The United Nations and Democracy

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The UN has been maligned over the past decade for peacekeeping failures in Somalia and Bosnia and for being a bloated, inefficient, ineffective bureaucracy. Yet, at the same time, the organization has become increasingly active in promoting the democratic process around the world, particularly in developing countries. It is, in fact, not hyperbole to assert that the UN Secretariat has assumed the impressive role of international agent for democratization, as it has engaged the UN organization in various activities toward that end in more than seventy-five states and territories over the past decade. Unfortunately, this formidable UN effort at assisting the democratic process worldwide has gone largely neglected and unappreciated.

This study aims to remedy this neglect by pursuing three main purposes. First, I examine the concept of “democracy” as interpreted and applied by the UN so that a clearer picture can be derived of the particular political system envisioned, promoted, and supported by the UN Secretariat. I also offer an appraisal of the Secretariat’s rationale for undertaking such efforts at promoting democracy and the special role, if any, that certain member states might play in these efforts.

Second, I examine the ways and means the UN has adopted for implementing assistance to states that have requested special help from the UN in the democratization process. This analysis provides insights into how the UN facilitates the democratic process and which states have been most active in seeking UN support. For the discussion, a clearer picture emerges of which facets of democracy are considered paramount by the UN and how the organization has contributed to institutionalizing those facets in various countries around the world.

A third purpose of the study is to gauge what success the UN has had in its efforts to promote democracy. I do this by examining certain key questions, among them: Have the UN’s efforts been worthwhile? Where has the UN succeeded in promoting democracy, and where has it failed? Are there political, legal, and ideological lessons to be learned from the UN experience in promoting democracy? In sum, can the UN make a difference in promoting the acceptability of democracy worldwide? If so, how, and to what degree? Finally, the conclusion aims to draw lessons
learned from the UN’s experience for effecting democracy throughout the past decade.

At the outset, however, two important caveats are in order. First, this study focuses on the recent efforts of the UN to promote democratic practices around the world. The analysis does not mean to imply, though, that the UN is either the only or the most effective agent for doing so. Clearly, other bilateral and multilateral democratization efforts, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Scandinavian donors, the Organization of American States, or even Mercosur, may be as important, if not more so, in promoting the ways and means of democracy around the world. My main aim is to explain how, where, and why the UN has taken up the challenge of promoting democracy after the Cold War and the legal, political, and economic implications those efforts hold for member states.

The second caveat deals with how the notion of democracy is treated throughout the study. Although the analysis concerns the UN and its role as an agent of democratization, it must be emphasized that democratization as a process comes down to people. Often international democracy is equated with the notion of sovereignty and equality of all states. That is not the meaning here. Rather, democracy refers to the practices of people in a national society that strive to provide free and fair elections, with respect for the civil and political rights of individuals, protected under the rule of law. This means that the concept of democracy at the global level must constantly give attention to the roles and actions of people in different countries. In sum, since 1990, the UN has acted openly to provide the ways and means for instituting democratic practices in various countries. This study examines those ways and means, along with their underlying philosophies, as articulated by the UN secretaries-general in documents and deeds over the past decade.

The Evolving UN Role

Since 1945, the meaning of democracy has changed markedly in international relations. During World War II, democracy was viewed as the political system that opposed fascism. During the Cold War, the notion of democracy was pulled in two different directions, East and West, mainly to appeal to developing countries in the Third World. On the one hand, Eastern socialist states espoused democracy in terms of economic, social, and cultural circumstances threatened by Western imperialism, with the overarching need that more egalitarian opportunities be given to all states. In these revolutionary efforts, the Eastern bloc often resorted to violent means to subvert legitimate governments. In the West, democracy was viewed as the political rights and civil liberties of a free, independent state that must be protected from global communism. Paradoxically, however,