

**The European Union, the United Nations and the Arab Spring:  
The Changing International Discourse and Practice Concerning Democracy Promotion  
in the Arab World**

**Jerry Pubantz**

**University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
For delivery at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association  
March 2013**

The Arab Spring, now two years past, currently feels more like a “January Thaw” at best as the blooming of popular democratic impulses in 2011 has faced apparent democratic retreat in North African countries, and all out resistance in Syria and several of the Arab Sheikdoms of the Gulf. At worst, the overthrow of Arab dictators has opened the gates to terrorist organizations across Mali, Algeria, and much of West Africa.

The protests and toppled Arab governments that followed like dominoes after Muhammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in December 2010 in his hometown of Sidi Bouzid seemed at the time the latest wave of democracy’s advance on a global scale, the latest surge of post-Cold War democratic change that confirmed the general direction of world historic forces. As such it fit neatly into the narrative of international organizations (specifically intergovernmental organizations - IGOs) since the late 1980s that global peace and progress depend heavily on the promotion of democracy and human rights by both indigenous national actors and the international community.

What did not fit neatly in this narrative was the “black swan”<sup>1</sup> character of the Arab Spring. Erupting spontaneously, sparked by a tragic yet unlikely event, to create regional revolution, the popular uprisings that followed Bouazizi’s death surprised all major actors in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Reflecting the general understanding of international relations scholars, Simon Duke concisely defines black swans as “events that no one predicted and thus prepared for and where there is risk of overestimating knowledge about the event and its political impact.” Simon Duke. *Managing Change in External Relations: The EU’s Window of Opportunity* (Maastricht: European Parliament, 2011).

international system, including international organizations that had been engaged in democracy promotion in the Arab World for more than two decades. They could lay no claim to the upheavals as products of external democratization efforts, and as such the Arab Spring raised fundamental questions about the efficacy of those efforts particularly by the United Nations and the European Union. Implicit in EU and UN democracy promotion was the assumption that their initiatives would produce democratic socialization at all societal levels through gradual political reform. The sudden revolutionary break in 2011 destroyed the expected narrative and produced rapid reconsideration within international organizations on how to effect democratic change from outside, including the external encouragement of necessary underlying national democratic values and habits.

One obvious reason for failure on the part of international organizations was their penchant to work with the corrupt and aging regimes of the region. Family rule produced the likelihood of “dynastic” succession as generational change became inevitable.<sup>2</sup> With or without these transitions in the offing, outside promoters of democracy thought they could pressure rulers into democratic change with the promise of economic assistance and integration into the world community on beneficial terms. Persuasion and dialogue were the weapons of choice in the struggle to get dictatorial regimes to loosen their grip.

---

<sup>2</sup> Despite it being “presidencies” under threat, in most cases family members were being groomed to succeed the ruling generation. In Libya Saif al-Islam Ghaddafi had emerged as the heir apparent to his father. In Yemen, Ahmad Ali Abdullah al Saleh had already taken control of the country’s major army units and the Republican Guard in anticipation of his father’s demise. Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak had moved his son into control of the ruling party apparatus. And even in Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began, Madame Layla Ben Ali and her son-in-law Sakr Materi were reported plotting to succeed longtime ruler president Ben Ali. For a full review see Larbi Sadiki, “Whither Arab ‘Republicanism’? The Rise of family rule and the End of ‘Democratization’ in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen,” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2010, 99-107.

Local dictators were more than willing to talk the language of liberal democracy and to offer what turned out to be cosmetic changes, but little changed in substantive rule.<sup>3</sup> Survival strategies by ruling cliques came in many forms, but each was premised on their full knowledge that the logic of democratization would be the political defeat of those who had ruled for so long. Even where international organizations attempted to leap over governments to work with local civil society organizations (CSOs) to create “demand” for democracy, regimes established state-controlled CSOs so as to redirect external funding to government purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond national governments’ ability to block democracy promotion’s effectiveness by external actors, IGO reticence to push participatory democratization in the face of security concerns in the post-9/11 environment also diminished the impact these organizations had in Arab states. Still haunted by the 1991 Islamic Salvation Front’s victory in Algeria, and fearing an opening for radical Islamist attainment of power by way of the ballot box, international organizations often recoiled from pushing the democratic agenda too heartily. Now it appears the world’s aforementioned fear of Islamism’s chances at the polls has actually allowed radical islamists to fill political vacuums in parts of Africa to everyone’s peril.

The war on terrorism took precedence over democratic change in the political atmosphere of the past decade. International organizations sent out mixed signals counterbalancing a values agenda of human rights, democracy promotion, and the rule of law against the pursuit of security interests.<sup>5</sup> Regimes found it easy to make the case for security policies against radical groups in their societies at the expense of greater popular participation in public life.

---

<sup>3</sup> Vera Van Hüllen, “Europeanisation through Cooperation? EU Democracy Promotion in Morocco and Tunisia,” *West European Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 1, January, 2012, 128.

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Caropico, “Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 13 (Summer 2002), 380, 392.

<sup>5</sup> Vincent Durac and Francesco Cavatorta, “Strengthening Authoritarian Rule through Democracy Promotion? Examining the Paradox of the US and EU Security Strategies: The Case of Bin Ali’s Tunisia,” *British Journal of*

This was an unfortunate choice since it left the only meaningful opposition in these states to the very groups the international organizations feared. With little legitimacy and less funding secular and moderate religious opponents found themselves heavily disadvantaged. It was also unfortunate because it flew against the historical record of IGO promotion of democratic governance in other parts of the world over the previous twenty years. Stated in what would have been in the past an oxymoronic assertion, self-determination *was imposed* from outside in such places as Bosnia, Indonesia, southern Sudan, Kosovo, Timor-Leste, and Iraq. In each case this was achieved without significant radicalization of domestic politics.

In each of these cases, the United Nations achieved reasonable outcomes, if not complete and vibrant democracies, through the encouragement of vibrant civil societies from the moment of international intervention. Convinced by centuries of democratic theory, reaching from the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville to those of Robert Putnam that posits an engaged citizenry fully committed to peaceful democratic practices in civic life, IGOs, supported by international NGOs (INGOs), individual states, and private foundations, sought to build indigenous civil society as the critical structure that could sustain fragile new democratic institutions.

The lesson of those interventions was largely lost in the democratization strategies pursued by IGOs in North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean region, and specific Arab states after 9/11. It took the awakening of Arab civil society and its confrontation with the authoritarianism in the streets of Arab cities to produce a review of past policies and the consideration by the EU and UN of new strategies going forward. Both organizations renewed the international discourse on effective democracy promotion and launched transformed

---

*Middle East Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2009, 11. Also see Frederica Bicchì, "The Union for the Mediterranean, or the Changing Context of Euro-Mediterranean Relations," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2011, 5-14.

initiatives in the Arab world, despite evident backsliding in several of the revolutions themselves.

### **The European Union and the Arab Spring**

The European Union has been an exercise in democratic integration since its origins in the European Coal and Steel Community of the early 1950s. Based on its inherent values and framing documents, the EU launched serious democratization initiatives outside of Europe in the 1990s. In 1994 the European Parliament created the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), later known as the European Instrument<sup>6</sup> for Democracy and Human Rights, which was given the responsibility of directing all EU human rights, democratization, and conflict resolution policies, working in partnership with nongovernmental and international organizations. In 2008–2009, EIDHR contributed more than €235 million to fund over 900 human rights and democracy projects in over 100 countries. Of these, grant awards worth €101.7 million went to civil society organizations in 77 countries.<sup>7</sup> Between 2007 and 2013 EIDHR distributed approximately €1 billion in aid.

EIDHR operates under two 1999 EU regulations<sup>8</sup> that required all EU operations to “contribute to the general objective of developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law and to that of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms in third countries.” The regulations required the agency to nurture pluralism, “bridging divides” among identity groups, and confidence-building measures. EIDHR, in addition to financing activities to enhance

---

<sup>6</sup> Regulation (EC) No. 1889/2006 of the European Union Parliament and Council, December 20, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> European Union, *Human Rights and Democracy in the World: Report on EU Action, July 2008 to December 2009* (Brussels: European Commission, 2010), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Council Regulations (EC) No. 975/1999 and 976/1999 of April 29, 1999. OJ L 120 of 08.05.1999.

political and civil rights, supports initiatives to encourage economic, social, and cultural rights. This is largely done through sponsorship of private civil society activities.<sup>9</sup>

Given the many EU initiatives in the Arab world, particularly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, one might think that the Arab Spring would be claimed as a victory for EU policies. But EU policies were never intended to bring about democratic revolution from below. Truth be told, they were premised on governmental endorsement from above. This proved a fatal error in the ruler-dominated Arab states, where longtime dictators were unwilling to loosen authoritarian controls.<sup>10</sup>

The EU has also placed an emphasis on democracy and human rights in its development policies. The Treaty of Nice (2000) extended the promotion of human rights to all EU development assistance programs. Three negotiated agreements between the EU and groupings of non-European states dominate EU development and democratization policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the Cotonou Agreement, the Barcelona Process, and the San José Framework. EIDHR administers nearly €18.5 billion to carry out these programs. The Cotonou Agreement, signed in June 2000 in Cotonou, Benin, established a 20-year cooperation program between the EU and 77 African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries.<sup>11</sup> Finding sustainable development to be dependent on “respect for human rights [and] democratic principles,”<sup>12</sup> the Cotonou signatories committed themselves to using EU aid for such disparate ventures as “improving education, health and nutrition systems, and cultural development.”

---

<sup>9</sup> European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) Strategy Paper 2011–2013, at <[www.ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/Human\\_rights/index\\_en.htm](http://www.ec.europa.eu/external_relations/Human_rights/index_en.htm)>.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion see Rosemary Hollis, “No Friend of Democratization: Europe’s Role in the Genesis of the ‘Arab Spring’,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 1, 81-94. Also see Caropico, “Foreign Aid,” 379-395.

<sup>11</sup> By late 2010 the EU’s partners under the agreement had grown to 79 states.

<sup>12</sup> Article 9(2) of the agreement reflects the approach the EU followed at the beginning of the millennium. Cotonou pulled together development, human rights protection, and the empowerment of society through democratic practice as synergistic elements. It stated that “democratization, development, and the protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.”

The Barcelona Process—or Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)—ensued from the 1995 Barcelona Declaration between the EU and 12 Arab states on the southern and eastern sides of the Mediterranean Sea. Its stated purpose was to promote political liberalization in those states.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes seen as “democracy by osmosis,”<sup>14</sup> the Barcelona model “was predicated upon situating all areas of change—political, social, cultural, economic, and strategic—within a single holistic framework.”<sup>15</sup>

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 intensified the EU’s intent to further democracy in North Africa and the Middle East. The European Union concluded that any security discourse *had to include a human rights component*, if only to deter the spread of fanatical Islamism and terrorism.<sup>16</sup> The EU declared human rights protections and movement toward democratic politics “**essential elements**” of any security or economic agreement with Arab states. Theoretically those agreements were eligible for termination if these goals were not being achieved. However, while the contingency existed, the EU never terminated economic assistance to a country due to lack of progress on democratization.<sup>17</sup>

The Union launched its “European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP),”<sup>18</sup> which offered increased access to the European market and financial assistance in return for political, legal, and economic reform. It was the EU’s most systematic effort at political reform in its partner countries. The EU signed agreements with Tunisia, Morocco,<sup>19</sup> Jordan, and the Palestinian

---

<sup>13</sup> Richard Youngs, *Ten Years of the Barcelona Process: A Model for Supporting Arab Reform?* (Madrid: Fundación par alas Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior, 2004), 1. The 12 states are Algeria, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Turkey, Syria, Tunisia, and the Palestinian Authority.

<sup>14</sup> Youngs, *Ten Years*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Youngs, *Ten Years*.

<sup>16</sup> Malmvig, “Caught Between,” 345.

<sup>17</sup> Van Hüllen, “Europeanisation through Cooperation?”, 119.

<sup>18</sup> Later known as the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI).

<sup>19</sup> Between 2007 and 2010 the ENP invested €654 million in Morocco alone. Kristina Kausch, “The European Union and Political Reform in Morocco,” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2009, 166.

Authority.<sup>20</sup> European policy-makers announced the ENP would focus on a bottom-up approach to democracy promotion, strengthening civil society and providing assistance to Islamic NGOs. But scholars who follow the activities of the ENP noted that the dialogue with Arab governments about democracy and human rights rather quickly disappeared and good governance became a low priority.<sup>21</sup>

The Arab Spring confirmed the critique, and it was obvious to European politicians and policy-makers alike. The ‘essential elements’ had been ignored in agreements with North African governments, and little attention had been given to popular participation, human rights protections, and maybe most importantly, economic development at the lowest levels of society.<sup>22</sup> The grist for the Arab revolts was provided by the difficult economic circumstances produced by corrupt, discriminatory, and unenlightened economic policies in the affected countries, and the world-wide economic downturn that hit educated and middle class Arab populations especially hard. Arab streets were filled with young people with reasonably good educations but no jobs, a product of unbalanced economic development.

The EU response to the Arab Spring that was enunciated in March and May, 2011, recognized the inseparability of human rights, economic development, and democratization. On March 8 the European Commission (EC) indicated that future democratization in the Arab world would be based on a “stronger partnership with the people, with specific emphasis on support to civil society.” Moreover, it would be built on “sustainable and inclusive growth and economic

---

<sup>20</sup> Richard Youngs, *Europe’s Flawed Approach to Arab Democracy* (London, Centre for European Reform, 2006), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Bicchi, “Union for the Mediterranean,” 5,11. Durac and Cavatorta, “Strengthening Authoritarian Rule,” 17.

<sup>22</sup> In Morocco, for example, two years after the upheavals unemployment remained high, income levels had not increased, and there was a huge economic disparity between the elites surrounding the government and the citizens who had taken to the streets to protest the Moroccan king’s monopoly of power. The economic conditions raised the fear of a new outburst of instability. Suzanne Daly, “Moroccans Fear That flickers of Democracy are Fading,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 2012.



development,” especially in “poorer regions” of these states.<sup>23</sup> The EU instituted the “more for more, and less for less” policy that promised more EU financial support for faster internal reforms and downgraded relations with governments that violated human rights and democratic standards.<sup>24</sup>

The Commission noted that it must listen not only to government requests “but also to demands expressed by civil society.” In Tunisia, the epicenter of the Arab revolts, the EC allocated an immediate €17 million for democratic transition and “assistance to impoverished inland areas.”<sup>25</sup> Acknowledging that past policy “did not deliver the results we expected,” the Commission established the European Neighbourhood Facility for Agriculture and Rural Development to work closely with the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Bank to hasten economic development, which in turn could serve as a foundational plateau for democracy.<sup>26</sup> It also put in place a program titled “SPRING” (Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth), which made available €350 million in grants for projects and another €1 billion from the European Investment Bank in loans.<sup>27</sup>

In May, 2011, the Commission went further and called for the encouragement of “deep democracy” in these states by supporting civil society even as it imposed sanctions on the national government for violations of human rights. The Commission created a new European

---

<sup>23</sup> European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. *Joint Communication to the European Council, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean*. March 8, 2011, COM (2011) 200 Final, 3.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the “more for more, and less for less” policy see Isabelle Iannides and Antonio Missiroli (eds.). *Arab Springs and Transition in the Southern Mediterranean: The EU and Civil Societies One Year On. Berlaymont Paper No. 1*. Brussels: Bureau of European Policy Advisers, January, 2012, available at <http://SSRN.com/abstract=2000173>, and at [http://ec.europa.eu/bepa/publications/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/bepa/publications/index_en.htm), 7.

<sup>25</sup> European Commission, *A Partnership*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> European Commission, *A Partnership*, 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Iannides and Missiroli, *Arab Springs*, 7.

Endowment for Democracy<sup>28</sup> (EED) to fund non-governmental organizations (NGOs) directly, ignoring sovereignty claims by the governments involved. Now considered one of the “Big Three” within the EU democracy promotion architecture, along with EIDHR and ENP, the Endowment intentionally began providing assistance to pro-democracy movements and *unregistered* NGOs.

The European Union also launched a Civil Society Facility with an annual budget of €26.4 million for local CSOs that followed “best practices” in advocacy, institution-building, and monitoring government accountability. As part of the civil society effort the European Commission partnered with the Anna Lindh Foundation to enhance CSO dialogue on human rights, women’s empowerment, and democratic culture.

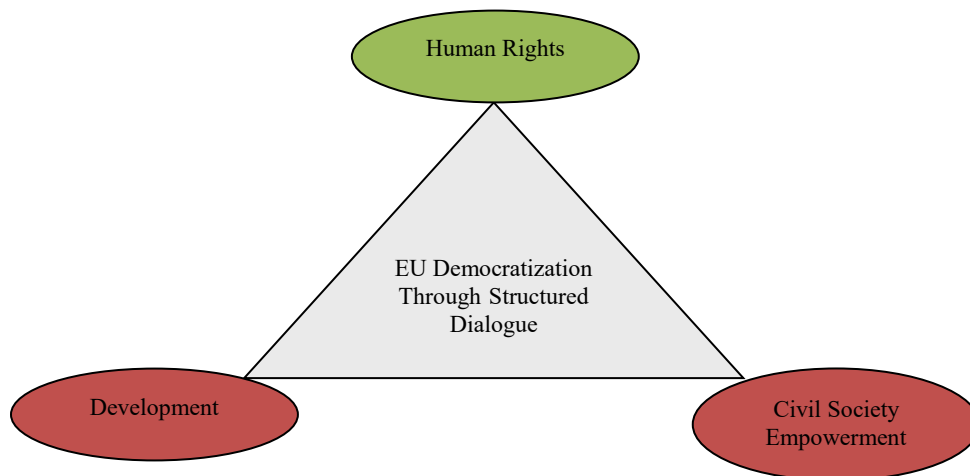
The post-Arab Spring EU emphasizes on CSO development at the lowest grassroots level and economic development in the poorest parts of the Arab world are major adjustments in the European approach to externalized democracy promotion. However, they are not so much a break with standing policy as recognition that key aspects of what the European Union calls a “Structured Dialogue” had been disastrously overlooked in the name of security interests and evolutionary change from above. The European Council in 2006 determined that economic assistance serves to strengthen democracy and human rights. As a central strategy to this end, the Council directed EU agencies to emphasize “democratization as a means to improve the life of citizens and contribute to poverty reduction and MDGs,<sup>29</sup> thus giving particular emphasis to the empowerment of poor people through participation, good governance and equality in human

---

<sup>28</sup> European Commission and High Representative of the union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. *Joint Communication to the European Council, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A New response to a Changing Neighbourhood*. May 5, 2011, COM (2011), 303, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations

dignity and rights.”<sup>30</sup> The process culminated in 2010 in the establishment of the Structured Dialogue, an inclusive consultation among members of the European Parliament, European Commission, EU member states, civil society organizations in developing countries, and local authorities in states where the EU is promoting democracy. Even employing an online blog for recommendations and negotiations, the Structured Dialogue provides a rich mechanism for input by local actors, marginalized groups, and activists into development strategies. An example of



“participatory development,” the Structured Dialogue weds the components of EU democracy promotion—development, human rights, and civil society engagement—with the power of globalization to override state borders and national government interference. As pictured here, enhanced attention to development and civil society empowerment emerged in EU circles after the Arab Spring.

EU authorities recognized that the Dialogue challenged the jurisdiction that “was the sole preserve of national governments,” and this in part explains the go-slow approach in Arab

---

<sup>30</sup> European Council, *The EU Approach To Democracy Promotion*, 4.

authoritarian regimes.<sup>31</sup> The Arab Spring demonstrated the fallacy of working with those governments and not addressing the economic development issues at the grassroots level and strengthening civil society (both pictured in red in the graphic illustration above) even without government endorsement.<sup>32</sup> The Structured Dialogue by intent enhances the decision-making role of local actors and civil society groups at the expense of state bodies, and brings international influence and resources to bear on local politics in a way that challenges former bordered- and nation-based definitions of democratic politics. Fulfilling this intention was something European governments were unwilling to do prior to the upheavals of 2011, but committed themselves to do in their wake.

The EC's May 5, 2011, statement asserted that the European Union would give a "greater political role for non-state actors."<sup>33</sup> As such the EU moved away from democratic *state-building*, as it had attempted in the earlier process of working with the sitting authoritarian governments. It now sought democratic *nation-building* from below through the growth of civil society and heavy investments in economic development. By changing the discourse and subsequent policy, the European Union moved closer to the international template sponsored by the United Nations over the previous decade.

### **UN Response to the Arab Spring**

The evolutionary approach, working through national governments in the Arab world, was never part of the democratization strategy pursued by the United Nations. "Peaceful transitions which entail a real rupture with the status quo cannot be facilitated through technical fixes." At least

---

<sup>31</sup> European Commission, *Structured Dialogue: For an Efficient Partnership in Development, Background Document--Overview of the Process and Overall Context*, March 2010, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Tobias Schumacher, "The EU and the Arab Spring: Between Spectatorship and Actorness," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2011, 109-110.

<sup>33</sup> European Commission, *A Response*, 4.

that is how the UN Development Programme assessed the situation shortly after the eruption of the Arab revolts.<sup>34</sup> According to UNDP, security concerns could not address real stability. Rather it was necessary to “mature and broaden the *democratic space* (italics added)” and address the roots of the Arab Spring which were to be found in “development failures.” That “democratic space” was the public sphere in which domestic and international NGOs intermingle with local civil society, within which UN policy dialogues and consultation could occur, bypassing national governments.

As the Arab Spring spread into the summer and fall of 2011, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon pronounced the phenomenon “a once in a generation” opportunity to support democratic change in the Arab world. He authorized a multifaceted UN response spearheaded by the UN Development Programme, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the UN Department for Political Affairs.<sup>35</sup> Noting the “profound demographic pressure” that drove the intensity of the Arab revolts, Ban pointed to the need “to create 50 million new jobs in the next decade,” and the UN’s “responsibility” to aid in that effort.<sup>36</sup>

While surprised by the immediacy of events that followed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in December 2010, UN officials exhibited a quite different reaction than EU policy-makers, the latter concerned with what had gone wrong with EU democracy promotion. This is probably because the UN apparatus for exporting democracy had been in operation longer than EU

---

<sup>34</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Strategy of Response to Transformative Change Championed by Youth in the Arab Region*. UNDP website: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org). Also found in Peter Burnell. *Lessons of Experience in International Democracy Support: Implications for Supporting Democratic Change in North Africa*. United Nations University – World Institute for Development Economics Research, Working Paper No. 2011/84, December 2011.

<sup>35</sup> “Crisis and Change in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Politically Speaking: Bulletin of the United Nations Department of Political Affairs*, Summer-Fall, 2011, 1.

<sup>36</sup> Ban Ki-Moon, *Keynote Address to the high-Level Meeting on Reform and Transitions to Democracy, Beirut, Lebanon*. SG/SM/14062, 1/16/12.

institutions and the United Nations had learned the hard lessons in many previous nation-building attempts.

Suddenly in the wake of the Arab Spring UN agencies took a renewed interest in and direction from Ban Ki-moon's *Guidance Note on Democracy* published in 2009. In that document he acknowledged "the internationally agreed normative content" of democracy that had come about through "intense debate" among all stakeholders—local, national, and international.<sup>37</sup> He noted the universal norms and standards that informed even the most local of democratic practices.

The "citizen" contemplated in the *Guidance Note* possesses political agency in many jurisdictions, and, therefore, both within and beyond borders. This cosmopolitan ideal is plausible because of the many arenas of international civil society that invite the exercise of democratic choice. Empowerment and international discursive consensus—or at least John Rawls's "overlapping consensus"—at global, national, and local levels could be real possibilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The promotion of this sense of citizenship by the United Nations over the last 25 years in post-conflict peacekeeping operations, in human rights debates, in economic and human development projects, and in the promotion of civil society informed the immediate UN response to the Arab upheavals.

In the late 1980s, as the Cold War passed into history, the United Nations, unshackled from ideological deadlock, undertook democracy promotion; this despite a commitment since its birth to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in a state's internal affairs.<sup>38</sup> This

---

<sup>37</sup>Ban Ki-moon, *Guidance Note of the Secretary-General on Democracy* (New York: United Nations, 2009), found at <[www.un.org/democracyfund/Docs/UNSG%20Guidance%20Note%20on%20Democracy.pdf](http://www.un.org/democracyfund/Docs/UNSG%20Guidance%20Note%20on%20Democracy.pdf)>.

<sup>38</sup> Although the UN Charter references human rights, equality, individual rights for men and women, popular participation in society, and other characteristics common to democratic life, the document does not include the word "democracy." Early UN documents are laconic on the role of the world body in the promotion of democratic

development came at a time when the UN Security Council was expanding UN peacekeeping missions in conflict areas. New missions moved beyond separating combatants and monitoring truces—as earlier peacekeeping had been limited to—with the goal of reconstructing domestic governments and civil societies.

The first UN democratization mission in a post-conflict setting occurred in Namibia in 1989. The United Nations took full administrative control of Namibia for the purpose of orchestrating a constitutional assembly, presiding over elections, and transferring power to an independent government. On March 21, 1990, Namibia achieved full independence as a democratic state. The democratization process was replicated in the early 1990s in two Latin American states—El Salvador and Guatemala. Success in these operations led to later efforts, most with limited or no success, in Somalia, Congo, Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

The UN's democratic nation-building initiatives necessarily involved subsidiary bodies and specialized agencies. With the growing acceptance of democratization as the primary strategy for nation-building in conflict zones or weak states, the General Assembly created the Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) in the UN Secretariat in 1992 to assist with national and municipal elections. By 2011 EAD had received requests for electoral assistance from more than 140 countries and provided help in over 100 cases, including troubled places such as Mozambique, Bosnia, Palestine, Congo, and Angola. In addition to EAD, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank directed resources toward improved governance structures in poor countries. In 2011, one third of the UNDP budget went toward democracy

---

political systems. Even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights only once mentions “democratic society,” and then only as an allusion to the types of political rights citizens should have in their national political systems.

promotion with \$800 million allocated to governance projects in 145 countries. As early as 2003, UNDP was spending more than half of all of its funds on democratization. As regimes fell in the Arab world, UNDP was the spearhead organization in the United Nations System for democratization initiatives.

Connecting the three themes (democratization, human rights, and development) was critical to UN democracy promotion initiatives from the late 1990s onward. Seeing the western conception of democracy as too limited, because it emphasized procedural and representational aspects of democracy almost to the exclusion of other necessary factors, the UN endorsed a comprehensive approach that included economic and social transformation. Going beyond Lockean conceptions, the evolving UN definition stressed that economic development, social equality, and group rights must be bolstered in order to ensure democratic stability.

The 1993 United Nations World Conference on Human Rights affirmed the principle that “all human rights are universal,” and that “it is the duty of states, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.” The conference emphasized the indivisibility and interdependence of civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights. The Declaration also affirmed the *right to development* as a universal, inalienable, integral, and fundamental part of human rights. The final document asserted that extreme poverty and social exclusion constituted a “violation of human dignity.”

The World Conference’s Declaration was given practical meaning in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The 2000 Millennium Summit proved a watershed in the UN’s redefinition of democracy promotion. Summit participants agreed on six “fundamental values”: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and a sense of shared responsibility. The Declaration set specific goals that combined development, democratization, and human



rights. As the world's conflicts moved from Cold War causes to religious, ethnic, and economic origins in the developing world, the United Nations shifted its activity. Particularly through the nexus of nation-building, human rights, and development, the UN sought to address the overwhelming internal problems of states at risk, raise the standard of living for millions, and encourage international stability by ending human rights abuses within countries.

Kofi Annan, the UN's seventh Secretary-General, was a strong advocate of this approach to democratization. The Secretary-General touted the concept of "personal sovereignty." He argued that there was a "moral duty" for the United Nations to intervene on behalf of the individual, even if that meant compromising formal state sovereignty by the circumvention of the national government.

In the new millennium, the United Nations gave democratization the broadest operational definition of any actor in the international system. And the core of that definition was the promotion of civil society at the lowest levels of society and its engagement with the international discourse on democracy, economic development, and human rights. UN thinking was captured officially in the 2004 Cardoso Report. Named for the chair of the panel that wrote the document (former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso), the 83-page report acknowledged that components of international civil society were among the prime innovators and motivators in global relations and the promotion of democracy. Panelists noted that global civil society could now wield real power in the name of citizens in subnational settings.

The broad shift in UN thinking is evident in a review of the work of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In 2002 UNDP established the Oslo Governance Centre as part of its Bureau of Development Policy. Within 12 months it had adopted a Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) to all of its democratization efforts, asserting, without empirical

evidence, that HRBA produces better and more sustainable human development outcomes. UNDP contended that national development goals, more than merely seeking national economic growth, should be geared primarily toward changing the lives of citizens so that they could enjoy fully their human rights. This is a fundamental shift from seeing the target of development as economic improvement or even promoting it as the route to economic sustainability. Through development projects, UNDP hoped to give the “duty-bearers” the ability to meet their human rights obligations and at the same time afford “rights-holders” the empowerment to claim their rights. By weaving human rights and economic development into all UNDP democratization projects, UNDP hoped to encourage its vision of democratic values and practices.

Of the 61 UNDP democratization projects sponsored between 2000 and 2006, most were directed at creating “pro-poor” empowerment that would allow usually uninvolved groups to participate at all levels of decision-making. Especially in Africa, civil society formation became central to UNDP democratization, with the goal of encouraging participation in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. A new Democracy Fund, announced by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the African Union Summit in July 2005, supported UNDP democracy promotion. By June of 2010, the Fund (UNDEF) had expended more than \$106 million, mostly directed to local civil society organizations. Two hundred seventy-one projects sponsored by UNDEF were calculated to empower local actors, thus increasing participation and pluralism in the exercise of equitable democracy. They included what one might surmise were non-traditional investments and even intrusions in local and national life. What these kinds of projects reflect is a commitment not only to HRBA, but also to promoting other UNDP proposed pillars of democracy: economic development, universal participation on the basis of equal

empowerment, and open discursive will- and policy-formation at the local level that is grounded in internationally-deemed standards of democratic society.

Helen Clark, the current administrator of UNDP, noted in June 2011 that the central message since 2002 from the United Nations concerning the Arab world was that reform was necessary and should not be delayed. “Yet as recent events have demonstrated, reform was delayed, and the uprisings which have occurred have been hugely costly.” She went on, “Underlying these events are economic exclusion which has denied decent work and opportunity for many, and political exclusion which has denied a broad right to participate in the decision-making processes which shape nations' futures.”<sup>39</sup> The theme for UNDP economic assistance in the Arab region became human development, a comprehensive strategy of economic assistance to build local infrastructure, empower disenfranchised groups in the national economy, and meet local immediate needs. UNDP poured resources into the region based on its belief that, as Peter Burnell would put it, “one of the closest things to an iron law in democratization is that stable democracy benefits from development.”<sup>40</sup>

Shortly after Muammar Ghadafi’s fall in Libya the UN Security Council established a new nation-building mission in the country, UNSMIL, to oversee the transition to democracy. Its mandate was not only to help with elections and constitution-writing, traditional activities for such operations, but also to build civil society with special emphases on key components of the Libyan social order. The Mission established SCEET (Support to Civic Engagement in Libya’s Transition) that focused primarily on women and youth. It also helped draft an NGO law. Once elections were announced it literally trained and financially supported 634 women’s campaigns

---

<sup>39</sup><http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/articles/2011/06/22/arab-states-transitions-must-be-locally-led-and-driven-says-undp-chief.html>. Also see Helen Clark, “Jobs Equity and Voice: Why Both Economic and Political Inclusion Matter,” speech at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., April 6, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Burnell, *Lessons of Experience*, 26.

for the Libyan National Congress, funds coming from UNDP and UNDEF. This reflected the Secretary-General's belief that "Women must be at the center of the region's future," and that "there can be no democracy worthy of the name without women."<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, UNDP's work in other post-revolt states took a slightly different emphasis. In Egypt the agency supported multi-party national dialogue and encouraged young people to participate in the political processes. It promoted job creation and mobilized public involvement in the development of the human rights and anti-corruption architecture. In Tunisia, UNDP promoted the new electoral commission and the development of political parties, helping craft policy options to fight corruption. It encouraged inclusive national dialogue and invested in public works programs and training schemes for young people.

These variations from country to country represented some nuanced insight not evident in past nation-building experiences. While the preoccupations remained with building civil society at the grassroots and promoting economic development, the UN did learn some new lessons from the Arab experience. One was that no single size fits all. The new mantra from UN agencies was that future democratization strategies had to be tailored to each national environment. In 2012 fully 15% of UNDEF grants went to the Arab world, nearly double the usual amount, but the awards concentrated on "the demand side of democracy rather than the supply side."<sup>42</sup> Each Arab transition state has unique demands, and the UN template was adjusted to meet national peculiarities.

National ownership became the new concern of UN democracy promotion in the different Arab nation-building settings. Nation-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq had very limited success in part because Afghans and Iraqis never saw the external intrusions to be adoptable as

---

<sup>41</sup> Ban Ki-moon, *Keynote Address*, 1/16/2012.

<sup>42</sup> "UNDEF Board Endorses Short List of 73 New Projects," *UNDEF Update*, No. 14, May 2012, 1.

indigenous practice. There was a sense that once the foreigners went home, gains previously made would be undone. Ban Ki-moon had established the standard on national ownership in his *Guidance Note*, decreeing “UN assistance should ... be explicitly requested by local actors and never imposed.” But in Afghanistan, Iraq, Congo, and other nation-building operations after 2009, his mandate was more often honored in the breach than in compliance. The populist “street” nature of the Arab revolts chastened UN unilateral impositions and interventions. Fearing a backlash, as much as fearing the failure of UN efforts that did not match specific national cultures and histories, the UN attempted to calibrate its programs to grassroots public opinion and norms in each society.

### **The Arab Spring, Democracy Promotion, and State Sovereignty**

The Arab Spring delivered another blow to the insularity promised by state sovereignty. The world community not only watched from afar but also intervened despite complaint and opposition from the embattled authoritarian governments. This is a phenomenon that has been going on for some time. The post-Cold War, marked by accelerating globalization, global communications, the willingness of powerful states to impose emergent human rights norms on recalcitrant governments, has witnessed a withering assault on Westphalian state autonomy. The response of the European Union, the United Nations, and other international actors to Arab events pushed the needle a little further toward a world of compromised state sovereignty and global solutions to domestic crises.<sup>43</sup>

The contemporary attack on state sovereignty generally congealed around the defense of human rights over the last 30 years. The European Union, which, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, spent nearly \$1 billion annually on democracy promotion, gave the broadest definition to human rights

---

<sup>43</sup> By example, US President Obama’s decisions to undercut the Mubarak regime in Egypt and to intervene in Libya, but not in Bahrain or Yemen, reflected little consideration of legal state sovereignty norms.

in its conception of democratization. On June 26, 2006, the European Council published its first working paper on EU democratization policy. European leaders noted:

Though understandings of democracy may vary, it needs to be emphasized that democracy, including rule of law and the protection of human rights, is a **universal value** [boldface originally included], the principles of which are enshrined in numerous international texts and conventions, and is thus a right for all and a goal in itself. In this sense, democracy and human rights are inseparable and interdependent. Democracy is also described as a **process** [boldface originally included], developing from within, involving all sections of society and a range of institutions that should ensure participation, representation, responsiveness and accountability. The task of building and sustaining a culture of human rights and making democracy work for its citizens, though especially urgent and difficult in emerging democracies, is in fact a never-ending challenge.<sup>44</sup>

While equally preponderant in the human initiatives of international organizations, at least since the 1960s, economic development gained no equal billing to human rights in the EU understanding of democracy.

To be sure, the United Nations discursive and substantive fusion of critical components in its configuration of democracy also starts with human rights as the oldest of these definitional building blocks. The return of normative principles to modern international law was enshrined in the United Nations Charter. Not only the civil liberties that limit government's impositions on individual freedom but also positive legal rights were assumed to be part of a person's human inheritance. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights spelled out social and economic rights which governments had legal obligations to provide. These rights were augmented in following decades with group and cosmopolitan rights. With the close of the Cold War, the new energy of globalization, and the social action of non-state forces in the international community, conservative conceptions of the required human rights essential to democracy slowly responded

---

<sup>44</sup> European Council, *The EU Approach To Democracy Promotion In External Relations: Food For Thought*, June 21, 2006, 1, found at <[www.democracyagenda.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=8](http://www.democracyagenda.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=8)>.

to arguments in favor of these social, communal, and cosmopolitan human rights, thus broadening the definitional boundaries of democracy itself.

But in historical terms, the postwar era's commitment to economic and social development as also a component of a right to democracy followed the assertion of essential human rights. The "development movement" that began in the late 1940s presumed economic advancement was a prerequisite to democracy.<sup>45</sup> It was also a "freeing" act, ending centuries-old colonial tutelage. UN documents, beginning with the Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have all decreed economic development to be central to UN activity. Furthermore, whether it was Walt Rostow, Raul Prebisch, or Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, from the 1950s through to the new century, economic modernization and its social development corollary have signaled fundamental principles of democratic life. The United Nations placed that idea in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and gave it practical meaning by setting in motion the UN Development Programme.

While human rights were never far from concern in the days of Arab unrest, development and civil society empowerment beyond the control of a national government, two legs in the Structured Dialogue of the European Union, emerged as the common foci of both the EU and UN interventions in the reverberating months following the Arab Spring. For the European Union, the redirection was meant to address a regular criticism that EU democratization efforts were not giving enough attention to programs promoting social cohesion, to the delivery of goods and services, and to essential development assistance that underlay successful democracy

---

<sup>45</sup> While by different means, the older tradition of enlightenment capitalists assumed the same outcome: trade based on the comparative advantage of all nations would produce the wealth of different peoples to their optimal benefit. In so doing, the marketplace would make possible not only economic liberty but republican liberty as well. Today's economic globalists have revived the argument—although not without opposition—that economic liberty and global trade will necessarily contribute to democracy's advancement.

initiation.<sup>46</sup> It was delivery aspect of democracy – of social and economic goods – that the EU hoped to enhance through its new partnerships in the Arab world. For the United Nations, it was not a matter of redirection but rather a ramping up of development assistance at the grassroots level, largely by investment in civil society projects.

The failure to address the development disparities in the Arab states provided the fuel set alight by Bouazizi's tragic self-destruction. Not just the poor but the underemployed middle of society made demands on their societies that no government in the region under existing circumstances could economically meet. The European and UN decisions to rush economic investment to these states, and the UN's appreciation of the imperative of national ownership, recognized this reality. Of the asserted "self-evident" foundation stones of democracy, economic development gained renewed respect among outside actors.

On the shared ground of contemporary international relations, state sovereignty is, increasingly, an insecure claim. No longer a permanent and inviolate characteristic of statehood, internal sovereignty depends less and less often on the capabilities of the central government to enforce its will, and ever more on the acceptance of its claim by its citizens, as demonstrated so well in the streets of Cairo, Tunis, and Benghazi. When former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan rolled out in conjunction with the 2000 Millennium Summit the concept of "personal sovereignty" that he said the international community must defend against state sovereignty, he was first laying out a defense for the UN democratization strategy and second acknowledging the realities of interdependent globalization.

---

<sup>46</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Democracy in Development: Global Consultations on the EU's Role in Democracy Building* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2009), 23.



The UN's position, and increasingly so the European Union's in its response to the Arab Spring, reflects what is now often referred to as the neo-Kantian approach to sovereignty. In the view of Immanuel Kant's acolytes, sovereignty arises from the will of the state's citizens who seek to protect and provide for their well-being through the power of their government. Kant's commandment that no state should forcibly interfere in the constitution and government of another state is seen by contemporary Kantians as not so much a prohibition out of concern for the legal principle of state sovereignty as it is Kant's assertion of the freedom and autonomy of other peoples restrained only by the moral law.<sup>47</sup> For example, neo-Kantians like Fernando Tesón have noted the decline of the Westphalian system and the redefinition in international law of state sovereignty in terms of Kant's defense of the "rights of man" and popular sovereignty.<sup>48</sup> These scholars sense that global interdependence will override state sovereignty to create a new international civil society under "just legislation."

When government becomes the perpetrator of violence against its own citizens, as occurred in the Arab revolts, neo-Kantians (unlike "realists") often suppose that sovereignty in principle is relinquished, thus suggesting a fundamental amendment to the traditional international relations canon. By administering justice to guilty government leaders, or by empowering local individuals, groups, and power structures to confront authoritarian governments, the international community notionally restores citizens' rights and security, undercutting the causes of internal conflict. But, of course, ultimately, such restoration requires outside intrusion into the formerly sovereign state.

---

<sup>47</sup> Martii Koskenniemi, "Constitutionalism and Mindset: Reflections on Kantian Themes About International Law and Globalization," *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, Vol. 8, No. 1, January 2007, Art. 2, 10.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Fernando Tesón, *A Philosophy of International Law* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

In the wake of the Arab Spring, for both the United Nations and the European Union democracy is not so much about institutions as it is about participatory citizenship. The EU movement in this direction brought it closer to the long-standing UN democracy promotion strategy. In both cases the approach further challenged the tattered concept of state sovereignty as traditionally understood.

The use of civil society organizations raises thorny issues concerning international intervention and suggests a porosity of borders that is beyond state control. In this practiced conception of democracy, citizenship is lifted beyond state sovereignty and is tied to transnational engagement with the issues of human rights and development. This is a central tenet of contemporary cosmopolitanism, which presumes that “stateness” is not a requirement of effective citizenship in a global democratic order. Whether it is in networked webs of nongovernmental organizations, sponsored domestic political activity, or agenda-setting that privileges global issues and standards, IGOs seek to activate a new citizenry as a critical element of true democracy. While unwilling to say it openly, EU and UN actions in the Arab setting demonstrate yet again their belief that state sovereignty is of decreasing importance to the authoritative identity of the individual as citizen.

International organizations are examples of Habermas’s “nodal points” in the international communications network, part of international civil society, advancing the salient issues, possible solutions, and constructed values of a vibrant democratic process into the public sphere, where global consensus formation is, Habermas thinks, possible.<sup>49</sup> In the public sphere, a learning process leads international organizations to discover new norms and methodologies, and alter their understanding of old ones. These practices today take on more legitimacy than they

---

<sup>49</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discursive Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 373.

did at the close of World War II because the organizations themselves have acquired a certain normative authority that was not present when the United Nations approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.<sup>50</sup>

IGO practice today, originating from praxis and discursive learning, suggests that democracy is more about participation at every level than about individual representation in formal bodies at the national level. Within state-centric democracies the UN, European Union, African Union, and other international organizations have bet that democratic stability requires a vibrant civil society, human rights, and economic development. Furthermore, the defense of human rights, the rule of law, and economic development depend on the social engagement of numerous groups and individuals, all committed to democratic procedures.

In the process, local civil society organizations have become intertwined with the international community in ways that allow international organizations to act as domestic influences on national and local government and lead local citizens to engage in international citizenship functions. A blurring of local and transboundary citizenship emerges that contributes to the creation of a nascent cosmopolitan international civil society in which national borders are less important than in early periods of state formation. The behaviors of the United Nations and the European Union in response to the Arab Spring continue to move that process forward.

---

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of the new authoritative legitimacy of international organizations see Jean-Marc Coicaud, "Reflections on International Organizations and International Legitimacy: Constraints, Pathologies, and Possibilities," *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 53, Issue 170, December 2001, 523–536. On the United Nations in particular see Robert Fine, *Cosmopolitanism* (London: Routledge, 2007), 24.