

## Global Democracy Promotion: Seven Lessons for the New Administration

A professed commitment to worldwide democracy promotion has been a hallmark of U.S. foreign policy for many years and was given a distinctive emphasis by the outgoing administration. President George W. Bush calls it “the urgent requirement of our nation’s security, and the calling of our time.”<sup>1</sup> Promoting democracy, however, is not merely a matter of advocacy via an international megaphone. Policies of the Bush administration have led many to question the methods used to promote democracy or even the goal itself. Despite such criticism, much of it warranted, democracy promotion remains a central plank of U.S. foreign policy, an expression of U.S. values, and a tool that can be used to pursue the strategic interests of the United States. It is critically important, therefore, to learn from the mistakes of the past seven years and to rethink and refine the theory and practice of democracy promotion.

Direct congressional involvement in the enterprise was pioneered by the Task Force on the Development of Parliamentary Institutions in Central and Eastern Europe, an initiative led by Reps. Martin Frost (D-TX) and Gerry Solomon (R-NY) in the early 1990s. The Task Force established parliament-to-parliament relationships aimed at nurturing legislative institutions in emerging democracies. Even though the transition from showcase parliaments, typical of communist regimes, to fully functioning and independent legislative bodies was varied

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Representative David Price (D-NC) represents the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area of North Carolina. He chairs the House Democracy Assistance Commission (HDAC) and the Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, and formerly taught political science and public policy at Duke University. The views he expresses in this article are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of HDAC.

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 32:1 pp. 159–170

**Elections must be part of a more sophisticated strategy supporting democratic development.**

and uneven, several countries undertook it successfully, laying a solid foundation for representative government in the region. The Frost-Solomon Task Force offered the experience of Congress as a guiding light on this path.

For the last three years, Rep. David Dreier (R-CA) and I have led a similar effort with the House Democracy Assistance Commission (HDAC), the institutional descendant of the Frost-Solomon Task Force. The bipartisan commission of 20 House members has sought to strengthen the institutional capacities of partner legislatures in Afghanistan, Colombia,

Georgia, Haiti, Indonesia, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Macedonia, Mongolia, Timor-Leste, and Ukraine. HDAC has worked with parliamentary colleagues and their staffs in all these countries on nearly every aspect of legislative governance, from budgetary analysis and committee oversight to personnel management and constituent relations. Implementation of the programs has occurred through close collaboration with U.S. embassies around the world, as well as democracy programs administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and executed by experienced organizations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Research Triangle Institute (RTI), and the Asia Foundation. As a result, HDAC has been in a unique position to witness both the successes and failures of U.S. efforts to promote democracy worldwide.

HDAC's founding premise is that democracy is not just about elections—what is equally essential to lasting democracy is what happens *between* elections. Democracy requires strong institutions in legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. An important threshold is reached when a free and fair democratic election is held. Yet advancing voters' concerns through peaceful, constitutional, and responsive means requires moving beyond elections to the practical work of developing the capacities of democratic institutions.

Too often, U.S. democracy promotion efforts have failed to penetrate beyond the rhetorical or superficial, and the Bush administration's track record in this regard is decidedly mixed. The most consequential mistake has been to assume that democracy could spring fully formed from the barrel of a gun, most notably in the case of Iraq. Bush's failure to avoid the errors of his predecessors, despite acknowledging and disavowing them, has also been damaging. Like many executives before him, the current president has allowed a myopic, short-term view of foreign affairs to obscure our national security vision. In places like Kenya and Pakistan, the United States has allowed its friendships with

pro-Western, anti-terrorist leaders to cloud its judgment in the wake of ascendant popular opposition to such leaders. In other places, such as Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia, short-term calculations of self-interest have muted U.S. advocacy for democratic reforms. With the democracy agenda and strategic interests of the United States increasingly overlapping, what policy course the new president and his administration pursue is an urgent and critical question.

## **A New Way Forward: Seven Practical Lessons**

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The United States must no longer repeat mistakes that have poorly served the nation's long-term interests and have often underperformed in abetting short-term objectives. Admittedly, U.S. commitment to democracy abroad cannot always be absolute—after all, the United States is a nation with a complex and extensive agenda on the international stage. Yet, it is imperative that the United States be far less ready to sacrifice the democracy agenda for other goals. Supporting the growth of democracy extends beyond supporting democratic reforms and pressing non-democratic leaders. It must also include the difficult, sustained work of building and supporting democratic institutions. With that aim in mind, this article offers seven practical lessons for the consideration of the new president and his administration.

### **Understand the Limits of Elections**

Many trace the disastrous chain of events that led to a schism in the Palestinian territories and a Hamas takeover of Gaza to the Palestinian elections of 2005. The Bush administration, eager to promote democracy, vocally called for elections. Many analysts, meanwhile, cautioned that Hamas would be well-prepared to take advantage of Fatah's corruption and listlessness through near-term elections, an analysis that turned out to be quite prescient. The United States followed Hamas's victory by cutting off foreign aid and refusing to engage with the new, democratically elected government.

Elections are a vital component of a democratic society, but successful elections are better viewed as a component of a democratic transition, the success of which is determined by many other factors. Elections do little good for democratic development if the institutions that are charged with carrying out the popular mandate are ineffective or unresponsive. Moreover, as the Hamas example also shows, there is an inherent foreign policy tension in advocating free elections. The United States endorses free elections but is unable to control the outcome. The victors of democratic elections, therefore, may not always be democrats or friends of the United States.

Despite the inherent tension, the United States should continue to not only encourage but, in some cases, demand democratic elections. In fact, the current administration has erred in some cases by not calling more strenuously for

near-term elections, as with the military-led government of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the next administration must be much more aware of the limits of elections, and ensure that the call for elections is predicated on a more sophisticated and comprehensive strategy for supporting democratic development.

### **Side with the Democrats**

Realism is a necessary aspect of U.S. foreign policy. The United States has to rely on friendly relations with non-democratic leaders around the world for a variety of strategic reasons. Relationships with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah II of Jordan are essential in working toward peace and stability in the Middle East. The U.S. economy simply cannot afford a breakdown in the relationship with Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the United States has depended on autocratic leaders in Central Asia for military bases and flyover rights in connection with the military campaign in Afghanistan. The United States' leading role in the world means that U.S. security interests will sometimes require the administration to act in ways contrary to the ideals promoted through its foreign policy. The United States, however, needs to reconcile its realism with its commitment to democracy. While the latter does not mean that the United States must always condemn non-democratic leaders with whom realism may argue for friendship, it does mean that the United States cannot be seen as taking sides against legitimate, popularly backed democracy movements.

The administration's response to the 2007 elections in Pakistan provides a perfect example of what *not* to do. Just as a group of pro-democracy reformers won a free and fair election in a region where doomsayers feared that Taliban-types would triumph in an open system, the Bush administration publicly took the side of a military dictator who had just rigged his own election and then ejected the Supreme Court justices who dared to challenge him. The administration justified its relationship with President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan in terms of security. Yet, publicly appearing to stand with Musharraf and against the new, democratically elected government not only undermined democracy, but also risked undermining the very security interests the United States sought to protect by damaging U.S. access to, and credibility with, the new government of Pakistan.

Such scenarios simply cannot be repeated. U.S. respect for the outcomes of free and fair elections cannot be, or appear to be, contingent on whether "our" side is victorious. The degree of positive engagement with election winners will obviously vary with circumstances— Hamas currently represents a limiting case. When the United States, however, is seen as intervening *against* democracy, it not only undermines the democracy agenda but also the credibility of U.S. global leadership.

### Engage the Islamists

Traveling throughout the Middle East has given HDAC a unique opportunity to examine political Islamism in a variety of forms. There are numerous Islamist political parties that are fully committed to assertive, yet peaceful, participation in democratic systems. In many instances, these parties are highly organized and represent part of the political mainstream. In Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Yemen, and elsewhere, Islamist parties are on the rise.

**U.S. policymakers should treat Islamist parties' ascent as an opportunity for engagement.**

Rather than an unmitigated cause for alarm, U.S. policymakers should treat their ascent as an opportunity for engagement. Not every situation—and not every Islamic party—is alike, and they should not be treated in such a manner. If U.S. foreign policy is perceived as opposing the earnest, democratic ambitions of such parties, it will only add fuel—and perhaps radicalism—to their fire. When these increasingly popular parties actually take power, their policies will be shaped by their experiences in the opposition and their perception of the U.S. posture toward their political participation. Engagement with these parties offers the United States an opportunity to encourage their commitment to democracy as well as the expression of their views and grievances through democratic means. In the long run, integrating such parties into open political systems may be the best way to dissociate Islamism from the impulse toward political extremism.

Engaging Islamists also requires discontinuing silent U.S. endorsement of leaders who play up the specter of Islamist parties as the chief reason to slow democratic reform. As Nathan Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway have argued, “Where the government chooses heavy-handed repression as the means to deal with the growing influence of mainstream Islamist movements, the reformers [within the movements] may very well lose out.”<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, an open, pluralist political system that allows Islamist parties to participate—and often forces them to confront the burden of responsibility that such participation brings—generally “strengthens the side of reformers and encourages parties to change even further.”<sup>3</sup> Recognition of this reality should challenge the next administration to press more forcefully for democratic reforms by pro-Western allies, such as Egypt and Jordan, who have used the Islamist specter to limit political freedom.

### Emphasize Institutions, Not Individuals

Bush's too-cozy relations with world leaders who have suppressed democratic movements, such as Musharraf and (for a time) President Vladimir Putin of

Russia have demonstrated the dangers of reducing U.S. international statesmanship to personal relationships. Yet, overly personalizing diplomacy is just as risky when the leaders are firmly committed to democracy. Lavishing excessive personal attention on leaders such as Presidents Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, and Viktor Yushenko of Ukraine—all staunch democrats—can undermine their credibility and popularity among their voters. Moreover, such leaders cannot last forever.

Far more important is the construction of effective, enduring institutions, which requires a shift from personal attention to an institutional focus. The United States should support developing capacity in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, fostering vibrant civil society and media, and promoting active political debate. In fact, successfully supporting the development of democracy might even entail enabling the political participation of leading critics of key U.S. allies. A healthy opposition is a critical component of a functional and lasting democracy; HDAC insists on the inclusion of opposition parties in all its programs. The United States must beware that in supporting a friendly sitting government, it oftentimes becomes complicit in shutting out the legitimate opposition. Events in Georgia in late 2007, which culminated in sudden elections, demonstrate that when opposition views do not find a platform in government, they often find an outlet in the streets. The new U.S. president should surely support the efforts of democratic leaders around the world, but must keep in mind that it is the institutions, not individual leaders, which will endure.

### **Include the Legislatures**

Legislative institutions are essential to responsive and sustainable democracies, and U.S. democracy building efforts should approach them as full and necessary partners. Too often, however, U.S. administrations and even members of Congress have limited bilateral engagement with a foreign country to its executive mansion—a bad habit that simply must change.

Many developing democracies face urgent challenges to distribute resources—whether they are land, wealth, or government services—equitably among their citizens, and to assure claimant groups and communities that their needs have been fairly considered. Legislatures are uniquely positioned to confront these challenges. Moreover, the institutional strengths of legislatures, such as oversight of budgets and executive policies, are vital elements in battling the most pervasive threats to democracy: corruption, strongman executives, and dominance by the military. Legislatures offer forums for resolving regional, tribal, or ideological conflicts peacefully, marking a radical change for many newly democratic societies.

U.S. officials must take greater pains to include legislators in bilateral policymaking, giving them seats at the table as the U.S. government develops

aid packages, devises capacity-building programs, and explores bilateral issues through official visits between capitals. HDAC has, at the very least, helped to reverse the trend of Congress organizing delegation visits to other nations that leave legislatures off their itineraries.

In addition to institutional-strengthening efforts, more must be done to empower legislatures to act effectively and independently. This requires access to information. The Afghan Loya Jirga's inability to obtain basic information regarding the amount of aid provided by the United States to the Afghan National Army and police forces has astonished HDAC's members. Without such information, oversight of the development of these forces is impossible. Diplomatic missions should share detailed information on foreign aid and other cooperative activities with legislatures as a common practice. The missions should also seek the advice of the legislatures as they develop major aid initiatives. Doing so will empower the legislative branch and reinforce its status as a branch of government that is equal with the executive.

### **Deploy Resources Strategically**

Democracy assistance has grown dramatically in the last 20 years, and is now the third largest activity of USAID, after health and economic growth, accounting for between \$1 billion and \$1.5 billion in foreign aid each year.<sup>4</sup> Yet, approximately one quarter of this money has been spent in just two countries—Afghanistan and Iraq—over the last several years, with a handful of other countries claiming a disproportionate share of the remainder. In all, ten countries account for more than half of all democracy and governance funding in the president's fiscal year 2009 budget.<sup>5</sup> U.S. officials need to take a hard look at the distribution of democracy assistance funding and make sure that it is being spent wisely. The high-profile crises of the day notwithstanding, democracy assistance funding must be allocated to sustain programs in nations still in the midst of democratic transitions and to support nations beginning such transitions. The rug cannot be pulled out from under nations just as they are beginning to stabilize. The administration must also avoid devoting outsized portions of the budget to a concentrated group of recipients to the detriment of burgeoning democracies that do not necessarily grab the headlines at the time.

One necessary shift is a far greater emphasis on Africa, which currently appears to have the most significant and promising stream of emergent democracies. Recent developments have led the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone to join Botswana, Ghana, Kenya (despite its recent troubles), and Mali, among others, as promising democracies on that continent. Yet, Africa receives less than half as much in democracy assistance funding as any other region in the world on a per-country basis. Africa, however, does receive a greater share of some other foreign aid programs. For example,

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nearly 95 percent of the President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) funding has been spent in Africa.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, while the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) was initially criticized for failing to put down roots in Africa, approximately half of the MCC compacts currently active are in African nations.<sup>7</sup> This assistance, however, only underscores the need for a greater focus on strengthening democratic institutions. Active, effective democratic institutions are needed to prioritize, manage, and oversee this assistance, preventing corruption, and ensuring that our

aid achieves the greatest possible impact.

In choosing HDAC partners, we have considered the strategic importance of candidate countries and their level of need, but we have paid particular attention to the parliaments' commitment to reform and interest in a partnership. The crucial question that U.S. policymakers need to ask themselves is: where is the support the U.S. has to offer most likely to be well-utilized and to have the greatest marginal impact? While this is not a complete guide for the allocation of democracy promotion efforts, it contains important positive lessons. The priority should be to support nations that are undertaking or continuing a transition to democracy, rather than cases which may have more immediate strategic significance but for which a transition to democracy is still wishful thinking.

In fact, a clear distinction between *cooperation*—or working to support the existing democratic aspirations of governments, officials, and reformers—and *subversion*—or working to undermine undemocratic but sovereign governments—must be made for democracy promotion to be more effective. The failure of the current administration to make this distinction has sparked a growing global backlash against efforts to “export” democracy, which is a remarkable outcome given democracy's enduring appeal. Even though democracy promotion will not be greeted with equal enthusiasm among all contending factions in countries where the United States is involved, it should still be conceived as a strategy of cooperation and partnership in situations where democratic institutions and practices have gained a foothold. To conflate it with whatever efforts we undertake to bolster opponents of adversarial regimes in places like Cuba and Iran is to invite confusion and suspicion of our motives. Democracy promotion is not “regime change.”

This is not to say that the United States should not work to undermine and limit the influence of global despots like Than Shwe of Burma or Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. Such efforts have an important place in U.S. national



security strategy, but confronting despotism and building sustainable democracies are two different things, and they should be treated as such. Moreover, supporting nations that genuinely want and choose democracy will help to confront autocracy. For example, the outspoken criticism of Mugabe's recent violent repression of democratic opposition, and the pressure placed on that regime by many African leaders, would never have occurred at the height of the "big man" era of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, when corrupt dictators-for-life held the reigns of power in capitals across much of the continent. The spread of democracy *around* Zimbabwe is an important enabler of democrats *within* that nation.

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The distinction between supporting the development of democracy and undermining adversarial, autocratic regimes is not just a matter of rhetoric, but of funding as well. The administration has budgeted substantial "governing democratically and justly" funding for programs targeting adversarial regimes: \$20 million in Cuba, \$65 million in Iran, \$2 million in North Korea, and \$5 million in Venezuela for FY 2009. The \$65 million for Iran is equal to roughly one-third of the FY 2009 funding allocated for the entire sub-Saharan African region, excluding Sudan. An investment of that kind could fund the proposed democracy and governance program three times over in the Congo, which is a new democracy and perhaps a keystone to establishing a stable democratic system on the continent because of its enormous size and tendentious relationships with its neighbors.

### **Finish the Job**

Supporting nascent democracies is not an overnight job. In fact, U.S. democracy assistance programs last a decade on average.<sup>8</sup> HDAC, however, has encountered diplomatic missions that are pulling up the stakes of democracy programs just as a country is about to reach the finish line. Consider the following current examples. In Ghana, USAID will reportedly end its democracy programs in FY 2009, just as Ghana holds its first true transition from one freely and fairly elected president to another. In the last three years in Macedonia, USAID has dramatically scaled back its democracy and governance programs just as Macedonia has begun to reach the threshold for NATO and EU membership (the legislative strengthening program there is scheduled to close its doors in 2009). In Timor Leste, Bush's FY 2009 budget eliminates "good governance" funding, just six years after it gained

independence. And finally, in Namibia, the administration zeroed out democracy and governance funding at the end of FY 2007 while Namibia's promising democracy continues to struggle to overcome single-party dominance. Abandoning institutional strengthening efforts before the job is done threatens to squander multi-year investments that often range in the tens of millions of dollars. The next president must ensure that U.S. democracy programs endure until democracy has firmly taken root.

Admittedly, this advice begs several questions: When is it clear that democracy has taken root? Is there any end in sight to these commitments? Such questions are valid, and suggest the need to further refine the current approach. First, improved metrics are needed to assess the state of democracy in nations around the world and to determine the precise needs and points of entry for U.S. assistance. One useful tool might be an annual global assessment of democracy, similar to the State Department's annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.

Second, while clear endpoints may be nearly impossible to establish, democracy assistance programs must take better account of clear thresholds. For example, membership in NATO and the EU are hugely significant milestones for developing democracies in Eastern Europe. Consecutive multi-party elections involving peaceful transfers of power between civilian leaders are similarly important markers. With the Millennium Challenge Account's emphasis on measuring and rewarding good governance, the United States should view the attainment of compact eligibility, or at least the MCC's good governance standards, as another critical goalpost. Closing up shop just before these thresholds are crossed risks taking the wind out of the sails of reformers who are driving emerging democracies toward such goals.

Finally, the new administration must acknowledge the simple truth that democracy is not created overnight. The administration needs to do a much better job of convincing policymakers and the American public that commitments must be sustained over the long term, and that investments of manpower and resources are clearly in the interest of U.S. national security. If democracy assistance efforts are to have any hope of success, we must move past that great U.S. desire for immediate gratification.

## Conclusion

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Supporting the development of democratic systems around the world is critical to America's moral leadership even as it enhances U.S. national security. Democracy is an antidote to terrorism and violent conflict because it facilitates economic opportunity and channels societal grievances into peaceful and predictable processes for addressing them. If U.S. officials are serious about the

spread of democracy as a foreign policy goal, they must become far more serious about deploying the right means to achieve it. In addition to the other pressing challenges on the international agenda, the new president should undertake a major and comprehensive reform of the foreign aid architecture guided by a more coherent and sophisticated view of the democracy agenda. This new architecture should be based on three major imperatives:

First, nations within the community of democracies should help new members of the club demonstrate to their citizens that democracy makes a difference to the quality of their daily lives, a tangible “democracy dividend.” HDAC recently led a delegation to Pakistan to assess the status of governance there following its recent parliamentary elections. One Pakistani leader told the delegation: “the Chinese come to Pakistan and build textile factories. The Russians come and build steel mills. Americans come and spend billions of dollars, but what is there to show for it?”<sup>9</sup> The United States needs a strategy that pairs institutional capacity-building work with development projects to address fundamental problems that have the potential to undermine democracy such as economic inequality, intractable poverty, and public health crises. Along with other international donors, the United States must increasingly work to ensure that new democracies can deliver the promise of a new day.

A second necessity is to focus on diplomacy and development at the grassroots level. The recent trend toward “Fortress America”-style embassies on the outskirts of town is a metaphor for our broader diplomacy. Too often, embassy contacts are limited to the political and economic elite, a *modus operandi* that curtails public diplomacy and conveys exactly the wrong message. Too often, development dollars do not reach the average citizens of recipient nations. In fact, an estimated 80 percent of development funding is spent within the United States. U.S. soft power—the potency of the nation’s cultural, intellectual, and governmental capital to attract foreign interest—depends on the ability to extend beyond capital cities and embassy compounds. As the foreign aid apparatus is reformed, we must find ways to ensure that the benefits of U.S. generosity and power serve as examples and penetrate deeply and broadly. The democracy agenda, too, will be enhanced by increased engagement at the grassroots level, which of course is where the heart of democracy truly lies.

Finally, the U.S. agenda for global engagement needs to rediscover a sense of moral and political humility. U.S. foreign policies must be open to new insights and interpretations. This is particularly true when it comes to the work of

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democracy. Inherent in the notion of democracy is that it is the citizens of a society themselves who must choose their own best way. The new administration would do well to remember Mohandas K. Gandhi's wise warning that "The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It has to come from within."<sup>10</sup> On HDAC, we have adopted the term "partnerships" advisedly. Our aim is to support, advise, and facilitate as emerging democracies find their own way.

## Notes

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1. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "President Sworn-In To Second Term," January 20, 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html>.
2. Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway, "Islamist Movements and The Democratic Process In The Arab World," *Carnegie Paper No. 67* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2006).
3. Ibid.
4. Dinorah Azpuru, Steven E. Finkel, Anibal Pérez-Liñán, and Mitchell A. Seligson, "Trends in Democracy Assistance: What Has the United States Been Doing?" *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 2 (April 2008): 150–59.
5. The top ten recipient nations of "Governing Justly and Democratically" funding in FY 2009 budget are: Afghanistan (\$248.0 million), Iraq (\$198.0 million), Sudan (\$77.4 million), Iran (\$65.0 million), Pakistan (\$55.2 million), Egypt (\$45.0 million), Lebanon (\$37.0 million), Liberia (\$35.9 million), Indonesia (\$35.2 million), and Russia (\$30.3 million). See, U.S. Agency for International Development, "Congressional Budget Justifications: Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2009," <http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2009/>.
6. The United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, *The Power of Partnerships: Third Annual Report to Congress on PEPFAR (2007)*, Appendix III, <http://www.pepfar.gov/press/c21604.htm>. The estimate is calculated from funding data for PEPFAR focus countries provided in the report. The report does not provide country-specific data for other (non-focus country) bilateral assistance provided through PEPFAR. According to the report, which covers FYs 2004-2006, \$3.366 billion of the \$3.380 billion in funding provided to focus countries has been spent in Africa.
7. The Millennium Challenge Corporation has compacts signed or in implementation in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ghana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, and Tanzania. See, <http://www.mcc.gov/countries/index.php>.
8. Azpuru et al., "Trends in Democracy Assistance."
9. Pakistani official during a meeting with HDAC delegation to Islamabad, Pakistan, May 27, 2008.
10. D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi* Vol 3: 1930–34, (Bombay, India: The Times of India Press, 1961), p. 301.