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A changing geopolitical landscape: informal institutions and democratization

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Faye Donnelly, University of St. Andrews

Constantin Gurdiev, University College Dublin, Open Republic Institute

The main purpose of this article is to explore the role that informal organisations play in the legitimisation of regime change and the failure of key modern theories of globalisation and international relations (I.R.) to fully accredit the centrality of civic groups as agents of change. Following this, we use constructivist methodology in explaining gradual shifts in ideological mindsets and the socio-political aspirations. Briefly reviewing current events, this paper appraises the significance of unauthorised dissident movements, and their involvement in the proliferation of prominent trends, such as democratisation and terrorism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the events of September 11, 2001, the notion of regime change has sparked renewed interest within academic circles. Under the auspices of President George W. Bush's "war on terror", the deconstruction of rogue nations and reconstruction of failed states has become the language of our everyday reality, highlighting the need for a deeper analysis of popular, broadly-based movements on the political and policy landscape. Speaking before an audience at the Idaho Centre, Bush stressed that the war on terror "is a different kind of war. Today's enemies do not mass armies on borders, or navies on high seas. They blend into the civilian population." (2005:4).

These changes in geopolitical balance have led to the emergence of two conflicting theories of the role of the state and the emergence of new socio-political players.

In stark contrast to the bi-polar environment of the Cold War, John Naisbitt asserted that, "we are moving towards a world of 1,000 countries" (1995:40). Other hyper-globalisation theorists have surmised that, "the traditional nation states [have begun] to come apart" (Ohmae, 1995:8-9). Nicholas Negroponte concludes that, "without question, there will be no more room for nationalism than there is for smallpox" (1995:11).

In an opposing vein, sceptics of the globalisation paradigm charge that this phenomenon is, at least, a major exaggeration. These scholars assert that increasing trans-national political and economic activities are not unprecedented. Indeed, as early as in 1919, well before the hyperglobalist theory of globalisation, John Maynard Keynes wrote in his *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* that, "the inhabitant of London could order by telephone... the various products of the whole earth... and reasonably expect their early delivery upon his doorstep.... But, most important of all he regarded this state of affairs as normal, certain, and permanent... and any deviation from it as aberrant..."

Challenging the fractious balance of power paradigm, scholarly critics maintain that the state will remain a vital part of trans-national world. They note that several indicators of globalisation, such as the increase in foreign direct investment, tend to be geographically concentrated. According to Hirst and Thompson, "trade, investments and financial flows are concentrated in the Triad of Europe, Japan and North America and this dominance seems set to continue" (1996:2).

Perhaps a more realistic description of current affairs is offered in the trans-formalist notion of globalisation, somewhere on the continuum between the hyper-globalist and state-centric extremes. This ideology recognises that

alongside pervasive institutional change the state remains the central actor, and may even be increasing its sphere of influence in a modified form.

For instance, Clark (1999:18) has argued for, “a theory of the global...[as] an integral dimension of a more plausible theory of the state”. At the same time, Weiss forewarns that hyper-globalisation models err in writing off sovereign states since, “domestically strong states may be able to adapt, and to assist firms to adjust more effectively to the external environment...” (Weiss, 1997:21).

In contrast to the existing literature, this paper considers the importance of actors that frequently find themselves marginalised, and perceived impotent in an increasingly borderless world. Examining this dilemma, in contrast to the traditional anti-globalization postulates, we find that “local cultures' global participation has been greatly... underestimated” (Robertson, 1995:34).

While some of the work on international relations includes explicit analysis of non-state actors, such analysis rarely extends beyond the supportive role of such institutions in acting within the existing norms set out by the main political and economic players. Robert Dahl's argument that the mere foundations of democracy must include associational autonomy is a good example. Dahl (2005:189) defines associational autonomy's role in modern democracy as a tool for achieving various existent rights. Clearly such a definition neglects the importance of the informal institutions in norm and rights setting.

There is an urgent need for contemporary studies to integrate more of the actors that shape global politics into analysis. To this end, this paper draws upon constructivist theoretical frameworks to improve our understanding of change in world politics, and recognise the multi-layered nature of contemporary norms and social networks.

II. FOUNDATIONS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

The core assumption of constructivism is that the social world exists as a human construct and that people must self-authorise their own identity. In short, “man constructs his own nature, or, simply, man produces himself” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991:67). Equipped with a view of the social world consistently in flux, constructivists argue that the building blocks of reality are inseparable from a process of habitual communication (Onuf, 1998:59).

These scholars emphasize that individuals can acquire a durable sense of social identification only from concrete transactions in which they engage and invest. Others must also believe and ascribe to the symbolic contours of everydayness in order for the system to emerge. The ability of our faculty of speech to accomplish anything depends heavily on whether others respond to what they hear.

Constructivists stress that these repetitive interactions foster a sense of societal stability. This implies that individual lives and peripheral environments become considerably simplified and, in turn, prioritised. In short, “collective understandings provide people with reasons why things are the way that they are” (Adler, 1997:322).

Thus, the presence of closely-knit and durable ties of reciprocal identification (Anderson, 1983) ensures that institutional meanings attain legitimacy. Normally symbolic categorisation schemes and propaganda are deemed pivotal in this regard, as Edward Shils and Michael Young aptly depict. Utilising the loyalty invoked by mass public rituals, such as Elizabeth II's coronation, and by potent emblems, such as the British crown, these writers demonstrate how broad social norms represent an assured technique of group maintenance and cohesion.

An extremely interesting upshot of constructivist methodology lies in the implication that numerous material typifications, such as economic markets, not to mention the nation-state itself, are reified structures. By definition, “reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly supra-human terms” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991:106).

As ritualised actions become predictable routines, their natural surroundings gradually become involuntary and inert. Consequently, people forget that society is man made, and view it as a facility outside themselves and their

control. David Lake argues that a principle of reciprocal pacifism has amassed a taken-for-granted quality among modern liberal democracies. That is, “no less likely to fight war, in general, democracies are significantly less likely to fight each other” (Lake, 1992:24).

However, a key point to note is that constructivists and liberals alike do not depict reified, or corporate, identities as infinitely enduring spatio-temporal phenomenon. Despite the “fact that institutions, once formed have a tendency to persist” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991:99), society always remains incomplete and evolving.

Thus, contrasting the conventional IR theories, constructivism recognises that individual agents and their fluid interests must also be considered. Put succinctly, “constructivism's contribution is that it invokes the “context” effects of norms” (Price and Tannenwald, 1996:150).

Alongside this perspective, constructivists champion an explicit belief that social interests and expectations are endogenous rather than exogenous to adjacent social and political structures. In this respect, “social artefacts are not only imbued with meaning. They are forms that allow for the extension of the self to the world...” (Fierke, 2005:170).

Given this ability to eschew rational causality approaches that begin with pre-constituted environments and structured groups, constructivism has been heralded by many as an evolving “third way” to analyse international relations. In short, “it allows us to ask questions about features that are assumed away by other paradigms” (Finnermore 1996a: 328). Robert Dahl (2005:196) outlines the limited role of learning and interactions amongst the voters in acquiring an enlightened understanding of the democratic processes. However, as common in the modern theory, his argument does not extend beyond the supportive role of informal institutions as playing a reflective, not a creative, role in setting democratic norms and constraints.

Alexander Wendt sketches the distinction between the agent-biased and structure-biased theories in IR. Taking particular issue with the writings of Kenneth Waltz, who ultimately contends that anarchy regulates the rules of states' behaviour in the international community, Wendt asserts that while, “neo-realists and neo-liberals may disagree about the extent to which states are motivated by relative versus absolute gain, both groups take the self interested states as the starting point for theory” (Wendt, 1992:392).

Wendt demonstrates that the conventional wisdoms of neo-realism and neo-liberalism infuse an expectation that competition, not cooperation, will be the most likely outcome of state interaction. Furthermore, “the international system can change what states want” (Finnermore, 1996b: 5).

The advent and unexpected impact of Mikhail Gorbachev “New Thinking” aptly exemplifies how even the most powerful corporate identities can be radically and rapidly modified by shifts in their surroundings. Wendt is convinced that “self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of [competition]. Anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1992:394).

III. RELAYING THE BOTTOM LINE

This section utilises the central assumptions of constructivism to uncover the significance of informal organisation in regime change. Our aim is to re-establish the affinity between the legitimacy of governing states and institutions on the one hand and the behaviour of civic movements on the other.

Starting with the events of 9/11 a growing sense of pessimism has marked the beginning of the new sceptical cycle in public perception of the global geopolitical balance. Mirroring this, many pundits have begun to flag a “democratic deficit” or, more simply, a rift between state and society.

III.1. EUROPEAN UNION CRISIS

The outright rejection of the draft treaty establishing a constitution of Europe by the French and Dutch last spring serves as a textbook case of this creeping separation. Indeed, with the emergence of the present stalemate, many analysts are warning about the ongoing deconstruction of Europe.

Although the critics may be right, they are missing one crucial point – “disagreement over the constitution did not precipitate the EU’s current troubles; rather, it was the growing malaise over the EU’s operation that precipitated the constitutional debacle” (Cohen-Tanugi, 2005:55).

Thus far, however, the Union has consistently shown that it would rather add another layer of bureaucracy over all agencies than enforce necessary structural changes to streamline the Union and foster more accountability. “...even the sight of an iceberg of voter revolt rising ominously over the troubled waters of European policies can’t stop a Euro-Titanic bent on charging ahead with new bureaucratic canons” (Gurdgiev, 2005b).

The official EU position appears to completely disregard the rapid growth of independent, officially non-aligned popular organisations at grass-roots level across the continent which increasingly pitch themselves as the centres for opposition to the EU bureaucracy. In doing so, Brussels behaves along the traditionalist state-centric theory of state-subject relations.

Only minority parties represented in the EU Parliament, such as the UK Independence Party, are attempting to link up with these informal organisations in policy debate and development. However, since enlargement in May 2004, the EU’s institutions are showing significant signs of fractionalisation along the lines of core-periphery divisions. The new, still nascent, but growing movement, Congress of Brussels and proliferation of the more liberally-minded think tanks in and around Brussels offer promise of increasing participatory outlets for voter engagement and legitimisation.

III.2. THE WAR ON TERROR

Elsewhere, the present bid, “to implant democracy side by side with Islam” (Laird, 2005:36) in the Middle East magnifies this syndrome. President Bush outlined the mission’s purpose as an effort to oust Saddam Hussein’s old authoritarian order and, secondly, nullify Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. Capitalising on the widespread outrage following the 9/11 attacks was immensely important in legitimising this endeavour, but, ultimately, even this campaign was unable to disguise the differences between reality and the assumed situation in Iraq.

Compounding the failure of Britain and the US to gain UN Security Council support for their military invasion, the intelligence blunders concerning non-existent WMD and heinous evidence of abuses from Abu Ghraib stained the planned transition to democracy. In addition to the top-down paralysis of governance institutions, the coalition soon discovered that regime loyalists were dispersed rather than destroyed during the invasion. Evidence of insurgent resilience and resourcefulness lies in the overwhelming casualties they inflicted in the cities of Fallujah and Baghdad. Generally speaking, then, “the coalition pre-war planning effort was weakened by both conceptual and organisational errors” (Rathmell, 2005:1025).

Not surprisingly the limited nature of campaign outcomes has led to a growing scepticism about defining features of the current Bush administration, characterised by ‘preemption’ and ‘preventive war’. Indeed, many opponents complain that what began as self-defence of America vital interests has morphed into imperialist, unilateral, nation building.

Citing inconsistencies in purported US concerns, the Arab world seldom entertains the possibility that, “the Bush administration might actually be committed to democracy for its own sake” (Ottaway, 2005:178-179). Plainly, this lack of popular credibility undercuts official efforts to promote democracy. Furthermore, the unpredicted forcefulness of this approach under Bush, in some respects, proved counterproductive as the message of democracy is now frequently rejected with the messenger.

Exacerbating the situation, “Iraq has also, of course, become something of a terrorist training – and inspiration-zone” (Mueller, 2005: 51). Abrupt transformations in the nuclear ambitions of Iran, Syria and North Korea underline this growing imbalance between the objectives and the perceptions on the ground. It is becoming increasingly possible that the chief beneficiaries of the ‘war on terror’ may turn out to be the members of the ‘axis of evil’.

Similar to the Vietnam War intelligence and communications lapses in Iraq and the greater Middle East are born from a failure to understand what has motivated and legitimised trans-national jihad factions and other anti-regime organisations in the first instance. Apparently, “its main attraction for its followers lies... [in] its supposed capacity to provide answers to their contemporary political and social predicaments” (Ayooob, 2005: 955). The fact that Al Qaeda, was founded on the motto ‘Islam is the solution’ bears testimony to this assertion.

Events to date illustrate that both Bush and Blair and their critics alike have often focused on the wrong metrics for measuring progress in the Iraq war. Stemming from the absence of a clear or unified strategy to deploy, for instance, the architects of the intervention, “point to the success of America’s occupation of postwar Germany and Japan as evidence that occupation can deliver on democratic objectives” (Bellin, 2004-2005:595). Against the background of the crucial elections in January and the ratification of a new constitution such arguments have merit (Gurdgiev, 2004).

However, they do not tell the whole story. These idealist assumptions dilute the depth of nationalism and internal discord that have persistently cancelled the tremendous social, political and economic capital expended in fighting this war on terror. Additionally, they fail to realise that, “rather than being a mere electoral matter, democratic governance presupposes an institutional context characterised by recursive and progressing communication and social cohesion” (Cederman, 2000:3). Indeed, we need look no further than the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly to conclude that simply installing governing bodies does not consolidate democratic process.

Recent changes in the Washington doctrine on democratisation have signalled continued interpretation of the role of the informal organisations as supportive in the process of reforms in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. In March 2005, President Bush stated that the goal of the US Middle Eastern policy is “... to help change the conditions that give rise to extremism and terror... When dictatorship mcontrols the political life of a country, responsible opposition cannot develop, and dissent is driven underground and toward the extreme” (Bush, 2005b). This signifies the firmly held conviction that civic organisations do not act as the driving force of change in the region.

To some extent, this argument is in line with reality. So far, a wealth of historical evidence on Iraq shows that during the period from 1930s through the late 1970s, presence of strong and vibrant informal movements and associations in Iraq was not sufficient to develop significant democratic culture. However, the ability of the informal movements to generate democratic reforms is contrasted with the extremely powerful role that non-governmental organisations play in the Middle East and Iraq on the side of supporting and fostering extremist Islamic agenda. In fact, George Clause argues that given the strength of antidemocratic and extremist informal organisations in the Middle East, free and democratic elections there would most likely result in the emergence of an authoritarian, religious state. “History indicates that legitimate democratic elections in Arab states would most likely benefit Islamists” (Clause, 2005: 73).

III 3UKRAINE’S ORANGE REVOLUTION

Equally, the presidential elections in the Ukraine raise serious doubts about relying solely on bureaucratic procedures to transfer power in allegedly democratic avenues (Gurdgiev, 2005a).

For all its flaws, the Ukrainian election offers valuable lessons in terms of generating and delivering the true virtues of democracy. Reminiscent of the dissent movements that aided the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991, the ‘Orange Revolution’ staged in Kiev, “unearthed a vibrant civil society that few scholars and analysts believed had existed” (Kuzio, 2005:117). As had previously been the case in Serbia and Georgia, and during the 1990s across the former USSR (Donnelly, 2005), the neutrality of the security forces, along with fragmentation within the top ranks, proved invaluable to the protesters success in the dethroning the illicit regime. A monumental defeat for Viktor Yanukovych, the remarkable mass protests that followed the fraudulent elections offer concrete evidence that civil society and informal groups can still triumph over big government conservatism.

If nothing else, what the Ukrainian quest for accountable governance demonstrates is that history always remains

to be written. It is apparent that securing the hearts and minds of the informal organisations, advances civic agendas provides compelling footholds for implementing change.

IV. CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The purpose of this article was to place the role of the informal organisations and civic movements within the context of regime change.

We argue that the majority of traditional international relations paradigms tend to advocate polarized worlds, where nations are either approaching extinction or reassertion. Guided by the constructivist theoretical framework, we show that there is another side to globalisation and international debates that have received much less attention.

Through brief analysis of current affairs, we show that these inconsistencies are intimately connected to the problem of a democratic deficit associated with several initiatives promoting reform. Encompassed in this discussion was how the war in Iraq can be seen to be pulling Arab world in the opposite direction from democracy.

Although there is no singular policy stance that is likely to bear currency in all cases, this essay endeavoured to reinforce some policy options aimed at enhancing the value of democracy.

(1) The strategic and operational planning processes must be flexible to allow rapid adaptation when circumstances and players change.

(2) There is a need for significant reallocation of resources in the democratisation campaigns away from direct military actions and in favour of the Marshall Plan-like efforts to generate and sustain growth of democratically-based informal institutions in the failed and failing states.

(3) In support of the objectives outlined in (2) above, there is a growing need to develop institutional frameworks for providing physical and financial security guarantees to the democratically-oriented informal organisations.

(4) The US, Europe, Japan and Australia should focus on importing domestic nongovernmental resources into the failing states and societies along the lines proposed by Joseph Nye (2005: 267).

(5) The real policy breakthrough, however, will be in devising functional means of incorporating local and informal organisations – traditionally the secondary players – into the overall process of democracy building.

According to George Clause (2005: 75): Washington should support those groups that are more likely to accept... and emulate US political values. The most effective way to demonstrate that support is to openly pressure Arab regimes when they obstruct the political activity of more liberal groups.

The protesters of who have orchestrated dissent movements, such as the Orange Revolution, as well as the brave civilian who cast their vote at gunpoint in Iraq deserve more than a simple recognition in celebratory speeches. They deserve full consideration in our planning and execution of democracy-building policies around the world.

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