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## Democracy, Human Rights and Capitalism: Are They Truly Global?

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The current wave of globalization, which began with the end of the Cold War, is by far the fastest in history. Conventional state borders have disappeared in the face of the information revolution. Indeed, the world has become a global village. Closely related to these changes is the “globalization of paradigms”, i.e. the globalization of concepts and values such as those related to democracy, human rights and capitalism. Notably, reference to these paradigms in official discourses and by major media outlets has been creating new stereotypes. The purpose of this article is to attempt to answer questions on whether those paradigms have truly become global, what – if any – are the geographical and substantive exceptions and discrepancies in their dissemination and what could be the future prospects of globalization in these areas in light of the evolution of the international system at large.

### Democracy

Since the end of the Cold War the world has witnessed a remarkable increase in attention paid to issues of democratic governance. Also, it has become familiar to refer to democratic values as universal ones that do not differentiate between West and East, North and South, and do not depend on differences in religion, ethnic origin or race. Indeed, the unipolar dominance of the United States after the Cold War has significantly boosted the agenda of

democratization, deriving on the moral legitimacy and victory of democratic governance in the Cold War. In this regard, one may recall the argument of Francis Fukuyama on the end of mankind ideological evolution and the emergence of Western democracy as the final form of human governance, in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*.<sup>1</sup>

Democracy’s apparent victory in the world of ideas kindled sentiments of freedom and dignity worldwide. It also helped form ideas like those of establishing a new international organization, to be called a league or concert of democracies, in the USA’s presidential campaign in 2008. The main rationale behind these ideas was a perception that global democratization leaves little space for violence and terrorism, and consolidates international peace and security. The progenitors of these ideas also contended that the UN, which included undemocratic states, had become useless, could not be reformed and should be left behind.<sup>2</sup> It was also suggested that NATO should be made global to provide a security umbrella for

1 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

2 Theodore J. Piccone, “Democracies in a League of their Own: Lesson Learned from the Community of Democracies” (*Brookings Institution*, Policy Paper No. 8, October 2008).



the proposed league or concert of democracies. One may also recall that Condoleezza Rice, then US Secretary of State, advocated “creative chaos”, i.e. chaos that could arise as a result of the introduction of democracy, on the basis that it is likely to short-live and gradually give way to sustainable democracy. Accordingly, Rice saw no reason why the United States and its democratic allies would not intensify their efforts to spread democracy in the world. She went on to suggest punishing uncooperative regimes with diplomatic isolation.<sup>3</sup>

The surge of interest in democracy led to its further integration in the foreign policies of Western powers, including in conditions placed on official development assistance to poor and developing countries. It also manifested itself in the creation of new instruments in rich countries dedicated holistically to spreading democracy. In addition, the international multilateral system now gives more support to democratization, including through the UN Development Program and the UN “Democracy Fund”, established in 2005 as one of outcomes of the Millennium Review Summit in 2005.

In spite of this radical evolution and the fever of democratization, one still wonders if democracy and its values have become truly global and whether spreading Western ideas about democracy has been successful. To address these questions, I raise the following points:

First, China is a huge exception. The Chinese experience has proven that globalization does not equate to Westernization. On the contrary, China has successfully adopted some Western concepts, such as modernity and economic liberalism, and has so far made excellent use of them, whereas the Chinese political system remains authoritarian in form and substance. In spite of the challenges China faces with respect to democracy and human rights, and notwithstanding speculation about the prospects of the Chinese experience, this experience continues to stand out as a remarkable one, which could serve as a model to other developing countries.

Second, there is a great deal of politicization of democratic standards, with considerations of national interest often given priority over democratic principles. For instance, Western powers kept strategic or close relationships with repressive regimes in Arab Spring countries, and only supported the demands of revolutionary uprisings in these countries after the winds of change became irreversible. In addition, there is the problem of self-determination in the Palestinian occupied territories. This presents us with a moral paradox. How can the international community support democratic transformation in Arab Spring countries, while ignoring the historical demand of self-determination for the Palestinians.

Third, the multilateral system suffers from a democratic deficit. With the exception of some limited recent reforms

in the UN system, the Bretton Woods institutions and the emergence of the G-20 as the main forum of global economic governance in place of the G-8, considerations of balance of powers and developmental gaps between member states forestall hopes that current reform efforts could make the system more democratic. On the contrary, some would argue that the lack of democracy in the system is a *sine qua non* for its survival, while reminding us that the democratic multilateral system from 1918-1938 easily buckled in the face of fascism.<sup>4</sup> Notably, a stark case of lack of democracy in the current system is that of the UN Security Council and its “veto” privilege. Again, this presents a paradox. How can the UN and other multilateral institutions promote democracy worldwide, at the time they themselves lack democracy, and with no change in sight.

Finally, recent experiences indicate some serious mistakes in democratization efforts. To name a few, democracy cannot be imposed from outside. Instead, it has to grow from within, albeit with support from outside, or efforts to this effect could go in vain and perhaps cause backlashes. In addition, democratization needs to be gradual and attentive to economic, social and security conditions, otherwise it could expose concerned countries to chaos, which could have serious implications on international peace and security. Furthermore, the democratization agenda should integrate and respect cultural characteristics, especially when it comes to religion. There can be no one size fits all in this regard and stereotypes about specific religions or ethnic groups should be avoided. Notably, Muslims and Arabs were victims of this kind of stereotypes, especially in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11 in the United States. Ultimately, the Arab Spring has proven that there is no contradiction between Islam and fundamental democratic values.

### Human Rights

Certainly, there is a strong bond between human rights and democracy. Hence, the above analysis on democracy mostly also applies to human rights, including with regard to conditionality in official development assistance, surging interest in the international system, politicization and need to respect cultural particularities, and so on. Thus, in order to avoid duplication, I will focus here on the relative weight of human rights in comparison with democracy, in addition to shedding light on the degree of universality of human rights.

It appears that human rights standards make more of strict redline than democratic values. In particular, conditionality in official development assistance with regard to human rights is more evident. One example here is the clear messages of the United States and the EU to

3 Condoleezza Rice, “Rethinking the National Interest: American Realism for a New World” (*Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 4, July/August 2008).

4 Edward Luck, “Reforming the UN: Lessons from a History in Progress” (*International Relations Studies and the UN Occasional Papers*, No. 1, 2003).



Arab Spring countries about the rights of women and minorities. It is also widely held that basic human rights are universal, notwithstanding cultural differences. Accordingly, Western powers act more stringently when it comes to violations of basic human rights. In addition, there are usually sophisticated, multilevel webs of mechanisms designed to promote and protect human rights inside countries.

The international multilateral system also dedicates special importance to promoting and protecting human rights. A reflection of this is the transformation of the UN Human Rights Commission to the Human Rights Council in 2006, as one of the outcomes of the Millennium Review Summit in 2005. In addition, the International Criminal Court has added a new dimension to efforts to combat gross violations of human rights and to end impunity. However, politicization of work and reservations about the Treaty of Rome have hobbled the Court. Civil society organizations are also active in monitoring and pressuring governments on human rights throughout the world.

Now, we come to questions on whether the protection of human rights is truly global and the hindrances that stand in the way in this regard. To answer these questions, I raise the following points:

First, notwithstanding the advanced priority human rights receive, political considerations still play a role in some cases. A vivid case in point is that of the military intervention in Libya, authorized by the UN Security Council, to topple Colonel Gaddafi in 2011. In contrast, the Council remains paralyzed with regard to the bloody, destructive war that has been ravaging Syria for more than two years.

Second, Western powers nurture a division between civil and political rights on one side and economic, social and cultural rights on the other side, focusing on the former at the expense of the latter. In fact, the international system dealt with both clusters of rights on equal footing, creating binding pacts for both. In addition, there are strong inter-linkages between them. However, it seems that Western powers are unwilling to provide what it takes to protect economic, social and cultural rights, although these are priority rights for the majority of peoples in poor and developing countries. Instead, Western powers hold that ensuring civil and political rights should provide the conducive environment required for the free-market to pull the poor out of poverty. Now, this resembles the anecdote of the chicken and the egg; which comes first. But one thing is clear: the philosophy of the free-market economy does not work in many cases, including within Northern rich countries. Hence, boosting economic, social and cultural rights along with civil and political rights could be a better approach.

Third, there is a lack of consensus between Western and Eastern countries with regard to some specific human rights, mostly due to cultural differences between the two

sides. Some notable examples are those of homosexuals, religious freedom, minority rights, racial discrimination, xenophobia and islamophobia. Gaps in positions with respect to these rights deny mutually agreed frameworks to tackle them. It also deprives broad groups of humans of some of their basic rights.

Fourth, there are some novel concepts of human rights that raise a lot of controversy, especially humanitarian intervention (recently termed “the responsibility to protect”) and human security. The main source of controversy here is that both concepts challenge traditional definitions of state sovereignty. In addition, experience indicates that they are being applied selectively. Notably, the concept of the responsibility to protect was somehow endorsed by the UN Millennium Review Summit in 2005, whereas the same summit relegated the concept of human security to further discussions. However, both concepts still lack consensual, clear and stable frameworks for their implementation.

### Capitalism

No doubt, capitalism and the philosophy of the free-market economy are the key mantras of today’s world economy. In contrast, any country attempting to sail against the wind is destined to isolation and severe damage. The information revolution has instilled deep integration in the world economy, and the speed and volume of financial and trade flows across borders have reached previously unimaginable heights. In parallel, the fall of the philosophy of central economic planning with the end of the Cold War has paved the way for capitalism to dominate the world under the sponsorship of capitalist powerhouses and global economic institutions such as the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization.

Thus, there are no exceptions to the dominance of the free-market economy like in the cases of democracy and human rights, meaning more universality for the former. However, this dominance faces a number of challenges, including:

First, the philosophy of the free-market economy as laid out in the so-called Washington Consensus has failed to provide decent life for too many millions of people around the globe. This clearly manifests “discontents of globalization” as described by Joseph Stiglitz.<sup>5</sup> It is particularly evident in sub-Saharan Africa, some Latin American countries, as well as in strata of societies in rich and developing countries alike. This gap between “haves” and “have-nots” is the most imminent challenge to globalization, as it creates a force against international integration and threatens social and international peace in different parts of the world.

Second, recent experiences prove that the international economy is so vulnerable to crises that it is just a question

<sup>5</sup> Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).



of time before another crisis hits. In addition to unprecedented connectivity, reasons behind this vulnerability include inventions of virtual instruments in international financial markets and international macroeconomic imbalances caused by economic giants such as China. A vivid example is the international financial and economic crisis that has haunted the world since 2007. In response, the G-20 has been struggling to restore calm and implement necessary reforms. However, efforts to this end continue to fall short of addressing the deep roots of the problem. Third, outrage against economic globalization and the philosophy of the free-market economy has revived untoward nationalistic and protectionist trends in many parts of the world. By and large, there is hardly a country today without a nationalist movement or party. And there is concern that the current economic crisis could be exacerbated due to protectionist measures taken by both developed and developing countries since the inception of the crisis. In response to popular challenges to economic globalization, politicians have been struggling to introduce politically correct alternatives such as the so-called “third-way” movement and “social market economy”.

Fourth, regionalism poses yet another threat to globalization. Notably, there has been a proliferation of regional blocs, partially driven by exemptions from the rules of the World Trade Organization. Though the philosophy of these exemptions is to encourage regional integration as an intermediate step to wider global integration, experience demonstrates that regionalism creates resistant global trade imbalances, caused by false bloc-specific comparative advantages; the effect of trade diversion. As a result, the international trading system is increasingly suffering from trade distortions.

In summary, one could say that there is indeed globalization of capitalism, human rights and democracy, in descending order, and with challenges and counteracting forces in each of the three areas.

### Future Prospects

The potential of further globalization in each of the three subject areas depends to a great extent on the future of the international system, especially in view of the ongoing shift of world order, driven primarily by the rise of emerging powers such as the BRICS. Notably, emerging powers seek reform in the current international system; reform that protects their interests, reflects their cultural and ideological backgrounds and responds to their specific needs. And they rise with conservative legacies that reject intervention in internal affairs, including on bases such as human rights and democracy. In contrast, emerging powers are more in harmony with the philosophy of the free-market economy. However, they demand a stake in the international economic system that reflects their rising power. In addition to emerging powers, the growing roles of civil society, private sector and rogue actors in the international system can influence the future. While civil society tends to exert efforts in support of the protection and promotion of human rights and democracy, it shows a propensity to take positions in support of more humane globalization. In turn, private sector defends the philosophy of the free-market economy, as a must for its wellbeing and growth. Finally, rogue actors fight fiercely to take the whole world back to the dark ages, using grievances about unjust globalization, foreign intervention, politicization and double standards to advance their destructive agendas.

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