

***The Need for FORESIGHT:** Given inevitable constraints of the fiscal year framework for development planning, not to mention the day to day rush of project design and implementation, development policymakers and practitioners often simply lack the time to engage in longer term strategic planning. While there is usually a general sense of what they want to see happen 10 years down the line, there is still a need to think more systematically about what should be done today to best ensure those goals are actually achieved. In other words, we need to increase our resources for thinking over the horizon and strive to better understand how to get to where we really want by acting earlier in a more coordinated fashion. Foresight is intended to help meet this need in a novel way, by offering new insights drawn from cutting edge evidence based academic research. Each issue will be dedicated to a single theme, to be defined through a dialogue between academic researchers and the policymaking community. Articles will synthesize current research from the perspective of what we need to think about today in order to achieve our goals 10 years from now. In this way, we hope to create a new nexus between research, policy and practice by disseminating the latest development research in a practical way that is in tune with the priorities of the development community.*

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## **DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND THE THREAT OF NEW FORMS OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE** PHILIP OXHORN, MCGILL UNIVERSITY

Today's global commitment to supporting democratic governance is unprecedented. Starting in the 1970s with democratic transitions in Southern Europe and Latin American, then gaining momentum through the 1980s and culminating with transitions to democracy in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War, democracy's so-called "third wave" seemed virtually unstoppable only 10 years ago. Just as regional public opinion polls consistently show high levels of popular support for democracy as the preferred form of government, the principal donors of international development assistance increasingly include a commitment to democratic governance in the design of development policies and the designation of

aid recipients. In contrast to the not too distant past, democracy is no longer viewed as the end point in a long process of economic development involving tradeoffs that only rich, developed countries could afford to make. Instead, the earlier focus on prerequisites to democracy has been displaced by a more proactive perspective that emphasizes the need to build democratic institutions even in the poorest, least developed countries around the globe.

The promotion of democracy entered a new phase post-9/11 as it came to play a central role in the war on terror, particularly for the United States. This has introduced new trade-offs that threaten to re-polarize the world based on a Western Judeo-Christian vs. an Eastern Islamic "clash of civilizations." At the same time, the international donor community's commitment to supporting democracy became even stronger, even though it has not yet effectively resolved what has become a growing tension between non-Western "culture" and the alleged universality of democratic ideals.

Yet even before democratization and terrorism became inextricably intertwined in the international arena, democracy's third wave seemed to have reached its zenith. While the optimism of the mid-1990s has not been replaced by a new sense of pessimism, there is a growing sense that future prospects for democratic governance in developing countries can no longer be taken for granted. Freedom House, for example observed in its 2006 annual report what it calls a growing trend toward "freedom stagnation." This reflects setbacks in a number of countries that had made substantial progress in democratization and a retrenchment of authoritarian practices in regimes that had not. The military coups in Thailand and Fiji, as well as the failed coup in the Philippines, stand out only because of the brazenness of the threat to democratic institutions they

represent. In many ways, the more insidious threats to democracy posed by increasing restrictions on civil society organizations and the media are even more disturbing. According to Freedom House's data, this has resulted in democratic backsliding in 33 countries.

What does today's "freedom stagnation" and democratic backsliding imply for the future? One might have predicted that over 10 years of sometimes dramatic progress in the advancement of democracy, often won through intense, sustained mobilization by both the international community and national civil societies, would inevitably lead to a period of relative democratic calm, if not the stagnation we are witnessing today. New political institutions would need time to grow and consolidate. Societies, often lacking any experience in democratic governance, would need time to adjust to the new dynamics democracy entails. Societies might even need time to recuperate their collective energy after years of repression and mobilization. Such a period of recuperation would naturally coincide with a democratic honeymoon as societies waited to see what their new elected governments might be able to achieve, at the same time that fears of a backlash from the not-necessarily-defeated supporters of the *ancien* regimes would put a damper on societal pressures for even more change.

The international donor community, in turn, might be expected to adopt a more complacent strategy, biding its time until a new, democratic cycle emerges. Regardless of today's trends, or perhaps because of them, some might suggest the best policy would be one of patience; while the backlash against democratic backsliding may not come tomorrow, it is inevitable and a decade from down we all will be harvesting the democratic fruits of a more cautious policy today. While no country has officially adopted such a strategy, the international community's inability to directly confront democratic

backsliding is certainly consistent with it. Despite a policy discourse that continues to place democratization at the forefront of donor assistance goals, the international donors interested in promoting democratization have been unable to successfully disentangle it from the rhetoric of the war on terror and the clash of civilizations. In particular, it has failed to establish a more constructive normative justification for pursuing democracy as the *best* form of government that is relevant to the average citizen in practice. The failure to do so poses grave risks to the interests of the international donor community.

Such risks stem from the fact that it is a mistake to assume that public support for democratic institutions in developing countries is irreversible. Even as public regional public opinion surveys such as the *Afrobarometer* and *Latinobarometro* tend to show unprecedented levels of public support of democracy as the best system of government, there is frequently a wide gap between the public's preference for democratic government at a normative level and its much lower levels of satisfaction with the performance of the governments that are actually elected. In this context, the normative preference for democracy may actually be quite shallow. Over time, this gap could lead to growing public sentiment that democratic governance, however valued in principle, may be irrelevant to solving their most urgent needs, at best, and even an obstacle at worst. Indeed, the apparent inability of citizens to use their political rights under democratic governments to find democratic solutions for their most pressing needs is perhaps the greatest threat to democracy in the medium to long term.

There is evidence that such a threat may be already emerging. High rates of voter abstention in many southern countries may be one sign that democracy is losing its immediacy, if not relevancy. More seriously,

there is a growing trend among governments to put new constraints on the press and civil society organizations, particularly non-governmental organizations which are frequent recipients of international donor assistance, in what Freedom House describes as a "pushback" against democracy. Independent of the short term impact such actions have on the quality of democratic governance, for the medium to long term they seriously undermine the capacity of civil society to defend against future authoritarian encroachments by the state. To the extent that this curtailment of some of the principal actors responsible for maintaining the vibrancy of democratic governance meets with little public opposition or even public approval, there is growing evidence that public opinion may be susceptible to the belief that a functioning democracy is not only irrelevant, but perhaps even an obstacle, to achieving long-lasting solutions to the development challenges these countries face.

Ironically, the post-9/11 international war on terror and its association, however contradictory in practice, with democracy promotion has exacerbated several trends that could prove problematic for democracy's future in many parts of the world. While non-democratic leaders have long claimed that "western" democracy was not relevant to their particularly cultural history, this takes on a new immediacy, if not legitimacy, today. Legitimate concerns about whether NGOs funded externally represent national agendas and interests or those of their international sponsors have always existed. Today, such concerns are compounded by fears on the part of the host countries and their citizens that these NGOs might represent a kind of "fifth column" for external interference in national affairs. For Western donors, on the other hand, the war on terrorism has inevitably raised concerns that some NGOs might be part of the problem, fostering undemocratic attitudes and behaviors precisely in those countries where support for democratic governance appears most shallow.

For both new democracies and countries that one might hope would be aspiring to achieve democratic regimes, the international context is also changing in ways that could reinforce these trends. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War and with the unprecedented level of international consensus on the importance of democratic governance, there did not appear to be many viable alternatives. With the emergence of China as an economic powerhouse, more concerned with its economic interests than democratic governance issues and representing a clear example of how economic success is not dependent on effective democratic governance, the lack of a viable alternative to democratic rule cannot be taken for granted. While there is no reliable data on the levels of development assistance provided by China, it is significant and growing.<sup>1</sup> Foreign direct investment is even more significant. According to UNCTAD data, Chinese FDI increased from an average of US\$ 2.2 billion 1990-2000 to US\$ 11.3 billion in 2005. Whereas China had virtually no capital stock outside its borders in 1980, by 2005 it had accumulated US\$ 46.3 billion. This FDI will increasingly be in developing countries which provide the resources China's booming economy so desperately needs. The Chinese example and the growing levels of economic resources it provides developing country economies through both aid and, more importantly, direct foreign investment offer a choice to countries that may not wish to abide by the democratic conditionality imposed by Western donors. Moreover, there are signs that governments are cooperating to oppose international efforts to promote democracy through declarations that would legitimize their own undemocratic tendencies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, at the 2006 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation held in Beijing, China pledged US\$ 3 billion in low-interest loans and US\$ 2 billion in export credits through 2009. See Katharina Hofmann, "New Powers for Global Change? Challenges for International Development Cooperation: The Case of China," Dialogue on Globalization Briefing Papers No. 15 (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House, for example, has noted that Russia, China and several Central Asian countries asserted that "the right of every

It is important not to be alarmist; today's tendencies toward backsliding on the international spread of democracy are by no means firmly established, much less irreversible. Yet if Canada and like-minded international donors do not address emerging tendencies now, there is an increasingly likelihood that new forms of authoritarianism will present alternatives to political democracy. Complacency will have the effect encouraging these negative trends through inaction. This is because only Canada and like minded donors can provide a more democratic alternative. Future authoritarian regimes will likely be less violent and abusive of human rights than in the past, and are likely to retain more than a mere façade of electoral democracy. Since these regimes will be less overtly oppressive than their predecessors, restrictions on electoral competition will likely be more subtle. This means that international electoral monitoring will continue to be very important. At the same time, however, a myriad of restrictions on democratic processes in between elections may seriously limit the ultimate impact of electoral freedom of choice. Such regimes will be more akin to elected dictators, making it more difficult to mobilize opposition both internationally and domestically given the patina of legitimacy elections necessarily bestow on governments. Indeed, the threats to democracy in many instances are much more insidious than in the past, making it necessary to devise more subtle approaches to democratic promotion than those that link democracy simply to elections, often within the framework of the war against terrorism and a clash of civilizations. This is precisely where Canada and like minded donors are best positioned to maximize their influence.

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people to its own path of development must be fully guaranteed" in 2005 declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. See the *Freedom in the World 2007: Freedom Stagnation amid Pushback against Democracy*.

The cornerstone of such a policy needs to recall *why* competitive elections are seen as a necessary but not sufficient component of democratic governance: they are mechanisms to ensure, among other things, governmental *responsiveness* and *accountability* through *active citizen participation*. Political parties compete with one another by aggregating voter interests. Their success or responsiveness is rewarded with a quota of government power, while their lack of success or non-responsiveness results in loss of public office. This potential for the periodic alternation in the control over political power ideally ensures that power does not become entrenched in the hands of a few. Citizens are the ultimate decision makers, exercising their right to choose among alternatives, which in turn revolves around respect of the rights of competing interests to organize and make their views heard so that voters can make informed choices among various alternatives.

Yet the achievement of responsiveness, accountability and citizen participation cannot be exhausted through periodic elections. This is particularly true when, as is the case of many new democracies, political parties are weak institutions for aggregating societal interests and there is a marked distance between political party leaderships and the average voter—a finding also reflected in various regional public opinion surveys. Often in parallel to the holding of elections, a multitude of civil society actors—community groups, NGOs, social movements, trade unions, business associations, and so on—seek to achieve the same goals in more established democratic countries such as Canada. For the growing number of non-citizen immigrants in many developing countries, their only avenue for participating in democratic politics in their host countries is through civil society organizations. Civil society needs the same protections—freedom to organize, freedom of speech, rule of law, etc.—that political democracy more generally requires to thrive. While the realm of civil society goes well beyond its

interactions with the state, state-civil society relations are defining determinants of the quality of democratic governance and its ability to meet some of the most basic development goals associated with quality of life and respect for basic human rights. This requires that the state have appropriate institutional mechanisms for engaging with civil society.

Support for civil society and the development of state institutions should be of paramount importance for international donors. Because political parties compete to assume power, and given their intrinsic nature as mechanisms for interest aggregation, donor assistance for building parties is often problematic. International assistance to political parties could easily be deemed inappropriate due to the implicit political influence it might engender. At the same time, strong, representative political parties need to be built from the bottom up and external influences can distort this process, further separating political elites from their constituencies. The latter danger is certainly true for civil society, but the fact that civil society actors at best seek to share rather than assume power and have a more limited range of goals that are frequently non-partisan in nature mean that the potential negative consequences of international assistance are more manageable. Donor countries also have considerable expertise to share.

Of course, the ideals of responsiveness, accountability and citizen participation, like democracy itself, will become the valued political objectives of citizens only insofar as they are viewed as relevant for addressing the principal challenges that people in the developing world must confront. ODA can facilitate this by reinforcing democratic processes. But misguided policies can have the opposite effect, if only because they inadvertently contribute to citizen frustration with existing democratic processes when development policies do not succeed in addressing their most immediate concerns. This is

because promoting democracy is fundamentally a national challenge—one that ODA can influence, but not determine. To understand how to maximize the potentially positive role of ODA and minimize its potentially negative effects, it therefore is imperative that those responsible for development assistance attempt to view these processes from the perspective of the actual stakeholders. They must step back from the world of ODA and avoid a tendency to look for best practices based on the track record of development assistance by looking at national processes that are independent of ODA.

Two examples from Latin America, Bolivia's Popular Participation Law and participatory budgeting in Puerto Alegre, Brazil, are particularly relevant for understanding how state-civil society interactions can contribute to a vicious cycle of political instability (Bolivia) or help create a virtuous circle of improved democratic governance (Porto Alegre). This is because they originated independently of the influence of international donors, putting into relief the national dynamics that are central to the success or failure of all such experiments and which ODA might influence. Both examples are particularly relevant because they would later capture the attention of the international donor community, so it is important that the "right" lessons are learned from these experiences.

In many respects, Bolivia's 1994 Law of Popular Participation (LPP) epitomizes a deliberate attempt to revitalize Bolivian democracy by encouraging greater government responsiveness and accountability through active citizen participation. A radical decentralization of the state completely reorganized Bolivia's political landscape around 311 municipal governments, the majority of which were not only new, but were erected precisely in those areas where the state had been most noticeably absent. Municipal governments would now

have responsibility for administering health, education and infrastructure services, as well as other areas of social investment. To cover these new responsibilities, the state doubled the percentage of its revenues committed to municipal governments through a new program of "co-participation."

Each municipality would be governed by a popularly elected city council and mayor. To ensure that the new resources would actually be used to the benefit of the community, over 16,000 Base-level Territorial Organizations (BTOs) were legally recognized by mid-1997. Many were the traditional organizations through which indigenous communities had historically organized and governed themselves. The BTOs would establish community priorities through local participatory planning exercises associated with the elaboration of an Annual Operational Program (AOP) in each municipality. The BTOs would also select members for a new institution, Vigilance Committees (VC), that would articulate and represent community priorities in AOP processes. The VCs would also serve as a mechanism for exercising social control over the portion of municipal budgets financed through co-participation.

Through these various mechanisms, the PPL sought to ensure governmental accountability and transparency by creating a hybrid form of democracy, incorporating Western traditions of representative democracy with local, indigenous traditions of community self-government. Despite these pretensions and some notable local successes, the PPL largely failed to live up to its expectations, which was an important factor in the political instability racking Bolivia over the past decade. Several aspects of how the PPL was developed and implemented help explain this failure.

First, the PPL was conceived and designed with virtually no input from civil society. Then President Gonzalo

Sánchez de Lozado was actively involved, working closely with his key advisors. Even his Vice President at the time, Víctor Hugo Cárdenas, who was one of the most prominent political leaders of indigenous descent in Latin America, played almost no role.

Second, the decision to base PPL participation on BTOs deliberately excluded functionally-based or corporatist organizations from participating. Ironically, this decision excluded the principal actor in Bolivian civil society advocating decentralization: civic committees. Having excluded the principal groups demanding decentralization from the PPL framework, the ultimate success of the PPL was now dependent on sectors of civil society that were historically suspicious of central state institutions. When the PPL was enacted, there was little or no social support for it. The Government had to win over public opinion once the law was already in place, in the face of a very effective opposition campaign against the “leyes malditas” (the “damned laws”) that was able to mobilize substantial support from a variety of sources, including political parties, functional organizations (especially organized labor) and non-governmental organizations. Repression of protesters further clouded the social legitimacy of the PPL.

The key to successfully overcoming this lack of social legitimacy was inevitably the availability of co-participation funds. Indeed, a central aspect of the government's campaign to raise support for the new institutions was to publicize how much money was arriving to local governments so that people would have an incentive to start exercising some control over its expenditure. Not surprisingly, one reason for the rapid legalization of so many BTOs was their desire to gain access to these resources—and in many instances it reflected the desire of political parties to get those BTOs most closely tied to them recognized so they could gain access as well. This only served to further heighten the

suspensions of poor, marginalized groups that already were fearful of state efforts to equate narrow political interests with the public good.

The decision to limit PPL participation to territorial organizations raised serious questions regarding the representation of marginal groups and their manipulation by political elites. Demographics and migration from depressed rural areas meant that many BTOs were stagnant, moribund organizations that had lost their appeal to local inhabitants. The sudden influx of central government resources gave them new life, but they often were soon dominated by local political elites and political party representatives. In other cases, new organizations were formed in order to channel funds or work with state institutions, without any real connection to society.

More generally, there was little effort to mobilize organizations or citizen participation to get people to actually involve themselves in local politics. This was particularly true for the young. Although this changed dramatically during the waves of protests that have periodically wracked Bolivia in recent years, such participation went well beyond the bounds of the PPL and reflected its numerous shortcomings. At best, it suggests the growing irrelevance of these institutions as local participation targets central state actors and policies. At worst, the instability such “participation” generates underscores the failure of the PPL to achieve a more inclusionary form of democratic governance.

At the same time, the most dynamic organizations were often functional organizations that were deliberately excluded from the PPL, particularly committees formed to secure irrigation and potable water. The reason for the dynamism of such committees is that they had something concrete to offer their members. Successful committees often did not disband once irrigation or potable water were obtained for their members, and have shown the

capacity to move into other areas of activity related to community development. The problem was particularly acute for women's representation, despite the PPL's formal commitment to providing equal opportunities for both men and women.

These problems have been compounded by the actual way in which key institutions of the PPL functioned in practice. Participation by BTOs in planning has generally been limited to setting priorities for expenditures and making demands rather than actually participating in the planning process. This was partly due to the nature of the planning process itself, which was not really designed for more active inputs from civil society given the time constraints. But it also reflects past patterns of a more paternalistic and, at times, conflictual relationship between the state and civil society in which civil society looked to the state to resolve its problems on its behalf.

If BTOs are the foundation upon which the PPL rests, then the VCs are its central pillars. Yet by December 1995, only 163 of the requisite 311 had been formed. In order to speed up the process, the Government issued a decree stating VCs had to be formed within approximately two weeks in order to be eligible for co-participation funds. The deadline was met by the political parties governing municipalities, underscoring how they were in effect created by the state, denying them social legitimacy. Not surprisingly, VCs are only rarely able to fulfill their oversight role. Moreover, VCs depend on the municipal government for vital information, and the local government often simply refuses to provide it.

The shortcomings of the PPL stand in sharp contrast to similar experiences in Porto Alegre. Participatory budgeting (PB) was first initiated in 1989. While far less ambitious than the PPL, it similarly sought to create new institutions to revitalize local democracy by encouraging greater government responsiveness and accountability

through active citizen participation, and enjoyed considerably greater success. Indeed, its resounding success led to the adoption of similar programs in over 100 cities in Brazil, as well as many others throughout the world. In 1996 it was declared to be among the world's "best practices" in urban government at the United Nations Habitat Conference.

Of course, not all attempts to implement PB have been as successful as they were in Porto Alegre. It is also important to recognize that, while the more ambitious PPL was a national program, it failed at the local level. The same national dynamics found in Bolivia (corruption, excessive political party influence and pervasive clientelism) were also very real potential threats to the success of PB in Porto Alegre. From this perspective, the very different process behind Porto Alegre's reforms compared to the PPL need to be stressed. Like the PPL, the impetus for PB came from the national level. In sharp contrast to the insulated, largely secretive process through which the PPL was designed, PB in Brazil was made possible by the 1988 Constitution that was crafted with considerable input from civil society organizations. The new constitution made PB possible by granting greater authority to local governments to design new policymaking processes and recognizing the legitimacy of participatory institutions. Rather than mandate a single institutional design for the entire country, Brazil's new constitution facilitated local experimentation, and Porto Alegre took up the challenge in a particularly innovative fashion.

Once the institutional context had been opened up by the new constitution, several local factors heavily influenced the direction reforms would take. Porto Alegre had enjoyed a particularly vibrant civil society, which grew in opposition to Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985). This experience was ultimately eclipsed in the city by the 1986 electoral victory of the Democratic Labor Party



(PDT), a leftwing populist party that demobilized civil society in order to re-impose a more traditional clientelism in which the party's influence was paramount. The initial proposal for some form of participatory budgeting actually originated within civil society, in large part to enable civil society organizations to renew their own sagging legitimacy in the face of the pervasive clientelism of the PDT government. The Union of Neighborhood Associations (UAMPA) was formed in the mid-1980s by many of the community movements that emerged in opposition to the military dictatorship, and in 1986 it proposed incorporating civil society actors into the budget-making process—an unprecedented idea that still lacked a clear institutional framework.

When the leftwing Worker's Party (PT) won the 1988 municipal elections, it won in large part because of public repudiation of the PDT and it had yet to become established as a strong party in Porto Alegre. The party ultimately decided to make PB the cornerstone of its municipal policies. Central to this decision were the close relations between the PT and the various civil society actors demanding greater popular participation in municipal government. Indeed, this combination of party commitment and close ties to autonomous (albeit sympathetic) social movements proved key to the success of PB.

Despite these favorable circumstances, PB got off to a rocky start. Participation was initially relatively low and actually declined during its first two years. Rather than retreat into itself or abandon PB completely, the PT responded by working with civil society organizations, negotiating and perfecting the institutions of PB. Funding levels were actually increased along with the scope of PB, so that by the late 1990s 100 percent of all discretionary expenditures by the municipal government were decided through PB. Deliberate efforts were also made to encourage local participants to think beyond their

immediate communities and PB effectively began to address city-wide concerns.

PB operates on a yearly cycle. It begins in March, when assemblies are held in each of the city's 16 districts. Delegates are elected to represent their local communities in subsequent phases of the cycle. A 42-member PB Council is also elected to ultimately negotiate the final municipal budget with the local government. Budgets and projects from the previous year are reviewed. Delegates subsequently meet in intermediary meetings to determine regional priorities and discuss more general city-wide concerns according to designated thematic groupings. The PB Council is also responsible for balancing competing demands, setting priorities and distributing funds among regions and in accordance with larger city-wide priorities. Significantly, half of the available funds are distributed by a formal formula which is based on a region's prior access to PB funds, its population and each community's priorities. Finally, after negotiating the final municipal budget, the PB Council continues to monitor actual expenditures.

PB has transformed civil society. The level of public participation has continually increased, from just 976 in 1990 to 26,807 in 2000.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the PPL, participation is open to all. A deliberate decision was made not to base participation exclusively on prior membership in any organization, often inviting people to participate for the first time. As a result, the number of social organizations has increased markedly as a result of the PB process. For example, conservative estimates suggest that the number of neighborhood organizations increased from 180 in 1986 to 540 in 1998. Ultimately, PB has generated an alternative to the clientelism and

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<sup>3</sup> These statistics are taken from Brian Wampler and Leonardo Avritzer, "Participatory Publics: Civil Society and New Institutions in Democratic Brazil," *Comparative Politics*, 36:3 (2004.): 291-312.

patronage which had characterized local politics for decades. Growing levels of participation and organization tend to concentrate in poorer areas, and people with lower incomes and levels of education tend to predominate in the PB process. This, plus the fact that municipal expenditures have been deliberately redistributed toward poorer areas of the city, underscores the empowerment PB offers for disadvantaged groups. Citizens can see how their collective activities contribute to policymaking in positive ways, creating a potentially virtuous circle of growing civil society strength, dispersion of economic and political power and more inclusive democratic governance.

It is important not to exaggerate the success of PB in Porto Alegre, which covers just 10-15 percent of total municipal expenditures and amounts to meager per capita expenditure of just over US\$ 200. Yet in contrast to the experience of Bolivia's PPL, several clear lessons emerge. First, it is essential that the design of participatory mechanisms be negotiated with all relevant stakeholders. The only justification for the exclusion of actors should be their rejection of basic democratic principles in terms of their willingness to respect the right of other actors to participate. Second, the success of such institutions once they are in place is dependent on the perception by relevant civil society actors that participation in those institutions will result in policies that reflect their priorities, not the priorities of state actors, self-interested politicians or the international donor community. As was the case in Puerto Alegre, a virtuous cycle of participation can then emerge as civil society

recognizes the legitimacy of participatory institutions and as citizen participation increases as a consequence. In other words, the success of such institutions comes to reflect the perception that responsible and accountable government is the result of active citizen participation.

The ultimate challenge is to develop processes of state-civil society interaction that will help determine national policies, and/or further decentralize decision-making authority to local governments, building on the more limited positive experiences of Puerto Alegre so that larger issues can be addressed locally. This is precisely where international donors, particularly Canada given its own federal system, can play key roles, both helping to strengthen civil society actors and providing needed expertise for designing institutional mechanisms that will allow the state to work more effectively with them to achieve greater government responsiveness and accountability. Such aid is most likely to be effective as it enables democracies to channel scarce resources where they are most needed from the ultimate beneficiaries' own perspective.

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*Working Today to Prevent Further Democratic Backsliding Tomorrow  
Policy Recommendations*

In order to pre-empt democratic backsliding and the emergence of new forms of authoritarianism, the crucial challenge is to make both democracy and participation in civil society appear relevant for addressing people's most urgent needs. In a nutshell, this is what Porto Alegre's experiment achieved and precisely what was lacking in Bolivia's PPL. The international donor community can and should play a vital role in ensuring this happens. There are a variety of important policy priorities that can contribute to this end and the following is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Rather, it highlights some basic priorities should be stressed from the perspective of improving state-society relations as a key vanguard against democratic backsliding:

- 1) Continued emphasis on promoting the strength of local civil societies should be combined with the promotion of state reforms that allow civil society to effectively engage with the state as a complement to elections;
  - Strong civil societies should be seen as a natural counterpart to policies of general budgetary support in order to help ensure greater government accountability rather than a competing funding priority;
  - The design of such state reforms must be based on negotiations between state policymakers and all relevant civil society stakeholders;
  - Promotion of civil society should take the form of direct assistance to representative organizations consistent with granting agency priorities (e.g., support for women's organizations promoting gender equality) and indirect assistance in the form of capacity building to develop leadership skills and social capital;
- 2) While best practices should be identified, it is important to recognize that general policy goals for achieving responsive and accountable democratic governance through active citizen participation will necessarily need to be adapted to local traditions, expectations and needs, which is why the process of reform is pivotal;
- 3) This will necessarily require that donors maintain an active presence on the ground, working with local policymakers and civil society actors;
- 4) An active presence on the ground will also be necessary for identifying the most appropriate civil society organizations to work with, based on the following criteria:
  - Identifiable links with a grassroots base;
  - A clear commitment to tolerance in respecting the rights of other civil society actors and people outside the organization;
  - Demonstrated autonomy from political parties;
- 5) Donor policies should seek to balance legitimate donor interests in establishing project goals and ensuring the effective utilization of resources, on the one hand, and the interest of local civil society partners in taking ownership of projects through recognition of their input in establishing project goals and overall project design, as well as project implementation;
  - This balance should be achieved through a dialogue with civil society actors rather than presented to them as a *fait accompli*.
- 6) At the international level, a concerted effort should be made to create new forums for building a new international consensus on the value of democratic governance that goes beyond the holding of reasonably free and fair competitive elections;
  - Democracy as responsive and accountable government through active citizen participation needs to be portrayed as a universal value which is independent of the war against terrorism and the unique cultural traditions that characterize all societies;
  - These efforts should be modeled on the decades-long experience of creating a consensus on respect for fundamental human rights;
  - They should be a cornerstone of efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals;
  - Conditionality of assistance should focus on the dual aspect of state reform and civil society promotion.
- 7) Programs in support of election monitoring and the national institutions required for conducting free, fair and competitive elections more generally should continue in order to ensure that elections retain a maximum level of legitimacy;
  - This will complement support for civil society by strengthening the democratic context within it which it evolves;
  - This will serve as an important buttress against further democratic backsliding;
  - Particular emphasis should be placed on strengthening national and regional capacity for electoral monitoring in order to minimize dependence on external actors.

**DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA**  
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I am not a development expert, but have been involved for more than twenty years in specific issues related to “democracy” and “governance” in Africa. Recently, that has included leading the Carter Center delegation observing the 2006 election in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Commonwealth Election Observation Team in Cameroon in 2004, and subsequently co-chairing a joint Commonwealth-Cabinet “working group” in Cameroon to establish an independent electoral commission.

Two trends stand out as providing a basis for optimism, and a guide to the actions of governments, NGOs, companies and others interested in democratic development in that continent.

The first is the increasing willingness, and capacity, of Africans themselves to lead and define the initiatives which shape the continent. That is evident across a wide range of examples – including NEPAD (the New Economic Partnership for African Development) with its (remarkable) principle of peer review; the strengthening of the African Union as an institution able to act, in Darfur and other difficult circumstances; the steady expansion of elections where choices are available, rules are respected, results are accepted, and strong and independent institutions are established; and, most recently, in the African leadership which set the stage for the (remarkable) transition in the Democratic Republic of Congo from civil war to constitutional change and successful elections.

Of course, none of those examples is without its problems or caveats; but neither are the “hanging chads” of Florida nor other instances of failure or corruption in developed democracies.

What is most significant is the clear new pattern – NEPAD, a stronger AU, and steady progress towards durable democracies, all happening together.

The second trend is the determination to take account of the critical and distinguishing conditions in communities where democratic and governance models are being nurtured and built. Cameroon’s new election commission, ELECAM, was finally established by parliamentary vote in late December 2006, and took account deliberately of other experience in Africa, as well as the British and French institutional traditions on which the country’s legal and administrative systems are based. In the Democratic Republic of Congo elections, actual constitutional change established specific institutions to reflect Congolese reality, including a mechanism seeking to limit abuse of the media, and an unusually-effective electoral commission.

Obviously, adapting to local circumstances can be tricky and contentious ground, because there are agreed universal principles and common standards which must generally be respected, and “best practices”, which should not be ignored. On the other hand, reforms designed to express the informed judgment of diverse communities cannot logically require those judgments, or those communities, to lose their identities, or conform to some text-book norm. It is worth noting that each of the Cameroon and DRC reforms, which took deliberate account of local realities, occurred at the same time as the significant failure of schemes to reshape “democracy” in the Middle East along more Western lines.

Not to be too subtle, the lesson here is for Western institutions interested in “democracy” and “governance”. Most Africans already understand.

Cameroon, like Canada, is a bilingual French-English nation, so the 2004 presidential election drew an Observation team from La Francophonie as well as the Commonwealth. I wanted these two grand-maternal teams to meet in Yaounde. We did, and it was the single most contentious meeting we had, straying early into heated and irrelevant comparisons of the French model, and the British model, of electoral systems. Until suddenly a francophone observer from Mali said: "I don't care about French or English models. I want an African model that has a chance of working here."

When work began to design a new and independent electoral commission, the single factor which contributed most to progress was that we called directly upon the experience and authority of other African nations in discussing how a more independent system could work in Cameroon. This portion of the Commonwealth's was conducted predominantly by Africans, led by Samuel Kivuitu, the wise and battle-scarred chairman of the Electoral Commission of Kenya.

The single institution which was most helpful is the African Association of Election Authorities, the A.A.E.A., formed in 1997, and now including election commissions in 21 African countries as full members, with 7 African "public policy institutes" or NGOs, as associate members.

In Yaounde, in February 2006, Commissioners or other senior representatives of election authorities in Benin, South Africa, Mauritius and Kenya met with senior Cameroonian ministers for long, frank, detailed, practical discussions: Why does this work in our country? Why did this fail? And what variation might work in Cameroon? In May, teams of Cameroonian ministers and experts visited electoral commissions in those four countries plus Ghana, Burkina Faso, the United Kingdom and Canada.

A.A.E.A. was invaluable. We would not have consensus without it. Yet it receives scant financial support from international development agencies, or NGOs. As a result, it has had to turn down invitations to observe elections in member countries, and its attempts to strengthen political parties in Africa have been curtailed significantly.

It must be noted that, while Cameroon's Parliament has now voted to establish a new election authority, the jury is still out on whether the new ELECAM will be granted the financial and political independence it requires. That is the critical next question – but the progress this far is due largely to the availability and application of solid and authoritative African experience.

The important lesson is that there is a growing, sophisticated, successful experience with democratic elections in Africa itself. In election management, and other areas, there are strong and functioning institutions, in fact as well as in form, already rooted in the complex continent where the most serious challenges of governance must be met. Going forward, a priority must be to ensure that those strong indigenous institutions and examples get the support they require from the international community, including public opinion in developed countries.

In Kinshasa last fall, I was startled by a question from a Canada-based CBC interviewer asking, in effect, why the international community was giving such priority to elections in DRC when the human problems of poverty and disorder were so urgent and acute. The answer is that successful elections and democratic systems are often the conditions-precendent to addressing a community's deep social and security issues. But that connection is not always evident to publics whose support is needed in developed nations, and whose

confidence is needed in developing countries in transition.

In the DRC – taking nothing away from the will of the Congolese people, and the massive presence and often-deft skill of the United Nations and the European Union – this near-miraculous transition would not have happened without concerted African leadership. The seminal Sun City accords were the result of long and patient consultations guided and presided by former Botswanan President Ket Mesire and others. The leadership, resources and authority of South Africa, from President Mbeki on down, were applied consistently, quietly, quickly, and effectively. The engagement of SADDCC and the African Union was serious and re-assuring. Mozambique's former president Joaquim Chissano chaired

a “comité des sages”, able to intervene when things went awry.

Africa's capacity to help itself is strengthening at a time when international engagement is changing, for better and for worse. Official Development Assistance is not a priority in many capitals, or is being diverted to conflict zones. The stubborn public caricature persists of Africa as turmoil. Against that, many international development agencies have become more focused and effective, more churches, foundations and individuals are engaged and innovative, more corporations are taking their “social responsibility” more seriously. The impact of each of those positive developments can be magnified significantly by taking advantage of Africa's increased capacity to address its own problems, on its own terms.

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Founded in 1963, the Centre for Developing-Area Studies is undergoing a process of renewal so that it better reflects the changed reality of the world we live in. In the not so distant past when the Cold War had an inescapable impact



on the “third world,” the developmentalist state was almost universally regarded as a solution to development bottlenecks and the advantages of various non-

democratic forms of government were hotly debated. Today the Cold War is over, states are often seen as obstacles to market-led development and political democracy is an explicit goal of a wide range of national and transnational actors. Sadly, while the problems of poverty and inequality often remain daunting after decades of development research and assistance, the solutions seem to be more complex than ever given the often contradictory tendencies associated with many of the changes that have so transformed the world in which we live. It is also more apparent than ever before that bridges need to be built between academic researchers, policymakers and various non-governmental actors to deal with these challenges. CDAS is plans to help build these bridges. *Foresight* is one way to accomplish that.

CDAS’ new research agenda revolves around the need for *Understanding the Foundations of Democratic Governance*. To an unprecedented degree, achieving democratic governance where it does not exist and improving its quality where it does have become dominant goals, from the local level to the global. Yet it is not clear whether there is just one form of democratic rule, or if there is not, what qualities all democracies must share. For many new democracies, there is also a growing concern with the apparent inability of elected governments to effectively respond to citizens’ most urgent needs. However valued democracy may be in the abstract, the perceived ineffectiveness of actual democratic governments threatens to lead people to question its *relevance* to the most pressing issues of the day.

CDAS’ renewal also reflects a tradition of strength in development research and teaching at McGill. With literally dozens of tenure-stream professors working on issues relating to development, well over 100 graduate students completing MA and PhD degrees in Arts focusing on development issues and a new MA Development Option at the graduate level, not to mention almost 1000 undergraduate students in McGill’s *International Development Studies* program, CDAS is poised to assume a new leadership role in development studies.

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