

Three misconceptions in the debate about Afghanistan

Why Germany should promote democracy now more so than ever

by Julia Leininger,

German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)



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Protecting and promoting democracy needs to be a priority of the next German government's foreign and development policy. This may seem surprising in light of the criticism being levelled at the overhasty withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. And yet, although much of this criticism is justified, there are at least three misconceptions in the current public debate about democracy promotion.

Misconception one: seeking to establish democracy through military might is the standard policy of 'Western' donor countries. Not true. Military missions with a democracy mandate are the exception when it comes to promoting democracy, not the rule. Yet media attention often focuses on these very cases because they are costly and controversial. However, it would be wrong to draw sweeping generalisations from an individual case. Democracy promotion often comes along quietly, embedded in a development and foreign policy context. This includes, for example, providing advice on constitution-making processes, training judges and supporting civil-society groups.

Misconception two: democracy cannot be 'exported' to non-Western cultures. Although it is correct to say that democracy cannot simply be copied and pasted as a blueprint, states like Germany can help pro-democratic forces in other countries to develop their own models for balancing interests in a peaceful and pluralistic way. Rarely are said forces those in power because they are afraid of losing their political power. Where the governing elite tend to favour authoritarian rule, fostering democratic values and practices is hard, but not impossible. A study has recently shown that the international promotion of democracy is effective in most cases. So again, Afghanistan is the exception, not the rule.

Misconception three: liberal democracies have no or only very few supporters in non-Western societies. People take to the streets all over the world to stand up for freedom and against state oppression. We need to distinguish between those who are calling for a pluralistic society and those who are hindering democratic reforms to cling on to power. In Afghanistan too, there are people who have fostered a democratic living together and are still doing so now. Studies indicate that most Afghans reject the Taliban.

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The debate on international democracy promotion was long overdue. Democracy is an open-ended process of negotiating the values and rules that sustain a society. This generates conflicts. Even in mature democracies such as Germany or the US, the societal consensus on the values and institutional order

that keep us together is crumbling. This discussion also begs the question as to what democratic values Germany and Europe stand for in the world and how they can promote these internationally. Germany's next government will have to take a constructive approach to leading this debate. One specific example is the new German Democracy Promotion Act ("Demokratiefördergesetz"), which is expected to be passed during the next legislative period and urgently needs an international perspective.

The key question is not whether Germany should be promoting democracy but *how*. Even more important than actual strategies is the fundamental political stance, which should underpin this action – namely patience and humility. In terms of foreign policy, patience means continuing to support all those who have campaigned for democracy alongside Germany in the past – as well as those who are doing so now and will do in the future. Humility means openly acknowledging the problems facing the democracies in Germany and Europe and using them as a starting point for a constructive dialogue rather than seeking blueprints for democracy. In terms of domestic policy, German politics should expect more of its citizens, as recently opined in the DIE ZEIT. They should not shy away from informing constituents that promoting democracy, just like military intervention, is a risky investment. The outcome of democratisation processes is always open-ended. Germany can contribute to these efforts, but never guarantee the result.

Those of us who advise and evaluate policies should work for a better culture of learning. We must put forward solid suggestions for improving democracy promotion and foreign missions – not least in light of that in Mali, which is set to be accompanied by an appropriate support of democracy. In the case of Afghanistan, for example, we have long known that promoting a centralised state model would founder in the face of strong local power structures. The failures associated with this could possibly have been averted if financial flows had still been made available if mistakes had been named and recognized instead of having to focus on demonstrating positive effects above all. Holistic evaluations would also be needed to assess the various elements of international policy – stabilisation, democratisation and economic development.

The Taliban's seizure of power will mainly play into the hands of the advocates of autocracy. They will argue that democratisation leads to instability, brushing over the fact that lasting peace is only possible over the long term in a political system that manages to balance interests without recourse to violence and repression. In view of growing autocratization trends, the next German government's commitment to democracy across the world will also influence the future of democracy in Germany and Europe itself.