

Democracy Inc.

Hardly an election occurs outside the developed world today without an international corps of observers flying in to certify the results. But the outsiders sometimes do more harm than good.

by Eric Bjornlund

Friends and foes of the United States smirked last fall as the champion of the free world waded in embarrassment through Florida's electoral swamps. Even as U.S. government agencies and nonprofit groups were busily monitoring "troubled" elections in half a dozen foreign lands, from Haiti to Azerbaijan, America's presidential election was thrown into doubt by arthritic voting technology, sloppy voter registration, and partisan election officials—flaws that were supposed to afflict only "less developed" countries. One Brazilian pundit half-seriously called for international sanctions to force a new vote in Florida.

But American democracy has never been faultless, and—derisive comments in the international press notwithstanding—U.S. efforts to promote democracy abroad have never been predicated on its perfection at home. Indeed, the American groups that work to spread representative government overseas have drawn heavily on non-American models precisely because they recognize the shortcomings and idiosyncrasies of the U.S. system.

The real flaws in the global effort to foster democracy, meanwhile, have gone largely unnoticed—and they are flaws that threaten great harm to the democratic cause. The scattered and diffuse democracy movement of decades past has been transformed into a worldwide industry of sorts, led but not controlled by the United States. The industry has done much good. But it has also put a stamp of legitimacy on Potemkin-village democracies in Cambodia, Egypt, Armenia, and other countries. It has frustrated local democratic activists from Indonesia to Peru,

and it has provided autocratic rulers with ammunition to dismiss courageous local democrats as lackeys of foreign powers. Worst of all, it has undermined efforts to apply uniform democratic standards around the world.

The democracy industry has its deepest roots in the United States. From the time of President Woodrow Wilson's crusade to "make the world safe for democracy" to the era of the Cold War, Americans of virtually all political persuasions shared an ideological commitment to advancing the democratic cause in the world. But only under the Reagan administration did the United States begin to focus and institutionalize its efforts. Washington now devotes some \$700 million annually to democracy promotion. Much of it is channeled through the Agency for International Development—which parcels out the money to private consulting firms and more than a score of nongovernmental organizations, such as the Carter Center and the Asia Foundation—and a small but significant portion goes to the congressionally-chartered National Endowment for Democracy. It is a substantial commitment, equal to about 10 percent of the entire U.S. foreign aid budget.

The United States, however, is outspent by others. The European Union and developed countries such as Japan and Australia, along with multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, also pour large amounts of monetary, human, and diplomatic capital into the global crusade. The stated purposes are the same: fighting cor-



Cambodia's 1998 election was not the democratic idyll promised in this voter education poster.

ruption, establishing the rule of law, fostering civil society, developing democratic parliaments, and monitoring elections. But not all of the industry's "players" share the same commitment to democracy, and some are willing to sacrifice its pursuit to other foreign-policy goals.

The industry's rise has coincided with a revolutionary expansion of democracy around the world. What Harvard University political scientist Samuel Huntington has called the "third wave" of democratization began in the late 1970s with political transitions in Spain and Portugal, and spread in the 1980s to Latin America and Asia. Democracy swept through Eastern and Central Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and continued after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The 1990s also saw dramatic political openings in Africa and Asia. Since 1988, a total of 50 countries have made the transition to democracy, from Poland and Brazil to Taiwan and Nigeria.

The democracy industry can't claim credit for the third wave, but it has reinforced the trend. Last year, under the weight of domestic and international pressure, repressive regimes in Yugoslavia and Peru fell after

election monitors helped expose their attempts to manipulate national elections. Two decades ago, such a feat would have been almost unimaginable.

The industry has been fortunate: Its successes have been more sensational than its failures. But an examination of highly publicized elections, such as the recent ones in Cambodia and Indonesia, shows that its failures can be deleterious.

I worked in both countries as an official of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), one of the four main nongovernmental organizations supported by the National Endowment for Democracy. (Each of the two major political parties sponsors an organization, and organized labor and business sponsor the other two.) While my work involved several areas of democracy promotion, the monitoring of elections best illustrates the tensions caused by the involvement of foreign activists. I have seen outside monitors contribute to public confidence in the integrity of elections, provide invaluable moral support to democratic activists facing authoritarian regimes, and deter fraud.

But I have also seen them stumble—and do great harm to many of the world’s fragile democracies.

Cambodia suffered more violent turmoil than almost any other country in the 20th century. It endured intense American bombing during the last years of the Vietnam War, and three years (1975–78) of terror under the communist Khmer Rouge, which, according to some estimates, left nearly a quarter of the Asian country’s eight million people dead. A Vietnamese invasion in 1978 was followed by more than a decade of civil war.

In 1991, a glimmer of hope appeared when Cambodia signed an internationally sponsored peace agreement calling for liberal democracy and genuine elections. The United Nations established the largest, most costly peacekeeping force in its history (15,000 troops and a budget of \$2 billion) to organize the election of a new government and administer the country during its transition. But the 1993 election failed to bring either democracy or stability, and in 1997 First Prime Minister Prince Ranariddh was overthrown in a bloody coup by his putative coalition partner, former communist Hun Sen. The United States and other countries suspended aid, and the United Nations denied the new government a seat in the General Assembly.

Hun Sen eventually agreed to a new election. But the international community was far from united in its approach. Though democracy watchers around the world deplored Hun Sen’s violent putsch, many diplomats and aid providers believed that Cambodia could not be governed effectively without him. To them, an election—even an imperfect one—that lent Hun Sen legitimacy but also preserved a niche for political opposition seemed to be the best Cambodia could hope for.

With decisions about the future of foreign aid and diplomatic relations hinging on judgments about whether the contest was “free and fair,” the pressure was on to grant it a clean bill of health—giving Hun Sen a

sense of how much he could get away with. Eager to end the political crisis, the European Union, the United Nations, Japan, and Australia offered money, equipment, and technical assistance for the administration of Hun Sen’s far-from-perfect election.

The Americans were more squeamish about lending legitimacy to a dubious election. But the U.S. government tried to have it both ways: It declined to offer election aid—but watched from a distance, poised to resume aid and improve diplomatic relations if the process miraculously turned out well.

One Cambodian newspaper dubbed the Americans “idealists” and the Europeans “pragmatists.” But the difference was rooted in more than attitude. The United States, with its long history of activism by independent human-rights and prodemocracy groups, has largely separated election monitoring from foreign policy. In its efforts to monitor elections abroad, the United States relies heavily on nongovernmental organizations such as NDI and the International Republican Institute (IRI). These groups have a single, clear mission: to further democracy. It’s then up to the government to make decisions about whether and how to engage or aid foreign governments. Other players in the democracy industry assign diplomats and bureaucrats to monitor elections. Their judgments are inevitably colored by the fact that democracy is only one of the ends they seek.

Cambodia held its much anticipated election on July 26, 1998. Despite the atmosphere of intimidation created by Hun Sen and his followers, an astonishing 97 percent of Cambodian voters turned out to cast their ballots. Domestic monitoring groups described the process as relatively peaceful and well administered, as did the hundreds of assembled international observers. Speaking before a packed press conference at the plush Le Royale Hotel two days after the election, our own delegation’s coleader, former representative Steven Solarz (D-

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N.Y.), went so far as to speculate that the election might one day be seen as “the miracle on the Mekong.”

Hun Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) was declared the winner of approximately 42 percent of the ballots cast, which translated into a 64-seat majority of the 122-member assembly. Prince Ranariddh’s constitutional monarchist party won 31 percent of the vote and 43 seats, and a second opposition party, led by activist Sam Rainsy, won 14 percent and 15 seats.

But the Cambodian election was no miracle. Politically motivated killings had been commonplace since the ’97 coup, and they stopped only weeks before the election. Opposition members of Parliament, led by Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy, had fled the country in fear of their lives after the coup. Though opposition leaders were induced to return in early 1998, the violence hardly provided the backdrop for a “free and fair” democratic competition.

Violence was not all that marred the election: The CPP government denied opposition parties access to radio and television, threatened opposition supporters, and banned political demonstrations in the capital city of Phnom Penh during the campaign. Hun Sen’s supporters freely exploited their control of the judiciary and security forces. Two weeks before election day, an NDI-IRI report concluded that the process up to that point was “fundamentally flawed.”

Some foreign observers, however, failed to report these problems or blithely dismissed all signs of trouble. While the United States funded 25 long-term observers recruited through the Asia Foundation, none of their reports were made public or shared with other observer groups. The Joint International Observer Group (JIOG), a UN-organized umbrella organization of 34 delegations with some 500 members, didn’t even wait for the initial ballot count or for its own observers to return from the field before it endorsed the process as “free and fair to an extent that enables it to reflect, in a credible way, the will of the Cambodian people.”

Among the JIOG’s grab bag of groups were delegations dispatched by the governments of Burma, China, and Vietnam—regimes hardly known for their democratic

credentials. One JIOG delegation, which openly positioned itself as a Hun Sen apologist, urged even before balloting began that the election “not be discredited for reasons of international politics.” Most troubling of all, however, was the tendency of the JIOG’s *democratic* members—the “pragmatic” Europeans and Japanese—to gloss over the election’s undemocratic features.

Notwithstanding Solarz’s hyperbolic “miracle” remark, the NDI-IRI assessment as a whole was quite levelheaded. It made clear our concern about “violence, extensive intimidation, unfair media access, and ruling party control of the administrative machinery.” British politician Glenys Kinnock, speaking for the delegation from the European Union, rendered a terse and similarly restrained verdict—one that implicitly distanced the EU observers from both the “miracle” statement and the JIOG’s unqualified endorsement. Indeed, Solarz himself had said that the election would prove a “miracle” *only* if the tranquility of election day prevailed, and if the subsequent grievance process and the formation of the government proceeded smoothly. But in most press accounts, little more than Solarz’s sound bite survived.

The press, however, was not really to blame for the world’s failure to come to terms with what happened in Cambodia. As they have in many other cases, international democracy groups erred by making election day the big media event. By bringing observers to Cambodia only days before the polls opened, issuing much anticipated (and hastily composed) assessments of the polling, and hopping on the next plane home, monitoring groups encouraged journalists to zero in on “E-Day”—which constituted, after all, only 24 hours of a months-long process.

It didn’t take long for things in Cambodia to fall apart, making the foreign observers’ upbeat assessments of the election seem all the more disconnected from reality. (“Sometimes I wonder if we’re in the same Cambodia,” one exasperated local democrat said.) After struggling to complete the vote count, including a perfunctory attempt to conduct a recount in a few token locations,

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the CPP-dominated election commission and constitutional court summarily dismissed the numerous complaints filed by opposition parties. After election day, it was revealed that the election commission had secretly altered the formula for allocating seats, thus giving Hun Sen a majority in the National Assembly. There is some evidence that the commission was only responding to international advisers who wanted to correct their own technical mistake. No matter. The change was made in secret, depriving the election of whatever shred of legitimacy it might have claimed.

In Phnom Penh and other Cambodian cities, post-election protests turned violent. One man was killed. The formation of a new government stalled amid finger pointing and threats.

One month after the election, our group decried the violence and utter lack of an appeals process. But our warnings went unheeded. The army of observers and reporters was gone, and international attention had waned. Neither the United Nations, nor the European Union, nor the JIOG ever made a single additional public statement after their relatively positive assessments immediately following election day. That would have required them to confront uncomfortable facts.

Three years after the “miracle on the Mekong,” Hun Sen presides over a corrupt and undemocratic regime. His security forces regularly harass opponents and commit rape, extortion, and extrajudicial killings with impunity. But, with American support, the Hun Sen regime has regained Cambodia’s seat in the United Nations, and the flow of foreign aid, including American aid, has resumed.

A year after the dismal proceedings in Cambodia, Indonesia held a much happier and more legitimate election—its first genuinely democratic contest in 44 years. Many of the democracy-industry circuit riders who had been in Cambodia promptly turned their attention to the archipelago. But again, the global democracy industry made serious mistakes, perhaps missing a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shore up a fragile new democracy.

Indonesia’s democratic opening came in May 1998, when public anger at the regime’s corruption and economic mismanagement forced an aging President Suharto to step down after 32 years as the country’s autocratic leader. Democratic activists in Indonesia quickly organized the most extensive domestic election-monitoring effort ever seen. The prospect of establishing democracy in the country with the world’s largest Islamic population helped open foreign wallets. By early 1999, the United Nations Development Program and the interim government in Jakarta had launched an effort to raise \$90 million in international contributions for election administration, voter education, and poll watching. Just over a third of the total was to come from the United States.

When the polls opened on June 7, 1999, more than half a million Indonesians and nearly 600 foreigners from 30 countries were on hand to monitor the proceedings. It can only be called a messy election—but the vote was undeniably democratic. In the subsequent indirect election of the president, moderate Islamic leader Abdurrahman Wahid pulled out a surprising victory. Unfortunately, he has been ineffective, and the Indonesian national legislature now looks poised to remove him from office. Whether he stays or goes, Indonesia seems bound to endure a period of turmoil.

In Indonesia, the democracy industry inflicted a subtler form of damage than it did in Cambodia. In their drive to ensure fair procedures, the well-intentioned outsiders inadvertently disrupted the efforts of Indonesia’s many democrats. They once again allowed too much attention to focus on election day. And they stole the spotlight from local groups that could have benefited from more media attention.

The sudden influx of foreign money—much of it dumped into the country only weeks, or even days, before the election—touched off a mad scramble among the Indonesian groups. At the very moment they should have been focusing on the logistics of election monitoring, they were pouring their time and energy into grant proposals and budgets. Huge sums encouraged infighting among the Indonesian organizations.



Former president Jimmy Carter, his wife Rosalynn, and South African observer Tokyo Sexwale look on as an Indonesian woman casts her ballot in Ciputat, on the outskirts of Jakarta, in the 1999 election.

Misguided donors often made things worse by favoring different groups or factions.

Foreign aid also encouraged the need-
less proliferation of new monitoring
groups—organizations with little experience
and even less commitment. Twelve months
before the election, only one monitoring
group existed in Indonesia. The next nine
months witnessed the appearance of two
more. But in the two months before the
election, some 90 more groups elbowed
their way to the table. New organizations
sprang up like American dot-com compa-
nies in the heyday of high-tech oppor-
tunism—and many of them showed just as
little resiliency.

Having created incentives for Indonesians
to compete with one another, the donors
then tried to compel them to join forces in
ways that didn't always make sense. The
monitoring groups, for example, were
required to divide their responsibilities along
geographical lines, which touched off new
struggles as leaders haggled over their terri-
tories. The division could more effectively
have been made along, say, functional lines,
with some groups looking into such matters
as pre-election complaints while others

educated voters or monitored vote counts.
In any event, it was a decision best left to local
activists, not outsiders.

As the head of the NDI's 20-person pro-
fessional team in Indonesia, I saw firsthand
some of the ill effects of all this. Three weeks
before election day, at a final planning meet-
ing of the University Network for Free
Elections held at the University of Indonesia
in Jakarta, I was pained to see the group's lead-
ers mired in arguments over money. For
three days, student leaders from around the
country complained about inadequate bud-
gets, criticized the headquarters for hoarding
money, and made apparently specious alle-
gations of corruption. The urgent issues at
hand—volunteer training, communications
systems, vote count monitoring—went vir-
tually undiscussed.

For the University Network's idealistic
national leaders, such as human rights
lawyer Todung Mulya Lubis and professor
Smita Notosusanto, it was a profoundly
dispiriting experience. After the election,
they and their colleagues abandoned any
ambitions of building a national grassroots
prodemocracy network, instead creating a
Jakarta-based advocacy organization called
the Center for Electoral Reform.

The Indonesian experience is a reminder that elections are not an end in themselves; they are, rather, one step in the ongoing process of building democracy. Local organizations and networks created to monitor elections often go on to promote democracy in other ways, by fighting corruption, monitoring government performance, or engaging in civic education. They must be strengthened, with moral as well as material support, not treated like voting machines or ballot boxes to be stored away until the next election.

The democracy industry did a few things right in Indonesia. Not least, it helped ensure fair elections. And former president Jimmy Carter, the reigning celebrity in the international observer corps, offered a fine example of how foreign observers should behave. Carter was a careful student of the election, studying verification techniques, visiting polling stations, and listening to the reports of Indonesian monitors. On the day after the polls closed, he was enthusiastic. But hours before he was to address a press conference, he agreed to meet a small group of Indonesian democracy activists. They were worried about more talk of miracles. Carter listened, and he went before the television cameras with a very different message. He expressed optimism, but he also emphasized the need to pay attention in the days ahead as the votes were counted, the president was selected, and the new government took power. Carter focused attention where it belongs: on the long-term process of building democracy and the local groups that make it work.

With experience, attention, and care, many of the ills that beset the new global democracy industry can be overcome. Shifting attention from election day to the months before and after voters go to the polls is a matter of common sense. Such a shift would also underscore the broader point that genuine democratization takes time, and that those who are sincere in their efforts to help must commit for the long term. Democratization, says Cambodian opposition leader Rainsy, depends on political forces “who’ll remain here, who’ll fight here, who’ll die here, and who are determined to fight for democracy—not just

observers who come for a few days.” There should be nothing controversial about helping local democratic activists become continuing players with a stake in their country’s future. But because so many of the democracy industry’s important actors regard representative government as just one goal, to be balanced against others, this will be difficult to achieve.

All elections must be judged honestly, by the same internationally recognized standards. We know what they are: In addition to fair balloting and counting, there must be opportunities for political parties to compete, reasonably equitable access to the news media, an impartial election administration, freedom from political intimidation, and prompt and just resolution of election-related grievances. But until international donors break the link between the promotion of democracy and other foreign-policy goals—something only the United States has attempted—diplomatic goals will inevitably dilute efforts to establish true democratic governance around the world.

The United States is often criticized for taking a retrograde stance on the environment, national missile defense, and other issues. But when it comes to promoting democracy, Americans are criticized for their crusading idealism. What the Cambodian and Indonesian elections show is that a little more idealism might not be so bad. American nongovernmental groups are motivated by an altruistic desire to help people establish democracy. Whatever the flaws of American assistance, the separation of activities such as election monitoring from the official role of government yields a special kind of commitment. Other countries would do well to emulate the U.S. approach.

In the last decades of the 20th century, democracy established itself as the world’s dominant political ideal. Yet much of the world’s population has yet to enjoy democratic rights, and the commitment of many ostensibly democratic countries remains questionable. If we are to deliver on the promise of global democracy, those who carry its banner must not compromise its simple principles. □