peace thesis that liberal democracies do not wage war against each other. The US National Security Strategy of 2006 states that:

»The goal of our statecraft is to help create a world of democratic, well-governed states… This is the best way to provide enduring security for the American people.«

Similarly, the European Security Strategy states that, »The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states« (European Council 2003: 10). One consequence of this linkage between democracy and security is that democracy promotion has risen on the agenda of both the US and EU, notably in the Middle East but also in Central Asia (Carothers 2004: 63).

Such policies raise many discussion points, but the main interest here is with the *instrumental* orientation towards democracy promotion. Democracy is not valued simply as a goal in itself, but rather as a means to the achievement of security goals. There is nothing fundamentally erroneous or flawed with this, provided that democracy and security goals remain compatible. But what can be problematic about instrumentalism is that the attachment to the *means* to a particular goal only endures for as long as the conventional wisdom. An instrumental orientation to democracy promotion means that there is no intrinsic allegiance to democracy, and thus it is just as easy to switch to supporting authoritarian allies as the best way to protect security interests. Already the contradictions have been apparent, with security policy and the »war on terror« in Afghanistan requiring »co-operation« with (semi-) authoritarian rulers in geo-strategic locations, most obviously in Pakistan with President Musharraf, but also in Central Asia, notably with President Karimov in Uzbekistan and President Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan. All the Central Asian states offered overflight and other support to US-led coalition operations in Afghanistan, with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikstan and Uzbekistan providing airbases and hosting troops, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan endorsed the US-led war in Iraq (Congressional Research service 2006). Democracy as a means to enhance security can easily switch to a trade-off between security and democracy, embracing (semi-)authoritarian states as allies.

2.2 Democracy and Economic Interests

A second instrumental orientation is where democratisation is regarded as complementary but subservient to the goal of economic liberalisation and the promotion of Western commercial interests. This argument suggests that democracy is perceived as the most favourable political system for the opening up of national resources to foreign business interests and for offering transnational corporations (TNCs) the most stable and secure investment climate. Western interest in the oil and gas reserves in Central Asia is considerable, notably in Kazakhstan. Major US and European energy TNCs have significant investments in oil and gas production in Kazakhstan, including Chevron (US), ExxonMobil (US), Shell (the Netherlands), Eni (formerly Agip) (Italy), TotalFinaElf (France), British Gas (UK). Foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan from EU TNCs alone amounts to about €1 billion per year, with 80-90 percent in the energy sector (European Commission 2005, cited in Warkotsch 2006: 524). Turkmenistan's extensive gas reserves, among the largest in the world, have also attracted some investment from US energy companies (Congressional Research Service 2006), and are of considerable interest to the EU, given its concerns over future energy security. The death of absolute ruler President Niyazov in December 2006 has alerted Western governments to a possible political and economic opening. The primacy of such economic interests, with democracy promoted as an instrumental strategy, again means that democracy promotion policies can easily become marginalised if they do not coincide with commercial interests. It is highly unlikely, for example, that the EU will employ negative conditionality measures for fear of undermining its economic interests (Warkotsch 2006: 524).

3. Legitimacy?

How *legitimate* are Western attempts to promote democracy? The backlash against democracy promotion has focused attention on the accusation of *illegitimate* political interference (Carothers 2006: 58). Indeed, it is undeniable that external democracy promotion does entail intervention in internal political affairs, raising the issue of sovereignty. Thus the key question hinges on legitimacy and whether democracy promotion is pursued in a principled way. Three main concerns are examined here, consistency, double standards and country authorship, suggesting that legitimacy is often in short supply.

3.1 Consistency?

Are democracy promotion policies implemented in a consistent manner? Clearly, legitimacy is undermined if they are not. There are three possible dimensions to this issue.

First, *is there consistency in the treatment of different countries and regions*? Previously, I have highlighted the inconsistency in the imposition of political conditionality and aid sanctions (Crawford 2001). Sanctions were more likely in small, aid dependent countries in sub-Saharan Africa, much less likely where the West had significant economic and/or geo-strategic interests, for example, Indonesia under Suharto or Egypt under Mubarak, despite poor human rights records. The EU insists on human rights and democracy clauses as an essential element in all its trade and co-operation agreements with third countries, including in the Partnership and Co-opera-

tion Agreements (PCAs) with CARs. [PCAs with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan entered into force in 1999, and have been signed with Turkmenistan (1998) and Tajikistan (2004) though not yet fully ratified.] Yet, given the geo-strategic and energy security importance of Central Asia, such clauses are unlikely to be executed in instances of human rights violations or democratic reversals. For instance, the EU's own webpage on relations with Kazakhstan outlines democratic regression in terms of »crackdowns on media outlets, opposition groups, and non-governmental bodies that have been critical of government policies« (European Commission 2006), yet relations continue unaffected. Indeed, relations are increasingly warm and harmonious, focusing on economic interests, with a visit to Kazakhstan in October 2006 by the EU Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, her first to Central Asia, and a return visit to Brussels by President Nazarbayev in December 2006. Only in Uzbekistan did the EU partially suspend co-operation in October 2005, rather belatedly instigating an arms embargo and a visa ban on senior officials, following the extreme circumstances of the Andijan massacre of mid-May 2005 and the subsequent crackdown on civil society, notably human rights activists and independent journalists. It is notable that the US and the EU have shown more determination to take a tough stance against President Lukashenko in Belarus, where the West has less economic or strategic interests. Thus, turning a blind eye to authoritarian practices in Central Asia smacks of inconsistency and send the wrong message to autocrats everywhere.

Second, *is there consistency amongst international actors*, in particular between the US and the EU? Uzbekistan again provides an example of some inconsistency in approach between the EU and the US. Whereas, the EU eventually took limited sanctions post-Andijan and did distance itself from the government of President Karimov, the US governments has not imposed targeted sanctions (such as a visa ban and assets freeze) against those senior Uzbek officials deemed responsible for the massacre and its aftermath, as called for by Human Rights Watch (2006). This difference in approach has been sustained with the renewal of restrictive measures against Uzbekistan by the EU Council in November 2006. At the same time it must be acknowledged that the Andijan massacre effectively ended the US- Uzbek »Strategic Partnership«, signed in March 2002, with the Uzbek government requiring the withdrawal of US troops from military bases after the US government assisted with the airlift of refugees from Kyrgyzstan to Europe in July 2005. Previously, the period from 2001-04 had been characterised by security interests taking precedence over human rights issues in US policy towards Uzbekistan.

Third, *is there consistency with other foreign policy activities*? Or is democracy promotion trumped by other foreign policy goals? As suggested before, there is always the suspicion that democracy will be promoted where it concurs with other economic and security interests, but downplayed where there are economic or security reasons for staying on friendly terms with authoritarian rulers (Carothers 2004: 7). Indeed, Uzbekistan was one such example where security interests predominated over democracy or human rights issues in the West's relations with the Uzbek government in the immediate post-9/11 period, from 2001 to 2004, as discussed above. Earlier, Algeria was a well-known example in the early 1990s where security concerns trumped democracy promotion, with support from both the US and EU for the military-led government that emerged from the cancellation of the second round of parliamentary elections and the dissolution of the National Assembly in January 1992, in the context of certain victory by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) (Crawford 1997: 97). Given the predominantly Muslim populations in Central Asian countries, alongside Western concerns about rising support for Islamist groups and political parties, will democracy promotion in this region be quietly discarded in favour of support for militarily strong, politically repressive, but pro-Western rulers?

3.2 Hypocrisy and Double Standards?

A lack of consistency in the application of democracy promotion policies opens up Western governments to the accusation of double standards, undermining the legitimacy of their democracy promotion agenda. Yet, the recent hypocrisy and double standards of the Bush administration can only be described as staggering. On the one hand we have President Bush's »freedom agenda« and his stated prioritisation of democracy promotion as a foreign policy objective. On the other hand we have flagrant abuses of human rights and the rule of law by the US government, both abroad and at home. The examples are well known:

- The US prison and detention camp at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, where detainees have been held and interrogated since 2002 without legal charges being brought.
- The torture and abuse of prisoners and detainees in US-run prisons in Iraq (such as Abu Ghraib) and Afghanistan, as well as at Guantanamo.
- The »extraordinary rendition« by the US government of foreign detainees for interrogation outside of national or international jurisdiction, often to countries where torture is practised. Uzbekistan is allegedly one so-called »black site« (Amnesty International 2006).
- The violation of civil liberties in the US itself, for instance, the illegal eavesdropping of US citizens without court warrants by the National Security Agency.

Carothers (2006: 59) outlines the clear riposte: »How can a country that tortures people abroad and abuses rights at home tell other countries how to behave?«. By such hypocrisy and double standards, the US government undermines its legitimacy and its credibility as a democracy promotion agent. And by association it also undermines the credibility of the whole democracy promotion enterprise, including the activities of the EU and the OSCE. Additionally, such blatant hypocrisy gives sustenance to autocrats around the world, grateful for the opportunity to dismiss democracy assistance as Western interference in internal affairs and to get on with the job of cracking down on pro-democracy and human rights activists.

3.3 Local Ownership or Country Authorship?

A third aspect of legitimacy concerns the extent to which democracy promotion efforts are informed and guided by local knowledge. Democratisation is essentially an endogenous process. It can neither be exported nor imported, but has to be developed from within. There can be a role for external actors, certainly, but one that facilitates and supports country-driven processes. Yet this is frequently not the case, with a standard template of democracy promotion implemented by democracy promoters.

The answer to such problems is often posited as »local ownership«, a concept that has gained much credence in development discourse in recent times. Yet what does it mean? In many instances, it amounts to little more than consultation of local opinion in order to provide endorsement for what remain externally-designed programmes. In proposing a participatory methodology for evaluating democracy programmes (Crawford 2003), I substitute the term *authorship* for ownership, suggesting that external democracy promoters subordinate themselves to country authorship as a more substantive notion of local guidance and control. In this way, the legitimacy of democracy promotion would also be increased.

4. Commitment?

Are Western governments and intergovernmental organisations *serious* about promoting democracy? Putting rhetoric aside, what is the reality of democracy promotion? Various commentators have indicated that the reality often does not live up to the rhetoric, for example, Youngs' (2004) analysis of EU democracy promotion in the Middle East and my discussion of EU democracy promotion in Ghana (Crawford 2005). Youngs notes, for instance, that, »In the year after 9/11, the EU gave over twenty times more money for the preservation of historical sites in the Middle East than for democracy building« (Youngs 2004: 10). There appears to be a similar scenario in Central Asia in terms of both US and EU assistance.

Warkotsch (2006: 525) states that EU democracy assistance in Central Asia has been at »relatively low levels«, concentrating mainly on good governance rather than democratisation. Although the EU's new Regional Strategy for 2007-2013, »in preparation« at the time of writing, is expected to allocate 15 percent of its budget for good governance (International Crisis Group 2006: 17), such activities are much broader than democratic reforms. They can encompass, for instance, public administration reform, financial management and anti-corruption measures, applicable to all political regimes, democratic or otherwise. Assistance to human rights and democracy in the narrower sense from the European Initiative for Human Rights and Democracy (EIDHR) has also been limited, amounting to €2.3 million in 2005 for projects with NGOs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Warkotsch 2006: 516). Human rights organisations in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan received nothing, despite governments here being the worst human rights offenders in the region, though perhaps explained by the difficulties of channelling funds to organisations in these countries. Additionally, democracy assistance from EU member states, part of bilateral assistance programmes, is negligible. Germany is probably the most active member state, but subjected to criticism for »assigning a higher priority to working with the Uzbek government than to issues such as human rights and democratisation« (International Crisis Group 2006: 20-21).

US democracy assistance was reported as accounting for 18 per cent of the US $290 million assigned to the five states in 2003, less than the 31 per cent budgeted for »security and law-enforcement« (IWPR 2004). Approximately one-fifth of overall US assistance expended on democracy promotion is probably no more than can be expected, given that political and economic reform together only constitute one of three main objectives of US policy. Yet what is most notable is the relatively meagre and declining amounts of assistance. Amounts peaked in 2002, more than doubling in the year after 9/11 to US $582.9 million (Boyer 2006), doubtless as a reward for the military co-operation provided by the five CARs to US-led forces in the invasion of Afghanistan. But US assistance has decreased annually since then to $102.0 million in 2006, and likely to decline further given the US government budget request to Congress for $81.6 million for 2008 (State Department 2007: 83). Martha Brill Olcott, a regional specialist from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, is reported as stating that such figures amount to »tiny sums« and that »The rhetoric and the numbers are at odds with each other« (cited in Kucera 2007).

Why is it that the reality of democracy promotion so often fails to live up to the policy rhetoric? One explanation is that it is easier to make foreign policy pronouncements on democracy and human rights in high-level treaties and declarations than it is to translate these into real, material assistance, especially in less fertile terrain for democratisation like that of Central Asia. Yet this could be an argument for greater rather than less effort by external actors. Another explanation is that hard interests, for example, geo-strategic or commercial interests, routinely take precedence over soft interests such as democracy and human rights promotion, with the latter easily marginalised. The challenge for Western governments and inter-governmental organisations is to put »their money where their mouth is«. Yet it is reported that there is debate in Brussels about whether or not to allocate money for a democracy and human rights programme in the new Development Co-operation and Economic Co-operation Instrument (DECEI) for Central Asia that replaces the TACIS programme (International Crisis Group 2006: 26). The increasing differentiation between the CARs is a factor here, one which the EU's regional strategy has been criticised for not taking sufficiently into account (International Crisis Group 2006: 11). Whereas it may be difficult to provide democracy assistance to organisations and activists in Turkmenistan, the more liberal states such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan may offer more opportunities. Indeed, in the case of Kazakhstan, its bid to hold the Presidency of the OSCE in 2009 provides an opportunity for the EU to leverage political reforms in precisely those areas where it has identified democratic regression (see above) in return for its support.

5. Conclusions

The instrumental motivation, the lack of legitimacy and the lack of commitment constitute obstacles to democracy promotion in Central Asia and elsewhere, yet ones which are within the control of external actors themselves. In theory, democracy promotion policies could be implemented in a principled manner, one in which democracy is pursued as a goal in itself, in a consistent, non-partisan and committed way. In practice, this is unlikely to happen in Central Asia. In conclusion, three reasons are outlined why this is so, focusing on competing foreign policy objectives.

5.1 Security and the war on terror

Post 9/11, the emphasis on security and the prosecution of the war on terror, most notably in Afghanistan, has raised the strategic importance of neighbouring Central Asian states as sites of military bases and overflight routes for the US and for NATO. Such bases have also been important for the US and the UK in their illegal war and occupation in Iraq. The prioritisation of military co-operation with Central Asian rulers is likely to entail a demotion of democracy objectives. Even though elements within both the EU and the US administration may continue to focus on political and human rights issues (for instance, the annual US State Department's annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices), the primacy of military co-operation largely overrides such concerns. Indeed, such mixed policy messages are clearly interpreted by Central Asian rulers as indicating that »as valued partners they can pretty much do as they like« (IWPR 2004), with human rights and democracy issues simply ignored.

5.2 Energy security

For both the EU and US, the substantial oil and gas reserves in Kazakhstan (oil and gas), Turkmenistan (gas) and Uzbekistan (gas) constitute a higher-order foreign policy priority than democracy promotion. The EU is especially concerned about its reliance on Russia for its energy needs, with its dependency and vulnerability becoming particularly evident with the gas disputes between Russia and Ukraine in January 2006 and Russia and Belarus in January 2007. Central Asia's energy wealth is perceived as an important means to reduce that dependence on Russia and to enhance the EU's energy security. Similarly, the US government view Central Asia as a region where the West can access non-OPEC-controlled energy (Boyer 2006), with major US oil companies active in Kazakhstan. Already Kazakh oil has begun to be pumped through the US-supported Baku-Tbilisi-Ceylan (BTC) pipeline, commencing in Azerbaijan and terminating at Turkey's Mediterranean coast, with the US proposing further TransCaspian oil and gas pipelines (Olcott 2006: 7). The prioritisation of energy security and the commercial interests of European and American TNCs will serve to stifle criticism of Central Asian governments on democracy and human rights grounds, especially given that the West is in direct competition here with dominant Russian and Chinese interests (Olcott 2006: 7-13).

5.3 Stability versus democratisation

Thus it follows that, in order to protect its security, energy and commercial interests, the US and EU are likely to accord greater importance to the maintenance of political stability in the region than to democratisation efforts. This emphasis is reinforced by fears about the possible rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia and of »weak states« becoming »havens for terrorists«, in US government-speak. Yet, the emphasis on stability over political reform, with direct and indirect support provided to existing rulers, has two likely consequences in Central Asia, both antithetical to democratisation.

First, the authoritarian nature of present ruling elites is reinforced and their grip on power strengthened. The alliance with the West enables Central Asian regimes to repress opposition political parties and non-governmental activist groups of various hues, and the convenient banner of the »war on terror« accords particular legitimacy to crackdowns on Islamist organisations. Indeed, it is argued that the trend in recent years has been towards increased authoritarianism in some Central Asian states, notably Uzbekistan (see quotations from Fiona Hill and Vitaly Ponomarev, cited in IWPR 2004).

Second, more speculatively, a related consequence could be a rise in support for Islamist groups, with repression pushing them into the adoption of violent methods. The West would be culpable in such developments. Increased support for radical Islamism could arise not only as a result of greater internal political repression, but also from a discrediting of »Western democracy« through the association of the US and EU with oppressive and corrupt regimes, both »willing to forsake [their] principles in exchange for economic or military advantage« (Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis report cited in IWPR 2004).

In conclusion, as with human rights protection and promotion, in theory democracy promotion can be a legitimate activity, though largely depending on the manner in which it is implemented. In Central Asia, this would require a clear and unequivocal commitment to civil and political rights and democratisation on the part of self-styled democracy promoters. This is unlikely to happen. Democracy promotion is likely to remain trumped by other foreign policy objectives, or, alternatively, perceived as instrumental towards their realisation, and thus disposable. The rhetoric of democracy promotion will probably be retained as mild pressure on authoritarian governments, but aimed primarily at providing a veneer of respectability to the West's pursuit of its geo-strategic and commercial interests. Rather than democracy promotion, one consequence is of democracy demotion, with prospects for internally-driven democratisation in Central Asia receding backwards.

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