

Introduction

The Goals of Democracy Assessment

Over the past two decades democracy as a form of government has been on the advance throughout the world. There are many reasons for this. Most important has been the internal loss of legitimacy of military regimes, single-party systems and other forms of authoritarian rule, as their human rights abuses and lack of popular authorisation and accountability became increasingly unacceptable to their populations, and economic crisis removed whatever limited justification the regimes might have enjoyed. People mobilised in very different ways, often at considerable personal cost, to demand their replacement. The success of these internal processes proved infectious for others, but was also assisted by a change in the international climate of opinion. Western governments, some of which had previously supported authoritarian regimes simply because they were anti-communist, no longer felt the need to do so once the legitimacy of the communist model collapsed; and they were also under pressure from their own populations to use development aid to support democratic processes abroad. At the same time the main international financial institutions became convinced that systems of open and accountable government, respecting the rule of law, were better in the long run for business than authoritarian regimes had proved.

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This combination of pressures has resulted in democracy now being widely accepted as the norm for governmental arrangements. Nor should we underestimate the attractiveness of the democratic ideal in and of itself: its principle of equality, its promise of empowerment for ordinary people, its guarantee of basic freedoms, its commitment to pluralism and dialogue to resolve disagreement, its prospect of political and social renewal without convulsions. However, these are ideals that are easier to endorse in principle than to realise in practice, and there has been substantial disillusionment with the failure of many new democracies to deliver what they appeared to promise. Thus it has often proved easier to mount a reasonably fair competitive election under international auspices, or to maintain a relatively open press, than it has been to deliver accountable government, effective opposition, an impartial judiciary or corruption-free public officials. The legacies of imperialism, military rule and authoritarian government have proved hard to overcome. And many populations feel that all democracy has brought has been a change of elites, but no significant difference in the quality of their

daily lives, whether in terms of access to a means of livelihood, to affordable public services, or to personal security and equitable justice.

Similar problems of disempowerment have also emerged, if less acutely, in the older established democracies, where declining electoral participation has reflected considerable disillusionment with governments. These often appear to be more concerned with presentation than performance, and to be remote from citizens' daily concerns. In all countries people have come to feel that many of the decisions that matter for the quality of their lives are no longer within the competence of the elected government, but have escaped beyond the borders of the nation-state, to international organisations, transnational companies, or the imperatives of globalisation and international markets.

It is in this context of a general commitment to the norms of democracy, but of worries about their practical realisation, that the idea of democracy assessment should be located. This idea involves a systematic assessment by its own citizens of a country's political life in order to answer the question: how democratic is it in practice? Where is it satisfactory from a democratic point of view, and what features should be a cause for concern? How far have we progressed, and what remains still to be done? How can we improve on what we have already achieved? Such an assessment can serve a number of purposes:

- It can serve to raise public consciousness about what democracy involves, and about how democratic ideas can be related to institutional arrangements.

- It can give a more precise focus to popular concerns, by identifying both strengths and weaknesses of current democratic practice in a systematic manner.

- It can contribute to public debate about ongoing reform, and help to identify priorities for a reform programme.

- It can provide an instrument for assessing how effectively reforms are working out in practice.

In all these ways a democracy assessment can make a contribution to the democratisation process itself. But it should be evident that it only has value for countries where such a process is already under way, and where there is a significant commitment to it.

International IDEA has been working since 1995 with government and civil society in many countries to help enhance the process of democratisation. Most of this activity has been devoted to capacity-building for democratic advance in individual countries. But International IDEA also wants to advance democracy across a wider front. One way of achieving this goal

is to empower people throughout the world to carry out their own assessments of their country's progress towards, or retreat from, democracy and political freedom. So three years ago, International IDEA initiated a programme of democracy assessments with in-country partners, according to a distinctive framework and methodology. The methodology has been developed from a first model pioneered in the United Kingdom by Democratic Audit, at the University of Essex, through an exhaustive process of consultation and revision at the hands of international experts drawn from both old and new democracies. Teams of assessors in eight countries drawn from every region of the world have used this methodology to conduct pilot assessments of their own democracies. The countries are Bangladesh, El Salvador, Italy, Kenya, Malawi, New Zealand, Peru and South Korea; and in each of these countries, the teams have successfully concluded their own democracy assessments.

The purpose of this handbook is to put the capacity to carry out such assessments into the hands of all those who wish to advance the cause of democracy in their own countries. In this way International IDEA seeks to sow the seeds of democratisation throughout the world. We regard this process as one of self-determination: the people who are best placed to assess the quality of a country's democratic arrangements are the citizens of that country itself. The aim of the handbook is therefore to make the framework and methodology of democracy assessment available to as wide a public as possible and to provide assistance to all those involved in democracy and governance assessments. Our hope is that people will undertake assessments on their own behalf, whether of their country's democracy as a whole, or of some particular aspects of it. What we offer is not a blueprint, but a guide to the problems and choices involved in democracy assessment, and suggestions for how such assessments may be most effectively conducted.