

“Democracy and the UN Democracy Fund”

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by

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Two years into its history, the UN Democracy Fund has already begun to distinguish itself, both from other UN institutions and from other organizations seeking to promote democracy. Founded in 2005 at the World Summit, it is among the newest of UN institutions and the smallest of organizations promoting democracy, but neither of these conditions has prevented it from making a distinctive mark.

First, democratic values are deeply but not exclusively embedded in UNDEF. It reflects democratic values rooted in the UN principles member states have made the core of the UN system. These principles are deeply embedded in the sense that the UN Charter’s purposes and principles evoke human rights and democracy as key parts of human rights. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, unanimously adopted by the General Assembly, made this clear in 1948:

- (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
- (2) Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country.
- (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

This was reaffirmed in Paragraph 135 of the 2005 UN Summit Outcome Document:

We reaffirm that democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives.

But, importantly, these values are embedded without exclusivity. When we compare UN principles to the European Union’s *acquis communautaire* we see that the latter presumes that Europe will be a community of democracies. The UN is a community of “peace-loving states.” Moreover, the OAS and AU mandate proactive efforts to protect and, if interrupted, restore democracy. The UN, on the other hand, balances democracy with an equal commitment to noninterference. Unlike the EU, the UN does not make democracy a prerequisite for membership. And nonintervention is firmly ensconced in Article 2(4) and 2(7) of the Charter. UN members are

committed to not interfere in domestic matters unless international peace and security is threatened or the Security Council determines that there is fundamental failure to protect a population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity.

The 2005 World Summit Outcome Document also stressed that democracy does not come in one exclusive flavor:

We also reaffirm that while democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy, that it does not belong to any country or region, and reaffirm the necessity of due respect for sovereignty and the right of self-determination. We stress that democracy, development and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

The second distinctive feature is its governance. UNDEF follows a multi-stakeholder model. It is a UN trust fund under the authority of the Secretary-General, advised by an Advisory Board which itself is advised by the Programme Consultative Group (of UN agencies) in a process managed and assisted by the Office of UNDEF.

The Advisory Board is distinctively composed. It includes:

1. The Fund's seven largest contributors, providing a voice for those who are currently investing in the process. Currently, these (in alphabetical order) are Australia, France, Germany, India, Japan, Qatar and the US.
2. To them are added six states representing the rest of the UN membership. This group is designed to help ensure the full ownership of UNDEF by the UN and guarantee that the management of UN authorization and legitimacy is controlled by the UN as a whole. Currently, they are Mali, Mozambique, Peru, the Philippines, Romania and Vanuatu.
3. To the member states are added four individuals serving as personal representatives of the Secretary-General who bring expertise and an independent voice to UNDEF's deliberations. In 2008 they included Professor Adebayo Olukoshi, Mr. Amir Dossal (ex officio) and myself (serving also as chair).
4. Lastly, two NGOs active in promoting democracy, human rights and good governance bring both experience and expertise. They are the International Commission for Jurists and the Arab NGO Network for Development.

The combination of stakeholders ensures the presence not only of multiple voices but also differing interests, perspectives and backgrounds in making Fund policy.

The third trait is the distinctive place the Democracy Fund holds in the context of extensive UN activities in democracy promotion. Outsiders, including the UN, can help strengthen formal processes of democratic rule within states in a variety of ways, both indirect and direct. Clearly, elections are not enough. Stable and effective democracies depend on strong public and private institutions, a culture respecting human rights, the rule of law and a growing economy, among others.

UNDEF needs to develop a distinctive niche. Its funding is a small fraction of what the UN system spends, which itself is small fraction of bilateral assistance for democracy and good governance.

The UN system is already actively engaged in:

a. Electoral Assistance. The Electoral Assistance Division in the Department of Political Affairs has assisted 83 Member States and has received over 200 requests for assistance. Its objectives are to assist Member States to hold credible, transparent and legitimate democratic elections and to build professional institutional capacity so that states can organize their own elections with the full confidence of all those who should be involved.

b. Institution building. Here the UN seeks to strengthen accountability, improve administration and legal institutions, including legal training and education for civil servants. Among the many United Nations programmes and agencies that work to promote institution building are the UN Development Program and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

c. Human Rights Observance and Monitoring. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and UNICEF play key roles in capacity building and monitoring, the human rights foundations of democratization.

d. Mobilization of Civil Society and cultivation of a free and independent media. UNDP has established resource and training centers for non-governmental organizations. Those centers provide advice, assistance, training, equipment, information and know-how to NGOs in order to promote cooperation, networking and interaction with the Government.

In this panoply of activities, UNDEF's comparative advantage is enhancing democratic participation, with voter education and mobilization, particularly by NGOs. UNDEF fully recognizes that strong institutions and human rights are essential to democracy. But these latter activities are done by others, often well. UNDEF was established to tackle the most politically sensitive activities—the expansion of participatory politics.

Fourth, and lastly, it is distinctive because of its multilateral character. Its support reflects the trust placed by the UN member states in a democracy initiative that is designed to reflect multilateral impartiality. Democratic movements that might hesitate to accept bilateral assistance, because it might make them become—or even appear to become—dependent on foreign interests find that the UN Democracy Fund carries no such baggage. The Fund awards grants neither to please nor to annoy the governments of member states. While UNDEF knows that funding democracy activities in states opposed to democracy and determined to suppress democratic movements is quixotic, governments have no veto over which democracy activists in their country receive grants.

UNDEF's multilateral character requires nurturing. UNDEF, indeed, has a commitment to the entire membership to ensure that UN legitimacy is not misused.