

*The* UN Role  
*In* Promoting Democracy  
Between Ideals and Reality

“The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free, voting procedures.”

Edited by Edward Newman and Roland Rich

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# The UN role in promoting democracy: Between ideals and reality

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## Introduction: Approaching democratization policy

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*Roland Rich and Edward Newman*

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Democracy, in both theory and practice, is the subject of a huge field of literature.<sup>1</sup> Within this literature, the international dimensions of democracy are increasingly understood and explored. Democracy has even come to be seen by some practitioners as something of a political panacea.<sup>2</sup> It is widely accepted as a universal value.<sup>3</sup> Yet the role of the United Nations – the embodiment of international society – in the promotion of democracy remains understudied, even though the organization has adopted democracy promotion as an important objective:

The phenomenon of democratization has had a marked impact on the United Nations. Just as newly-independent States turned to the United Nations for support during the era of decolonization, so today, following another wave of accessions to Statehood and political independence, Member States are turning to the United Nations for support in democratization. While this has been most visible in the requests for electoral assistance received since 1989 from more than 60 States – nearly one-third of the Organization's Membership – virtually no area of United Nations activity has been left untouched. The peace-keeping mandates entrusted to the United Nations now often include both the restoration of democracy and the protection of human rights. United Nations departments, agencies and programmes have been called on to help States draft constitutions, create independent systems for the administration of justice, provide police forces that respect and enforce the rule of law, de-politicize military establishments, and establish national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights. They also have been asked by many States engaged in democratization to help

encourage and facilitate the active participation of citizens in political processes, and to foster the emergence of a productive civil society, including responsible and independent communications media.<sup>4</sup>

This volume explores and questions the modalities, effectiveness, and controversies of the UN's work in promoting and assisting democracy. It considers if the United Nations can help to build the foundations of democracy and whether, as an "external actor", it can have a substantive positive impact upon the development of democratic governance inside countries. The issues involved are approached from various angles. Thematic studies examine how the United Nations operates from the viewpoint of international law and within the theory and practice of democracy promotion. Focused chapters look specifically at techniques such as the operating mandates under which the United Nations works, the transitional authorities through which it operates, and the electoral design choices open to it. The volume also examines experience in this field through a series of case studies. "The pathway to any democracy is idiosyncratic, beset by a host of domestic political and cultural concerns particular to the nation in question."<sup>5</sup> And thus five case studies are selected to span time and space. The case studies are from three continents and begin with the UN's first efforts in this field, in Namibia, then pass through Cambodia, Kosovo, and East Timor, and end with what was thought, when this research project was first mapped out, to be the latest case, Afghanistan. Even as the eventual outcome of the democratization process in Afghanistan remains in the balance, the world's attention has shifted dramatically to the new challenge of 2003 – Iraq. While it is impossible for this volume to await the outcome of the post-war state-building process in Iraq, that situation is already casting its shadow over the UN system and indeed the international system as a whole. Clearly many of the issues raised in this volume will come under severe test in Iraq.

There is a natural tendency for high-profile cases to monopolize attention. These are the cases that demand attention from decision-makers, the media, and the public alike. But they do not tell the whole story of the democratization process and the UN's role therein. There are therefore also chapters on the work of the United Nations Development Programme and of the Electoral Assistance Unit of the Political Affairs Division of the UN Secretariat, explaining how the UN's work in democratization is a daily chore with long-term horizons. These chapters provide a useful counterweight to the balance of the book that mainly describes and analyses the dramatic and large operations.

The thrust of this project is therefore to ask, and hopefully to respond

constructively, to the where, when, what, and how questions of the UN's involvement with democratization. The aim is to provide insights and provoke debate through critical analysis. But before launching into the analytical issues and attempting to draw conclusions, there is a preliminary question that should be addressed.

### Why should the United Nations be involved in democratization?

The word "democracy" does not appear in the UN Charter. It is not one of the stated purposes of the United Nations to foster democracy, to initiate the process of democratization, or to legitimize other actors' efforts in this field. Democracy is not a precondition for UN membership; candidate members need only be "peace-loving states which accept the obligations in the present Charter and ... are able and willing to carry out these obligations".<sup>6</sup> Many members of the United Nations are not multi-party democracies in their domestic political structures, and many more could not be said to be liberal democracies. The United Nations is silent on other features of domestic political organization. It is agnostic as between republics and constitutional monarchies. It does not choose between presidential or parliamentary systems. It is ambivalent on the issue of bicameral as opposed to unicameral parliaments. Yet it propagates electoral democracy as the basic governance template for all nations to follow and the members appear to accept this view, or at least the UN's espousal of this view.

To understand the UN's penchant for democracy it might be worthwhile to look at the basic purposes of the United Nations as set out in the Preamble to the Charter and ask whether the UN's work in favour of democracy flows from these purposes.

#### *"The scourge of war"*

The UN's first purpose is to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. Does democratization help avoid war? This is the question addressed by the debate on democratic peace theory. The basic thesis draws on concepts first advanced in the eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant on perpetual peace and on recent empirical work analysing international wars since 1817.<sup>7</sup> The conclusion from the study of wars over the past two centuries is that while democratic states often go to war against non-democratic states, they generally remain at peace with each other. The length of the period under study and the apparent consistency and

strength of the observation of this “democratic peace” have led some scholars to draw the conclusion that democratization will have a substantial peace dividend.<sup>8</sup>

An acceptance of democratic peace theory would fully justify the UN’s efforts in this area. The proposed link between peace and democracy would mean the UN’s democratization work could be seen as a proactive means of ending the threat of the scourge of war. It clearly addresses the very purpose for which the United Nations was established. There are two ways of judging the theory: examining how widely it is accepted in the academic community, and gauging the extent to which policy-makers know, accept, and rely on it.

Samuel Huntington summarizes the importance of the issue when he says, “the democratic peace thesis is one of the most significant propositions to come out of social science in recent decades. If true, it has crucially important implications for both theory and policy.”<sup>9</sup> The strength of the thesis comes from the robustness of the statistical evidence in support, largely provided by R. J. Rummel.<sup>10</sup> One way of reading Rummel’s findings is to conclude that between 1816 and 1991, of the 353 pairings of nations fighting in major international wars, none occurred between two democracies. Such a startling statistical correlation is rare in the social sciences and provides a powerful foundation for democratic peace theory.

Debate continues, however, about the possible reason why consolidated democracies do not go to war against each other. Argumentation revolves around a number of hypotheses.<sup>11</sup> One theory claims that the checks and balances inherent in democratic decision-making act as a brake on decisions to go to war which is doubly effective when both sides of an argument are applying the brakes. Or perhaps there is a greater identification amongst the citizens of consolidated democracies, leading the peoples to a more sympathetic disposition towards each other through shared beliefs, making each less like “the other” and more like “us”. Rational choice theorists also posit explanations based on democracies’ greater competence in reaching non-zero-sum outcomes of not going to war. These debates are in the hands of social theorists and are unlikely to lead to any settled conclusions for a while.

There has been significant academic criticism of the democratic peace theory. Some of it inevitably focuses on the underlying definitions employed by Rummel and others to allow them to come to their conclusion.<sup>12</sup> More disturbing is the argument that while there may be some truth in the proposition in so far as consolidated democracies are concerned, transitional democracies have shown themselves to be particularly war-like.<sup>13</sup> For the United Nations, this poses an acute dilemma. If democratization is based on the purpose of securing world peace, one of



the short-term consequences may be an upsurge of war. Another problem with democratic peace theory is that it deals solely with interstate conflict and has little to say about internal national conflicts. Because many of the current trouble spots the United Nations must deal with are within the context of a single nation-state, democratic peace theory has little to offer in this regard.

The next question is the extent to which democratic peace theory has entered the policy domain. An important signal in this regard was President Clinton's 1994 State of the Union address, in which he based a key plank of his foreign policy on this theory when he said: "Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere." Democracy-building worldwide became a key plank of the Clinton years, culminating in the launching of the Community of Democracies, which had as one of its underlying premises "the interdependence between peace, development, human rights and democracy".<sup>14</sup>

The Bush administration maintained an interest in democracy as an organizing principle in its foreign policy and has continued to support the Community of Democracies initiative, but, distracted by issues of terrorism, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the enthusiasm waned. Democracy promotion nevertheless continues to be a significant plank of the foreign policy and international development programmes of most Western democracies, and democratic peace theory is a key motivation.<sup>15</sup> Support can also be discerned among developing countries, given that 60 of the 115 participants and observers at the 2002 Seoul Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies were developing countries.<sup>16</sup>

One can conclude that there is solid backing, both academic and in practice, for the proposition that democratization will help avoid the scourge of war. But in neither field is the support complete, nor can it be said that a consensus has formed around this proposition. The United Nations is on solid ground in its democratization rationale based on this theory, but perhaps further justification is required in the other purposes of the United Nations.

#### *"Faith in fundamental human rights"*

The UN's second purpose revolves around respect for human rights. The question thus becomes whether it is established and accepted that there is a linkage between democracy and human rights. There is now a considerable body of literature on this subject<sup>17</sup> and an authoritative pronouncement by UN members in the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Plan of Action,<sup>18</sup> which established the clear link between human rights and democracy when it declared in paragraph 8:

Democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Democracy is based on the freely expressed will of the people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives. In the context of the above, the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels should be universal and conducted without conditions attached. The international community should support the strengthening and promoting of democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the entire world.

The interdependence of human rights and democracy manifests itself in several ways. There is a strong argument that individuals have a right to participate in “genuine periodic elections” as required under Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The meaning of “genuine periodic elections” is also becoming clearer with the recent decisions of the Human Rights Committee and the Commission on Human Rights spelling out that these must be free and fair multi-party elections.<sup>19</sup>

Another linkage is emerging in the suggested right to democratic governance forcefully posited by Thomas Franck.<sup>20</sup> The argument in favour of this thesis flows not only from the perspective of individual entitlement but also from the perspective of international legitimacy being conferred on governments coming to office by democratic means.<sup>21</sup> Yet until the right to democratic governance is enshrined in a widely adopted legal instrument, it is difficult to dispense with the term “emerging” in describing its place in the panoply of human rights.

A further linkage is the understanding in human rights law, as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that democratic practice can mediate any limitations on the exercise of human rights.<sup>22</sup> Article 29 sets out the means of limiting the exercise of human rights, authorizing only “such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare of a democratic society”.

A final linkage may exist through the operation of the right of self-determination. Common Article 1 of the two major human rights covenants enshrines the right of self-determination for “all peoples” and asserts that “by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status”. There have been suggestions that a form of internal self-determination is developing, providing the people of a state with a continuing right to self-determination in the choice of political systems and leaders.<sup>23</sup> This could well become yet another foundation for democracy in human rights law. But at present the more common interpretation of this right makes it

more analogous to a right of decolonization than to a continuing right to democratic choice.<sup>24</sup>

The linkage between human rights and democracy is certainly sufficiently strong to be yet another rationale for the UN's involvement in democratization. The practice of the United Nations is increasingly to link the two issues in its work and to design interventions and supporting programmes with the effect of reinforcing respect for human rights with the building of democratic governance processes.

*“To promote social progress and better standards of life”*

Having found strong support for the propositions that democracy promotes peace and human rights, perhaps the most difficult question arises at this point when considering the third fundamental purpose of the United Nations: does democracy promote development? Initial thinking was that democracy depends on development, and that a certain level of income enjoyed by a large urban middle class was required before democracy could take hold.<sup>25</sup> This rather élitist concept of the flowering of democracy was a fundamental influence on the early shape of the international community's development assistance strategy, placing emphasis on economic growth, creation of export industries, and trickle-down models of social uplift. Jagdish Bhagwati wrote an influential book in 1966 in which he argued that developing countries faced a “cruel dilemma” because they had to choose between democracy and development.<sup>26</sup>

That early thinking has been replaced by a more sophisticated analysis. Bhagwati himself has had a change of heart and now believes that “the quality of democracy greatly affects the quality of development”.<sup>27</sup> Other commentators stopped using the concept of development as a precondition for democracy and instead speak of certain factors, such as literacy rates, limited income inequality, and substantial economic activity independent of the state, as facilitating the development of democracy.<sup>28</sup> Amartya Sen points out the error of seeing democracy as an end product of a largely economic process. He argues that it was wrong to ask if a country is “fit for democracy”; the correct way to look at the issue of economic and social development is to understand that a country becomes “fit through democracy”.<sup>29</sup>

The relationship between democracy and development will remain a subject of continuing research by theorists. The link between governance and development is now well established, and it is being complemented by a growing acceptance of the link between democracy and good governance. There is certainly a sufficient acceptance of the link to be another justification of why the United Nations is involved in democratization work.

There may remain continuing questions about the extent of the relevance of democracy to each of the three purposes of the United Nations discussed above. But when the link between democracy and these three major purposes of the United Nations is seen together, it constitutes a powerful case. All the more so when one considers the reinforcing nature of peace, human rights, and development to each other and the role that democracy plays in achieving each of these goals.

### Outline of the volume

The first section of the volume raises a comprehensive range of issues, challenges, and controversies related to democracy promotion and assistance. These thematic papers deal with the genealogy, normative context, and justification of democracy promotion, the legal and political framework, and some of the difficulties of this activity. They highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the UN's democracy promotion, and set the scene for the case studies that follow.

Tom J. Farer's chapter, "The promotion of democracy: International law and norms", considers if the normative framework of the United Nations permits it to influence the institutions and structures of governance within member states, if it has the legal authority to promote or defend "democratic" forms of government, and, if so, by what means. Farer demonstrates that the United Nations has indeed acted to influence the allocation of authority and power within states. The organization was a major facilitator for self-determination, and its capacity to promote democratic forms of government when it has the consent of the affected state has been demonstrated. Only where democracy promotion does not enjoy the consent of the target state can there be any reasonable doubt about the legal authority of the United Nations or its agents, in line with the domestic jurisdiction clause of the UN Charter. Even then, state sovereignty has never been inviolable; it has never been absolute in the sense of precluding one state from taking any legitimate interest in what was going on in another, including issues relating to governance and human rights.

In concrete terms, the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights states that "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government . . . [and] shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage". Regional and global norms, institutions, and legal instruments have furthered this democratic entitlement. The United Nations has taken a role in the coercive promotion of human rights as well as in more functional technical assistance. In terms of coercive action, this chapter examines the cases of Somalia,

Haiti, and Sierra Leone and the implications they hold for the legal status of democracy and democracy-promoting activities. Finally, Farer's chapter examines the legal basis of a number of assertions that suggest a central – and potentially coercive – UN role in democracy promotion. These propositions are:

- that the United Nations should refuse to seat representatives of states in cases where they have overthrown a government elected in internationally monitored and certified elections
- among the member states of treaty regimes that have made democratic government a condition of participation, intervention in order to defend or restore a government elected in an internationally monitored and certified process is presumptively legitimate and should not be deemed an “enforcement action” under Article 53 of the Charter
- requests for Security Council authorization of military intervention to establish or restore elected governments that are not members of pro-democracy treaty regimes should be denied unless they are related to the occurrence in the target state of crimes against humanity or a humanitarian crisis resulting from the collapse of political order
- military intervention to overthrow a widely recognized unelected government not engaged in crimes against humanity should continue to be characterized as “aggression”
- in peace operations the United Nations should continue to treat democratic governance as the only plausible basis for a sustainable politics in conflicted societies, while recognizing that the particular form of democracy must be shaped primarily by the local context.

The decision-making process and language of UN mandates are of enormous importance to the development of the legal and normative framework of UN democracy promotion and assistance. Roland Rich's chapter, “Crafting Security Council mandates”, examines the evolution of Security Council terminology relating to state-building operations and democracy assistance, and demonstrates how Security Council resolutions are the product of both law and politics. The terms of Council mandates are critical to establishing the legality of the UN's actions. Subsequently, the question of who drafts the resolutions is an important element in determining objectives and intentions. In the post-Cold War world, the Council has been operating in a far more collegial manner. Nevertheless, the influence of the major powers in drafting resolutions is clear, and there are often concerns of “permanent five” dominance. A critical question of this chapter is whether there is a coherent and cumulative process that builds on the style and terminology of the previous resolutions to establish an intentional pattern. The chapter suggests that there has indeed been a cumulative process. By looking at the language of resolutions in cases including Namibia, Angola, Western Sahara, East

Timor, Haiti, Kosovo, and Sierra Leone, Rich shows how the terminology is increasingly leaning towards the importance of governance in long-term solutions to conflict and instability.

However, this is not without problems. Mandates are constructed based on certain premises. One of those premises is the coherence of the political agreement negotiated by the disputing parties. If the agreements are negotiated in bad faith, or are beyond the ability of the signatories to implement, or are overtaken by subsequent events, the mandate that flows from them may be inappropriate. As a result of this, or because of the nature of building a consensus, resolutions are sometimes ambiguous. On the basis of experience, the chapter makes a number of conclusions: mandates need to be appraised on their clarity and practicality, with measurable targets in terms of performance, cost, timeliness, and closure. They must also have a defined division of labour.

Much of the UN's work in democracy assistance involves modest technical guidance and support. However, in exceptional circumstances, the United Nations is entrusted with a major role in upholding public authority, security, and governance. Simon Chesterman's chapter, "Building democracy through benevolent autocracy", considers the challenges of consultation and accountability in major UN transitional administrations such as in Bosnia, Eastern Slavonia, Kosovo, and East Timor. This chapter is guided by a number of core questions: how does one help a population prepare for democratic governance and the rule of law by imposing a form of benevolent autocracy? And to what extent should the transitional administration itself should be bound by the principles that it seeks to encourage in the local population?

In the case of Kosovo, Chesterman observes that the OSCE Ombudsman came to a damning conclusion on UNMIK'S record:

UNMIK is not structured according to democratic principles, does not function in accordance with the rule of law, and does not respect important international human rights norms. The people of Kosovo are therefore deprived of protection of their basic rights and freedoms three years after the end of the conflict by the very entity set up to guarantee them.

There is a paradox here: consultation and accountability and local representation are central to democracy, yet in post-conflict situations democracy must be balanced against peace and stability. This chapter considers the different forms of consultation with local populations that have evolved in the various operations as a necessary precursor to the transfer of some or all power to local actors. It also examines whether a transitional administration itself can or should be held accountable for its actions in either a legal or a political sense. Chesterman concludes that

there is a contradiction between the means and the ends of transitional administration, which stems from a reluctance to acknowledge the military force that gives it legitimacy. He argues that it is misleading to expect the international presence in territories such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and East Timor to depend on local consent or “ownership”. Consent of the local population is not the starting point. Accountability of international actors will necessarily be limited during the opening phases of an operation.

Elections are a mainstay of democratic politics; according to some definitions of democracy, they are the defining characteristic. In any context an electoral system attempts to result in a system of government that combines and balances a number of values: accountability, participation, pluralism, representation, stability, efficiency. The timing and modalities of electoral assistance are critical. Benjamin Reilly’s chapter, “Elections in post-conflict societies”, argues that elections are not always conducive to post-conflict peace-building. He observes that variations in electoral procedures can play a key role in determining whether political competition evolves along extremist or centrist lines, and hence in developing moderate and broad-based political parties. Three main areas of variation are crucial influences on the shape of post-conflict politics in most countries. First, there is the question of timing: should post-conflict elections be held as early as possible, so as to fast-track the process of establishing a new regime? Or should they be postponed until peaceful political routines and issues have been able to come to prominence? Second, there are the mechanics of elections themselves: who runs the elections? How are voters enrolled? What electoral formula is used? Third, there is the issue of political parties. Especially in cases of weak civil society, political parties are the key link between masses and élites, and play a crucial role in building a sustainable democratic polity. As Reilly observes, “there is the overarching issue of under what circumstances elections help to build a new democratic order, and under what circumstances they can undermine democracy and pave the way for a return to conflict”.

Laurence Whitehead’s chapter, “Democratization with the benefit of hindsight: The changing international components”, reflects on the arguments and presumptions of the “democratic transitions” theories and how they relate to the international dimensions of democracy and democratization. In fact he observes that much of the seminal literature on democratization neglected the role of international actors and norms. Democratization was viewed as internally driven and most likely to succeed when external destabilizing pressures could be minimized. The relevant unit of analysis was therefore the state (or national political regime), and attention was focused on those states that possessed sufficient internal

autonomy to screen out international intrusions. The situation today appears quite different. In re-evaluating democratic transition, Whitehead considers the balance between the external and internal drivers of regime change; the privileged site of state sovereignty as the main locus of attention; the new emphasis on democracy as security, rather than democracy as liberation; and the consequent appropriation of democratic discourse and rhetoric as justification for potentially neo-imperial initiatives that can now apparently be pursued unilaterally, without regard for countervailing responses.

The second section of the volume, *Perspectives from the United Nations*, provides an analysis of the practical work of the United Nations in democracy assistance, and some consideration of the conceptual and practical challenges; the chapters are also written from within the constraints that exist for authors writing as UN staff members. Robin Ludwig begins this section with an overview of UN electoral work in “The UN’s electoral assistance: Challenges, accomplishments, prospects”. She demonstrates how, since 1989, the United Nations has become an important source of international support and expertise in the conduct of democratic elections. This built in some ways upon the experience of decolonization and the UN Charter “principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples”. The end of the Cold War gave real impetus to international democracy assistance. The United Nations was called upon to assume a new, more active role in peacemaking and conflict resolution, and growing international emphasis was also placed on its work in the promotion and protection of human rights. At the same time, international negotiations on a variety of long-term conflicts began to show signs of success, and the issue of governance and democracy became integral with long-term conflict settlement. Nevertheless, as Ludwig observes, the beginnings of UN electoral assistance were not uncontroversial, due to sensitivities relating to sovereignty and interference in domestic affairs.

Nevertheless, in 1991 the General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled “Enhancing the effectiveness of the principle of periodic and genuine elections”. With this resolution, the General Assembly established an organizational structure for the provision of electoral assistance. A UN focal point for electoral assistance activities was established, and the mechanisms and processes of electoral assistance were developed. Ludwig describes how that process works – starting from a written request by a member state to the Secretary-General, or to the focal point. The varying forms of assistance described by Ludwig include the supervision of elections, verification of elections, organization and conduct of elections, coordination and support for elections, domestic election observation, and technical assistance. Ludwig concludes that one of the most important lessons of UN electoral experience over the past



decade is the evolution of a more realistic view of the role that elections can play in the creation of democracy. In the early 1990s many in the international community believed that the successful conduct of an election would establish the basis for the growth of a viable democracy. Experience demonstrated, however, that although elections contribute substantially to democratization, elections alone are not enough.

Edward Newman's chapter, "UN democracy promotion: Comparative advantages and constraints", raises a number of conceptual and practical challenges related to democracy assistance and considers the potential of various actors, especially the United Nations. His chapter considers if "external" international actors – such as hegemonic states, global organizations, regional organizations, financial institutions, and NGOs – can have a decisive, substantial, and enduring impact upon domestic transition and democratization, or whether assistance programmes only have a positive impact where the society in question is already moving towards democracy. He considers if top-down government assistance programmes are the most effective, or those that work with civil society and non-governmental groups, and whether the promotion of democracy in post-conflict and divided societies has a significant role in conflict settlement and reconciliation. Newman also considers what values or models of democracy external agents such as the United Nations or the USA bring with them to the democratization process, and how successful democracy assistance activities have been in terms of consolidating democracy in transitional societies.

This chapter concludes that the United Nations has had a modestly successful although not dramatic impact upon the countries in which it has assisted democracy and democratization. However, the extent to which durable institutions have been created in some of these cases is questionable, and the quality of democracy – in terms of accountability, transparency in political decision-making, participation and inclusion, and a constructive civil society – is also questionable. In most cases the United Nations can only facilitate progress when local conditions are conducive to this. When conditions are not, or when the UN's approach is not entirely appropriate for the nature of local conditions, success is unlikely. UN assistance is most fruitful when a convergence of forces – both within the society and internationally – coalesce around a democratic future and broad acceptance of democratic rules of the game.

Richard Ponzio's chapter deals with "UNDP experience in long-term democracy assistance". He describes how the UNDP made the promotion of democratic governance a core operational activity in the 1990s. Focusing on development assistance, this has involved support for electoral management bodies and parliaments to facilitate constitutional reforms and decentralization processes, giving primacy to building indigenous

governing capacity. This often stands in marked contrast with – but complementary to – short-term interventions to stabilize a country and build the foundations for recovery and peace. His chapter provides a short review of the evolution of the UNDP’s involvement in long-term democracy assistance, and raises a number of research questions in scrutinizing two distinct types of UNDP engagement, namely electoral systems support and assistance to legislative bodies. What is the UNDP’s record in building indigenous capacity within formal and informal democratic institutions? To what extent is it possible to draw conclusions and “best practices” from limited experience in different contexts? In examining these questions, the chapter contributes to the broader and more complicated question: does the UN system, through agencies such as the UNDP, have a decisive and enduring impact upon democratization in a country?

While each country setting poses unique challenges, some global lessons can be gleaned from UNDP successes and failures in election-related activities since the 1970s. The UNDP’s emerging comparative advantage lies in helping countries establish independent and permanent electoral bodies through long-term institutional capacity development. Electoral assistance has provided the UNDP and the UN system with a strategic entry point for broader, long-term democratic governance programming. Successful elections are critical in establishing political legitimacy within countries seeking to make a transition towards democracy and away from more authoritarian (and sometimes violent) rule. Effective civic and voter-education programmes, both prior to and following elections, help expand democratic participation. Donor coordination and resource mobilization are UNDP services that can be essential to the preparation of an election. And the UNDP provides valuable support to the implementation of technical assistance programmes for elections.

The final section of the volume deals with cases of major UN democracy assistance, spanning a broad historical and geographic range. The authors have all been personally engaged in the issues, they have a stake in the outcomes, and they provide an immediacy to their chapters that is often missing from the analyses of the more dispassionate observer. Henning Melber’s chapter, “Decolonization and democratization: The United Nations and Namibia’s transition to democracy”, deals with one of the first such cases. The historical context was important to the UN’s electoral assistance in Namibia because this took place in the context of the country’s transition to independence. His chapter explores the role played by the United Nations in contributing to a democratic post-colonial political order.

Melber argues that the United Nations played a crucial, if not decisive, role through the UN Transitional Assistance Group with supervisory

powers for the transition of Namibia to an internationally accepted sovereign state. Indeed, the United Nations can be considered as the midwife to the birth of the Republic of Namibia, proclaimed in 1990. The democratic political system established as the framework for the governing of this society has since been shaped to a considerable extent both directly and indirectly by the United Nations and its agencies involved in the process.

However, Melber argues that the United Nations was more of a broker in the transition to internationally accepted independence than an agency promoting democracy as its priority. And, like a number of other post-independence African countries, Namibia was characterized by a liberation movement turning into a political party to occupy political power. In this case SWAPO consolidated its dominant position and expanded control over the state apparatus. Its legitimacy was based on being the representative of the majority of the people. Yet Melber questions the commitment of the ruling élite to true democratic principles and values. The track records of the African liberation movements – both with regard to their internal practices during the wars of liberation as well as their lack of democratic virtues and respect for the protection of human rights once in power – are far from positive examples. Namibia's first decade of independence witnessed a constant consolidation of political power and control by the former liberation movement, and Namibia's political culture reveals more than a decade after independence some disturbing features of deterioration. Melber concludes that the Namibian case of decolonization was guided by the goal of achieving a more or less democratically legitimate transition towards independence, but not the firm entrenchment of democracy.

Sorpong Peou's chapter, "The UN's modest impact on Cambodia's democracy", concludes that the best that can be said for the UN role in democratizing Cambodian politics is that it has been "positive but modest". His chapter asserts that Cambodia would have remained undemocratic had the United Nations (and individual member states of the UN system) not intervened. In terms of the legacy of democracy assistance, Peou observes a number of positive achievements that he partly attributes to the UN presence. The constitution (largely drafted by UN advisers and adopted after the 1993 election) has survived; Cambodia continues to have a multi-party electoral system and has thus far held national elections on a regular basis; political violence has been steadily declining; and political parties seem to accept election outcomes more readily. However, this alone does not qualify Cambodian democracy as liberal and embedded. The United Nations was unable to disarm the Cambodian signatories, a circumstance that perpetuated the conflict until 1998. The United Nations by itself has had a very limited impact on the

promotion of equitable media access during elections. The Cambodian authorities failed to respond to UN pressure for equitable media access, or comply with UN demands for law enforcement in relation to electoral laws. Cambodian authorities also tended to ignore repeated UN calls for political justice. In short, Peou argues that the UN success in promoting democracy should not be exaggerated. Cambodia's cultural and socio-economic factors made it difficult for the United Nations to play a more effective role in the country. At the time of the UN's arrival Cambodia had no genuine democratic culture, and there were clear limitations in terms of what the United Nations could achieve.

Ylber Hysa's chapter, "Kosovo: A permanent international protectorate?", addresses a complex case of international democracy assistance. Democracy assistance activities in Kosovo have occurred against a background of vicious state persecution, ethnic conflict, secessionist pressures, and international military involvement. This is not an auspicious context for the fostering of pluralism and democratic values. Nevertheless, in the wake of the NATO military campaign a broad range of reconstruction efforts were initiated, including education, police and security, supporting civil society, and democracy assistance. This has involved a number of very delicate challenges, relating to the position of the remaining minority Serbs in Kosovo and their willingness – or not – to participate in the democratic process, the need to establish a secure environment, the transformation and demilitarization of the Kosovar guerilla movement, the reconstruction of the economy, and elections.

Hysa concludes that the UN interim mission in Kosovo is a unique and ambitious UN engagement. Not only is it a peacemaking and peace-keeping mission, but at the same time it is a mission engaged in the administration and building of democratic institutions. It has required the creation of a completely new administration that started with a transitional phase and ended with the emergence of free local and general elections. Even though the United Nations is seized with the importance of its mission in Kosovo, its bureaucratized structure and a multiplicity of external actors place it in a poor position to discharge the ambitious objective set for it by the international community. Ultimately, he concludes, it must be the people of Kosovo who determine the fate of their land and who must provide the decisive input for the successful democratization of Kosovo.

A case that learnt lessons from Kosovo – although not necessarily all the right lessons – was the UN's involvement in East Timor. Tanja Hohe's chapter, "Delivering feudal democracy in East Timor", describes how the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) had been given a mandate to rebuild and administer a country that was reduced to ruins by the Indonesian military and local militias after a suc-

successful vote by the East Timorese for independence in 1999. A central theme of her chapter is that state-building and democratization are particularly difficult to achieve. She argues that whilst certain institutions were successfully established, UN state-building in East Timor was ultimately insufficient and inappropriate in its approach. It ignored local realities and functioned without specialized local knowledge. The international community focused solely on the establishment of Western institutions at the national level, which were not appropriate to local conditions.

An uninformed international community was not aware of how different local politics was from the forms taken by modern democratic states, and how these indigenous traits could undermine any state-building programme. The result, she argues, is that the institutions of Western democracy have not taken root in East Timor. The result of the mix of local social hierarchy, national political factions competing for exclusive authority, and the UN's centralization and absolutism has been the establishment of a type of feudal political culture. While internal constraints of the UN organization have been widely addressed, the intricacies of local realities on the ground are an additional dimension yet to be adequately appreciated. The grass-roots therefore need special attention, as this is where the majority of the population live and their understanding is an important ingredient for success. Their participation in the state-building process and a basic understanding of state institutions are crucial. The United Nations, she argues, has not yet developed effective methods to involve local populations, and has not even focused adequately on this problem.

Finally, Amin Saikal focuses on the United Nations and democratization in Afghanistan, which reflects a quite different case to Kosovo and East Timor. He recalls that the United Nations has had a long involvement in Afghanistan, directed at bringing peace and stability to the country. Whilst previous efforts have been modest, the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan in 2002 opened an opportunity for the United Nations to play a central role in helping the Afghans to settle their internal differences and build a lasting, popularly legitimated political order. However, the attempt to promote democracy is fraught with difficulty. The Afghan people, who are made up of various traditional Muslim micro-societies, divided along ethno-tribal, linguistic, sectarian, and personality lines, have never had a tradition or culture of democracy. Saikal's chapter explores the history of the Afghan conflict and the UN's role in search of a peaceful end to it; and evaluates the UN's role in the post-Taliban settlement of the Afghan conflict in terms of helping the Afghans to create the necessary conditions for the growth of a stable and workable political order. Finally, he discusses the steps which have been

taken in which the United Nations has been involved in support of democratization in Afghanistan. Perhaps one of the most critical questions in Afghanistan concerns the nature of its state and society. Resolution 1378, adopted on 14 November 2001, authorized the United Nations to play a “central role” in helping the Afghan people to establish a transitional administration for the formation of a new government. But Afghanistan continues to provide a classic case of a weak state with a strong society, according to Saikal. Historically, Afghanistan’s micro-societies have operated both individually and in alliance with one another, and the dynamics of their relations amongst themselves and with a central authority have been critical in defining the powers of the central authority and the nature of the Afghan state.

There is no chapter on Iraq, the war having concluded and the reconstruction effort begun as this volume was nearing completion. It is already clear that the situation in Iraq presents the United Nations and the international community with its sternest test. Among the many challenges being faced is the challenge of democratization. As one commentator has already pointed out:

Iraq has all the characteristics that have impeded democratic transitions elsewhere: a large, impoverished population deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines; no previous experience with democracy; and a track record of maintaining stability only under the grip of a strongly autocratic government. The United States enjoys no clear advantage in trying to develop a new political system for Iraq. It has no historical ties to the country and little understanding of Iraqi culture and society. Many Iraqis resent the United States as an occupying power.<sup>30</sup>

### Pulling the strands together

The five case studies, the description of UN development assistance for democracy-building, and the various thematic chapters are eloquent testimony to a simple truth: the United Nations is engaged in a vast and ambitious enterprise. The people engaged in this work come from many different walks of life. They include political leaders and civil society leaders, soldiers and police, lawyers and judges, international civil servants and local bureaucrats, development specialists and democracy specialists. Given the number of talented people involved over the past dozen years, it is not surprising that this volume does not pretend to have discovered a large truth that somehow eluded all its predecessors. That is because there is no magic formula for success. But pulling together the strands of the various chapters provides interesting insights. The chapters were written from particular country or specialist perspectives.

They were written by academics, practitioners, and engaged activists. Yet common themes emerge from the chapters that may assist in further refining and improving the UN's work in the field. The themes can usefully be grouped under three broad headings: managing time, making trade-offs, and mastering techniques.

### *Managing time*

Time is never an ally; it is always the remorseless enemy. This is true of virtually every situation the United Nations must deal with, from building states out of the rubble of war to assisting local authorities prepare for impending elections. In dealing with democratization questions, the United Nations works to many timetables, each more pressing than the last. Militant groups are often standing-off uneasily waiting for an opportunity to seize a speedy victory rather than engage in the tortuously slow work of compromise and reconciliation. Local people are impatient for security and normality to return to their lives. Peacekeepers and parachuted civil administrators are working through their allotted time before their successors begin their own steep learning curves. The major financial contributors are nervously watching the meter tick, knowing that each day represents millions of dollars in costs to their taxpayers. And the international community, fed by a frenetic media, finds it hard to maintain focus for long as it is beckoned to switch its attention to the next urgent situation.

Working to this time pressure, the United Nations and its fellow democracy promoters are confronted with the problem of promoting democracy while all the time knowing that the eventual solution will ultimately only be found in generational change. Democracy is far more than the holding of a transitional or post-conflict election. It is the building of a political system that has to survive the inevitable manipulation from insiders, the necessary alternation among power holders, and the attempts at usurpation by ambitious groups. It is a political system that must surmount the disappointment of defeated candidates, the continuing despair of marginalized communities, and the exasperation of the intelligentsia with the slow pace of reform. Democracy is both a system of working institutions and a viable political culture. Both aspects need time to establish themselves profoundly in any polity. The amount of time needed for such profound change cannot be measured in a financial year, a mandate period, or even a five-year plan. It is generational. Yet, of course, the United Nations does not have the luxury of that much time.

The most striking manifestation of the problem of management of time by the United Nations in its major national democracy-building programmes can be summarized in two words pregnant with consequences:

“exit strategy”. The problem that led to the push for exit strategies can perhaps best be seen from one of the continuing UN peacekeeping programmes, the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan. Set up in 1949, UNMOGIP was deployed to supervise the cease-fire agreed between India and Pakistan in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Since renewed hostilities in 1971, UNMOGIP monitors the cease-fire called for by the UN Security Council. So, over half a century later, even though one of the two disputing parties considers the mandate to have lapsed, the international community continues to pay almost \$10 million each year to have 68 international personnel “supervise” a cease-fire.<sup>31</sup> UNMOGIP has simply become part of the scenery. Its continued existence is not due to what it might be able to achieve but because of the possible diplomatic difficulties of ending the mission. Hence the understandable call for exit strategies.

Many of the case studies and thematic chapters point to problems posed by the pressure to bring major UN operations in the field to a close. The tendency to see the post-conflict national elections as a proper time for such a withdrawal places great pressure to hold the election as quickly as possible and then leave the local political forces to grapple with a new and difficult system. Cost pressures and changing priorities as new crises emerge add to the momentum for withdrawal of the United Nations. The question needs to be asked as to whether it is wise to jeopardize a significant investment by withdrawing precipitously. There are criticisms that this was the case in Cambodia, and fears that this may be the case in East Timor.<sup>32</sup> Yet where a region has the resources and will-power to support a more deliberate and engaged strategy, as do the Europeans in the Balkans, time pressure becomes far less pressing, horizons broaden, and democratization plans become more elaborate.

Accepting the inevitability of pressure for an exit strategy, the United Nations needs to plan around this with a well-thought-through entry strategy. A coherent entry strategy entails an understanding of the limits of UN effectiveness, an appreciation of the areas of UN comparative advantage, and a system of setting priorities and following a process of sequencing. The entry strategy begins with the international debate and passes through the drafting of the mandate. There is a tendency in the course of this process to adopt unrealistically ambitious goals and time-frames. These can lead to situations where the United Nations is virtually the sole actor with the task of turning an entire society around – a recipe for failure. With mounting experience in the field, the United Nations is increasingly accepting that its task is more often than not that of the coordinator of and the bringer of legitimacy to a broad effort involving regional civilian and military organizations, donor agencies, specialized agencies, humanitarian organizations, non-governmental organizations,



and local civil society. The UN value added is thus in the leadership role it undertakes and the confidence it builds in all parties through its involvement.

The reality the United Nations faces in building such coalitions is that national interests and international politics will determine the level of enthusiasm in any given situation. There was at one time an unwritten practice that peacekeeping forces should come from areas far away from the trouble spot, that the countries involved in peacekeeping be disinterested in the outcome of the local dispute, and that international citizenship rather than national interest should be the determining factor for involvement. Recent practice has tended to sweep away this concept. Today it tends to be the coalitions of the willing that undertake the tough peace-building jobs. They are self-selected on the basis of direct national interest in the outcome. Thus the Balkans can attract European attention, Haiti has US involvement, and East Timor has a protector in Australia. But the diminution of international citizenship as the motivating factor for disinterested involvement and its replacement with national interests usually based on proximity can leave many other parts of the world in difficulty. Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo are examples.

Managing time boils down to good mission design. It requires realistic mandates and good planning. The larger the mission, the more effort is required for coalition-building. Perhaps most of all, it requires a high degree of competence on the part of the United Nations as the leader in the field. This in turn requires an understanding of trade-offs and techniques.

### *Making trade-offs*

One of the recurrent criticisms of UN efforts, echoed in a number of the case studies, is an unstated assumption that the United Nations is somehow entering a political vacuum that simply needs to be filled with its own leadership. The assumption is particularly easy to make in situations of weak states or where occupying powers have been vanquished, leaving an absence of administrative machinery. There is a temptation in such situations to think of the area as a type of governance *tabula rasa* where the new administering power may construct a new political order beginning with first principles.

But as we can see in Afghanistan, weak states can have strong societies. As became quickly evident in Kosovo, in the shadow of the formal occupation administration that was swept away, there exists a parallel informal local administration. And as is clear in East Timor, a quarter of a century of Indonesian administration did not destroy traditional village governance processes. The first trade-off that has to be made is a balance

between notions of a universal template of governance and the reality of local politics. Even acephalous polities have politics.

The UN administration also often quickly finds itself facing another trade-off situation: the trade-off between impartiality and the reality that there is often a liberation organization that has fought long and hard and now awaits the spoils. The question becomes one of how to manage SWAPO, or Fretilin, or the Kosovo Liberation Army. There is no point in pretending that such organizations lose their *raison d'être* simply because their foe is vanquished. The better view is that they need to be integrated into society in as transparent and orderly a way as possible. This will entail including established leaders in consultation machinery, incorporating parts of such forces into the police or army, and allowing political organizations to test their popularity at the polls. There is a corollary trade-off here. The UN role in democratization is largely undertaken through capacity-building processes. Yet an essential ingredient for success is local ownership of the issues and results. There may be instances when a less ostensibly efficient system is put in place that gives significant decision-making power to local actors, even in transition situations, and allows them to learn from their own mistakes.

Clearly the United Nations cannot be expected to get it right every time. Getting right the balance between principle and pragmatism is a great political art. Perhaps in Cambodia the acceptance of the participation of the Khmer Rouge in the political process simply delayed for nearly a decade the ultimate UN responsibility to bring to book those guilty of genocide. Perhaps in Cambodia also, acceding to the demand of the incumbent Cambodian People's Party to share in power even though they had been the losers in the UN-organized election has simply slowed the democratization process. The choice was between power-sharing and perhaps a return to arms, and in such a choice the peace imperative will usually prevail. There is therefore often a critical trade-off between security and politics.

In examining the work of the United Nations in the field, the greatest pressure comes from the inescapable priority to assure a certain level of security before any efforts of democratization can take hold. Democracy needs a functioning state in which to operate, and it needs security at least sufficient to allow a free and fair vote to take place. The participation of the people of East Timor in their act of self-determination in August 1999, despite militia harassment, demonstrates the courage people will display to have a say in their political future.<sup>33</sup> Such a vote was only possible because the presence of UNAMET provided the population with some reassurance of a secure environment for the vote, though UNAMET was helpless in the face of the fury unleashed by its result. And where it is not possible to assure a workable level of security, as in Somalia, there can be no effective democratization process.

Time and again the cases demonstrate the necessity for priority to be given to the military and police efforts. There can be no question about this. Criticism is possible, however, where the enforcement effort has so dominated the process of change that there is little energy left for the democracy-building task. One wonders whether this problem may affect Afghanistan. Defeating the Taliban government that had harboured the al-Qaeda leadership was an operation that had virtually the entire world behind it, but the subsequent state-building efforts are not nearly as riveting. The security situation is still not satisfactory in rural Afghanistan, and there is a question mark over whether the United Nations and the international community will stay the course and successfully rebuild the civilian infrastructure that underpins democracy.

### *Mastering techniques*

After a decade of practice in promoting democracy, the United Nations can be expected to have come close to understanding and wielding the appropriate techniques. The structural issues involved concern those of consultation, institutional design, transition processes, circuit-breaker in intractable conflicts, reconciliation initiatives, establishing rule of law, and transferring skills. Every situation the United Nations faces has its own particularities and the United Nations needs to be a master of the general and a country specialist at the same time. The United Nations arrives in-country armed with a basket of universal values and norms, yet often is confronted by groups motivated by a culturally specific moral order, often distorted by years of national trauma. Does the United Nations have the right kitbag of techniques and attitudes to deal with these situations?

First and foremost among the UN's assets are its people. Beginning with the Secretary-General himself, the United Nations needs to put the right people in place. Kofi Annan has demonstrated his skills in many difficult situations. Having spent a career at the United Nations and having lived through the peacekeeping crises of the early 1990s, Annan came with a broad vision of the UN's role, tempered by an understanding of what the United Nations could realistically be expected to achieve. One of the Secretary-General's most important tasks is to put the right people in place as the special representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG). A consistent theme emerging from a study of UN activism in the field is the impact of the personality and style of the SRSG. The decision in 2003 to appoint Sergio Vieira de Mello as SRSG to Iraq for a four-month period is testimony to the critical importance of the position. Vieira de Mello had only recently been appointed as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, one of the highest-profile positions in the UN system, and yet Annan considered it so important to have an experienced cam-

paigner in the Iraq position that he was prepared to take the risk of withdrawing Vieira de Mello from Geneva. The reason for Annan's surprising decision can be seen in Vieira de Mello's success in his recent assignment in East Timor and the Secretary-General's appreciation of the role of the SRSG. It may be partly for reasons of his undoubted abilities that Vieira de Mello was tragically targeted for assassination.

The SRSG has virtual monarchical powers in the transition process and, as history judges a monarch's reign in part through that individual's personality, so must the SRSG's reign be assessed. Experience shows that the best profile for a successful SRSG is to have a UN insider who knows how to get the most out of a stubbornly inflexible system. The SRSG also needs to find a way to connect with local actors, often through a shared maternal language, while being seen by those actors as unconnected with the politics of the situation. The SRSG clearly must be a good manager, effective communicator, and a successful coalition-builder. Vieira de Mello had these qualities, as does Lakhdar Brahimi in Afghanistan. The initial SRSG in Kosovo, Bernard Kouchner, was also seen in a positive light in many quarters, while his successor, Hans Haekkerup, had more difficulty connecting with local politics. The third SRSG in Kosovo, Michael Steiner, seems to have made a strong start. The SRSG in Cambodia, Yasushi Akashi, did as well as could be expected with a relatively weak mandate and, heading the first major operation in the post-Cold War period, he suffered from the inexperience of the UN Secretariat in New York in handling the mission as well as some questionable appointments in the field.<sup>34</sup>

The Secretary-General and the SRSGs are supported by thousands of people in New York and in the field. The roles they assume range from the soldier authorized to employ force to fulfil a Security Council requirement to the official advising local electoral officials on best practice in ballot-paper design. At this point, one must ask whether a workforce of expatriates, not sharing the same cultural or educational background and speaking in several different languages, is comparatively the best group to undertake the range of tasks required. One of the chapters in this volume looks in detail at this question, and others approach it from various thematic and case-based viewpoints. A case can be made that the UN system necessarily produces a "Tower of Babel" of misunderstandings and confusion that can never compare favourably in efficiency with the best national bureaucracies. If, however, one looks at the work being performed not as "tasks" but as a "role", a different perspective emerges. The point here is that the United Nations and its people are most important as the vectors between the situation on the ground and the norms, values, and aspirations of the international community. The legitimacy the United Nations brings with it is as important in this process as the skills it employs.

But even in this context, the skills need to be developed and exercised effectively. The United Nations will at times lack the necessary skills. This is obviously the case in enforcement operations, where the United Nations lacks the military skills of countries such as the USA, France, or Australia, or of organizations like NATO or the Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) of the Economic Community of West African States. It can also be the case in capacity-building programmes, where partnerships with international financial institutions, global civil society organizations, or bilateral donor agencies and their consultants may be the best way to deliver results. Again, the United Nations adds legitimacy to such operations as well as oversight in delivery. The element of legitimacy can often be employed in the UN's consciousness-raising role. The UNDP's global *Human Development Report 2002*, on the theme "Deepening democracy in a fragmented world", had significant impact in setting an agenda for democracy in many national and regional debates. The *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, written by Arab specialists, had considerable impact in a region which has not yet seen the full impact of the third wave of democratization. As one of the authors, Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, notes:

the *Arab Human Development Report* has received unprecedented attention. In the Arab world and many Western capitals, virtually no major newspaper has failed to give it extensive coverage, and the broadcast media have been equally generous.<sup>35</sup>

No national or academic report could have had similar impact.

One area where the analysts in this volume find fault is with the way the United Nations discharges its accountability function. The UN's ultimate overseer is the membership of the organization. But having 191 masters does not presage having efficient oversight, particularly where the process of review of the work of the organization is highly political. There are also internal processes of oversight in the budgetary and personnel areas that parallel similar mechanisms in organizations of such size. These are clearly important, but they suffer from the fact that they share a broad world view – they do not see the world the way the recipients of UN assistance see it. Connecting with and being responsive to local people is perhaps the UN's greatest challenge and one it is not meeting well enough. The consultation processes are often too *ad hoc* or too personalized in terms of the relationship of local political leaders with the SRSG. One of the effects of the tendency to personalization of the process is that it often leaves resignation or the threat thereof as the only means of protest. The United Nations cannot be expected overnight to turn traumatized societies into pluralist utopia and hold monthly referenda, but it can be expected to encourage élites and volunteers to debate

the issues and start the process of building deliberative democracy. It can also be expected to study the local situation more closely and gain a better understanding of local perspectives.

There are mechanisms available to the United Nations in this regard. The independent ombudsperson, as instituted in Kosovo, is an excellent initiative that can play a crucial role of representing local people dealing with a new, confusing, and sometimes opaque administration. The use of local media outlets is another means of involving local communities in the governance debate. Depending on local practice, other techniques such as petitions, gatherings of traditional leaders, or meetings with NGOs can also improve the communication process. The various “lessons-learned” processes within the United Nations are available to examine best practice in consultation processes.<sup>36</sup> The United Nations would be selling short all the energy it puts into these processes if it adopts a “we always know best” approach.

### Defining the UN role in democratization

The present volume attempts in various ways to assess how well the United Nations is performing in its democracy-promotion role. The aim of the exercise is neither to praise nor to chastise the United Nations but to analyse how best it can contribute to this important ambition. Another way of looking at the issue is to ask whether the United Nations is indispensable to global democratization efforts. This is a better question than the riddle often posed in justification of the United Nations by its supporters: is the situation better after UN involvement? This is far too glib a question, as it takes no account of the tremendous resources the United Nations is employing and the reasonable expectation of a return from those assets.

A survey of the case studies and programmes described in this volume raises a fundamental difficulty that can be posited in the following simple question: is the United Nations only able to advance democratization in relatively small societies? There seems to be a correlation between the size of the problem and the degree of UN achievement. The success stories like Namibia, Kosovo, and East Timor are all societies of modest population size. The problems in these societies are no less complex than in other cases, but the breadth of the problem is somehow manageable.

An academic case for UN indispensability has recently been made in relation to another small society that is of critical importance to future global peace efforts, Palestine. In rejecting the ability of the USA to resolve the question of Palestine on a bilateral basis, even though it clearly has the most influence on all the parties involved, an influential academic

has made the case for a UN trusteeship over Palestine as the only way of overseeing the process of statehood and democracy-building. The Kosovo and East Timor situations were seen as the relevant precedents.<sup>37</sup>

But the situations the United Nations finds most testing are those of large nations like Afghanistan, Congo, and Iraq. If the United Nations can only successfully deal with the small islands, the sparsely populated territories, and the ethnic enclaves then it will fail the indispensability test. The case of Cambodia becomes ever more telling in this regard. It can currently neither be regarded a success nor a failure, as Cambodia's UN-nurtured democratic forms are not matched by a local democratic spirit. But Cambodia shows that the United Nations does have the ambition to tackle the large problems. The future of Afghanistan, Congo, and Iraq will tell us much more about the extent of the UN role in global democracy promotion.

Until there is an answer to this key question, we must content ourselves with a list of the significant roles the United Nations plays in this field. It can bring international legitimacy to the international community's efforts, even when it pronounces itself after the event as in Kosovo, and even where it remains ambivalent about the legality of the preceding actions as in Iraq. This legitimacy is transferable to the UN's agents and partners, making it one of the UN's principal assets. The United Nations also has the role of a conveyor of norms and values. It is the vector between the principles its members espouse and the reception of these principles on the ground. The vector role can most successfully be performed if the conveying agents are materially disinterested in the results, a description that is difficult to ascribe to powerful neighbouring states undertaking bilateral democratization efforts. The UN's international legitimacy enhances its role as a vector of ideals and ideas. The balance of this volume examines how the United Nations has undertaken its role in propagating one of the great ideals of our age, democracy.

## Notes

1. Space does not allow even a cursory citation of the most important works, but to mention some: Dahl, Robert. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Diamond, Larry. 1999. *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; Held, David. 1996. *Models of Democracy*, 2nd edn. Cambridge: Polity Press; Huntington, Samuel P. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Lijphart, Arend. 1999. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-six Countries*. New Haven: Yale University Press; O'Donnell, Guillermo, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead (eds). 1986. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*, 4 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

2. The US Department of State has a policy to “promote democracy as a means to achieve security, stability, and prosperity for the entire world”. See [www.state.gov/g/drl/democ/](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/democ/).
3. Sen, Amartya. 1999. “Democracy as a universal value”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 10, No. 3.
4. “Report of the Secretary-General on the support by the United Nations system for the efforts of Governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies”, A/51/761, 20 December 1996; reprinted under the title *Agenda for Democratization*, DPI/1867 (97.I.3), para. 5.
5. Hunt, Ben. 2000. “Democratization, international relations, and US foreign policy”, in James F. Hollifield and Calvin Jillson (eds) *Pathways to Democracy – The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*. New York: Routledge.
6. UN Charter, Article 4(1).
7. Doyle, Michael. 1983. “Kant, liberal legacies and foreign affairs”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 12.
8. Russett, Bruce. 1993. *Grasping the Democratic Peace*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
9. Quoted in Brown, Michael E., Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (eds). 1996. *Debating the Democratic Peace*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.
10. Rummel, R. J. Undated. “Libertarianism and international violence”, helpfully summarized on his website at [www.mega.nu:8080/ampp/rummel/dp83.htm](http://www.mega.nu:8080/ampp/rummel/dp83.htm).
11. The debate was nicely summarized by John Norton Moore in his address at the University of Virginia’s Engaging the Mind lecture series, Beyond the Democratic Peace: Solving the War Puzzle, 9 September 2002, [www.virginia.edu/facultysenate/speakers/2020/0203\\_schedule.html](http://www.virginia.edu/facultysenate/speakers/2020/0203_schedule.html).
12. Layne, Christopher. 1996. “Kant or cant: The myth of the democratic peace”, in Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller, note 9 above.
13. Mansfield, Edward and Jack Snyder. 1995. “Democratization and war”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 3. The authors find that “while mature, stable democracies are safer, states usually go through a dangerous transition to democracy. Historical evidence from the last 200 years shows that in this phase, countries become more war-prone, not less, and they do fight wars with democratic states.”
14. Toward a Community of Democracies Ministerial Conference, “Final Warsaw Declaration: Toward a Community of Democracies”, Warsaw, Poland, 27 June 2000, [www.ccd21.org/articles/warsaw\\_declaration.htm](http://www.ccd21.org/articles/warsaw_declaration.htm).
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# The UN Role in Promoting Democracy: Between Ideals and Reality

Edited by Edward Newman and Roland Rich

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The notion of democracy is a key principle of the United Nations and underpins much of its work. Almost a third of the UN's members have requested its assistance in conducting elections. The UN is supporting a new wave of democracy, although not without difficulty in places such as East Timor, Afghanistan, Cambodia and Kosovo. The role of the UN in the promotion of democracy is significant but also sometimes problematic.

This book considers and questions the modalities, effectiveness and controversies of the UN's work in promoting and assisting democracy. It examines if the UN can help to build the foundations of democracy and whether, as an 'external' actor, it can have a substantive positive impact upon the development of democratic governance inside societies.

Set against a background of political science and international relations, *The UN Role in Promoting Democracy* explores how the normative ideals of democracy interact with the realities of power in the international arena and in the societies in which the UN works. In so doing, this volume provides a timely analysis of the prospects and limitations of the UN's work in this area, and of the broader field of democracy promotion.

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