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Closing Space: Democracy and Human Rights Support Under Fire

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"International support for democracy and human rights faces a serious challenge" (CAROTHERS; BRECHENMACHER, 2014, p. 3), Thomas Carothers and Saskia Brechenmacher argue in a report published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. According to them, a growing number of governments are erecting legal and logistical barriers to democracy and rights programs, "publicly vilifying international aid groups and their local partners, and harassing such groups or expelling them altogether".

In their analysis, the authors point a growing number of democratic and autocratic countries (more than 50) that have actively sought to make life difficult for groups that seek to promote or enhance democracy or protect human rights. While most are aware of extreme cases such as Venezuela, Russia or Egypt, the latter of which recently expelled organizations such as the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) (CAROTHERS; BRECHENMACHER, 2014, p. 13), *Closing Space* shows that the pushback is far more sustained and broader. There are several reasons for this trend.

First of all, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 has strengthened those who regard democracy promotion as little more than Western-imposed regime change, throwing the concept into a legitimacy crisis it has yet to recover from.

Perhaps more importantly, autocrats across the world may be increasingly disinclined to tolerate European and US-American-financed organizations openly promoting democracy abroad in the context of a global shift of power away from established powers towards emerging actors. The West may lose – as Singapore's Kishore Mahbubani often argues – the necessary legitimacy to get away with financing democracy and rights support in other countries, and expelling foreign-financed organizations no longer carries the political risk it once did (CAROTHERS; BRECHENMACHER, 2014, p. 25).

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Thirdly, large-scale protests over the past years in seemingly stable autocracies across the Middle East and elsewhere may have led to worries by governing elites that democracy and rights support could turn out to be more threatening than previously thought – even though it remains unclear in how far the work of democracy and rights groups contributed to protests in many autocracies around the world.

Finally, the global War on Terror and the limitations it imposed on civil freedoms in the United States sent a powerful message to leaders that violating human rights or limiting democracy could be made politically acceptable if it occurred in the name of fighting terrorism.

Rather than being a short-term aberration, the authors believe that the difficulties experienced by organization in many places represent the "new normal" (CAROTHERS; BRECHENMACHER, 2014, p. 31). Western governments are partly to blame, they write. When the Konrad Adenauer Foundation was prosecuted in Egypt, the German government criticized the move but did not undertake any tangible steps. Most notably, US military aid to Egypt continued after the Egyptian government harassed US civil society organization operating in the country (CAROTHERS; BRECHENMACHER, 2014, p. 19). This shows that Western governments' reactions to restrictions on civil society are often a compromise between an interest in promoting democracy and economic and security interests – with the latter often proving to be decisive.

These developments provide a series of insights. First of all, power dynamics are often overlooked by international NGOs, but they matter greatly to recipient societies. Several developing countries had negative experience with foreign meddling by U.S. or European governments, and critics rightly point out that very few developed countries would accept a large influx of foreign money directed at influencing domestic politics. Interestingly enough, eight U.S. states prohibit the deployment of international election monitors, even though the 2000 presidential election was highly problematic by international standards (POSNER, 2000, p.12).

These imbalances are a serious obstacle to democracy supporters, and particularly emerging powers that seek to create an international order in which the same rules apply to all, such as India and Brazil, are likely - and right - to point out such inconsistencies. US-American NGOs that support democracy work abroad should therefore also seek to change U.S. legislation to allow international monitors and the influx of foreign money for

politically involved organizations – as long, of course, as they adhere to democratic principles (CAROTHERS; BRECHENMACHER, 2014, p. 56).

Finally, the report points to difficult political questions that pro-democracy organizations confront: Is it morally justifiable to disobey highly restrictive NGO legislation in autocracies such as Belarus, or does that – if found out – provide autocrats with a convenient excuse to crack down on civil society as a whole? (CAROTHERS; BRECHENMACHER, 2014, p. 55).

Outside the United States and Europe, *Closing Space* provides useful insights for human rights organizations such as Brazil's Conectas and institutions that receive foreign funding. Outside of these very small circles, however, few international observers in Latin America, Africa or Asia will read it, largely because the entire subject is still seen as a largely Western endeavor. Yet contrary to what is generally thought, rising democracies such as Brazil are already engaged in democracy support in many regions, such as Africa, where Brazil helped the authorities in Guinea-Bissau to register voters (ABDENUR; SOUZA NETO, 2013, p.3).

In addition, the text raises a series of important questions for international affairs in more general terms. As a shift of power is underway towards emerging powers in the Global South, is the global pushback against democracy work inevitable? What does it mean for the future of democracy if the world's leading economy is an autocracy? Does the West's economic decline automatically lead to a loss of legitimacy? Or will actors financed by Western governments merely have to change tactics and engage in more subtle manners? Finally, what role will so-called rising democracies such as Brazil, India and Indonesia play in this context?

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