Doing the Democracy Dance in Kazakhstan: Democracy Development as Cultural Encounter

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Recasting Democracy Development in the Former Soviet Union as Cultural Encounter

Twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the USSR’s successor states have not made the smooth transition to liberal democracy that many in Europe and the United States had once expected. The Baltic states and most eastern European countries have transitioned to the status of “sustainable democracies,” but the rest of the Soviet Union’s successor states sit more along a continuum of autocracy than of democracy. While there have been some “democratic breakthroughs” in these states, such as the evolution of competitive electoral systems in Ukraine, Moldova, and Kyrgyzstan or the spotty liberal reforms undertaken in Georgia, even these most politically liberal post-Soviet states remain unstable democratizing regimes at best. Most observers agree that their democratic reforms are tenuous and that the states are constantly at risk of being pulled back into the more solidly authoritarian sphere of their neighbors. As Michael McFaul suggests of the post-Soviet political evolution, “instead of stable, liberal democracies, this transition path produced unconsolidated regimes, waver- ing between democracy and dictatorship.”

The reasons that the former Soviet Union has experienced this trajectory of political development are many and complex, and a robust literature seeks to provide explanations. Some authors stress that the former Soviet states, unlike eastern Europe, have no historical experience with democratic institutions and processes and, thus, have been slower to change. Others have emphasized the Soviet legacy’s role in fostering a weak and deferential civil society, which is consequently unable to either hold governments accountable or advocate for reform. Still others focus on the lack of political will to reform, or the presence of active resistance to such reforms, among these states’ elites. Although these explanations vary in their emphases, they generally blame the region’s lack of progress.

1. Throughout this article, the term former Soviet Union refers to all the states that have emerged from the Soviet Republics with the exception of the Baltic states (i.e., Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). These states’ different histories and subsequent entry into the European Union make them a separate case.


5. See Andrew Wilson, Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World (New Haven, 2005); McFaul, “Political Transitions.”
toward democracy on an absence of traits or experience (that is, a history of democracy, a strong civil society, political will, and so on) among the leaders and peoples of the region.

Intertwined with these critiques of the post-Soviet context and its role in deterring the development of democracy, this literature also provides a variety of criticisms of U.S.-funded political development efforts in the region. In particular, numerous sources question the types of projects created to promote democracy, suggesting that they are poorly targeted or do not sufficiently take into consideration the local context. Thus, while the literature mostly blames local conditions and context for the region’s lack of democracy, it also at least implies that the producers of development assistance should share responsibility for the region’s perceived inability to embrace democratic change.

Although the present article is meant to complement this aforementioned literature by providing insight into the processes of both democratization and democracy promotion in the former Soviet Union, it is not intended as an exploration either of why U.S. democracy assistance to the former USSR has failed or of why these states have yet to fully democratize. These are certainly important questions for policymakers and scholars alike, but they also tend to limit our analysis of democracy development efforts by suggesting that the concepts of both democracy and development success can be simply defined and discerned. In the case of democracy development, these interdependent concepts remain elusive and contested.

The influence of the political context on the operational definitions of democracy and successful development are self-evident. There is no universal definition of democracy, and states of strategic importance to the international community are frequently held to less stringent democratic


7. Although a variety of scholars studying democracy development have provided us with definitions of democracy, by the authors’ own admission these definitions are generally unsatisfactory for universal use, being either too broad or too narrow. Michael McFaul uses Joseph Schumpeter’s definition, which is “the institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle.” See Michael McFaul, *Advancing Democracy Abroad: Why We Should and How We Can* (New York, 2010), 28. This very broad definition, however, applies to China’s inter-party competition as much as it does to the United States’s citizen-centric electoral democracy. By contrast, Larry Diamond provides an expansive ten-point descriptive definition of “Liberal Democracy” that is so restrictive that one could argue that no state truly fulfills its criteria. See Larry J. Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Towards Consolidation*, (Baltimore, 1999), 11–12.
standards than other countries, especially if they contribute to international security or energy interests. Similarly, both international and domestic political factors often contribute to the determination of development success. As anthropologist David Mosse suggests, development success and failure tend to be “policy-oriented judgments” often depending more on domestic and international policy priorities than on actual project performance.

If the role of the political context in these definitions is fairly obvious, the role of the cultural context is less evident and rarely explored by either policymakers or scholars. Although both practitioners and scholars generally recognize that culture plays an important role in all areas of development, and in democracy development in particular, they most often deal with the concept in a pedestrian way that one scholar of development studies has termed “add culture and stir.” In other words, they view culture as a static set of local traditions, one of several factors to be considered when external development planners adapt their technical approaches to a given context. With the exception of a handful of critical anthropological studies, the development literature does not engage the complexities of cultures as dynamic systems that inform the motivations of both those who implement development projects (that is, development producers) and those whom these projects are meant to benefit (that is, development consumers). Such analysis is particularly missing

8. This has long been noted of U.S. policy in the Arab world, which plays critical roles in both America’s energy and security interests. The United States has generally been mild in its criticism of Arab states for their lack of democratization and has even been very careful in its embrace of the pro-democracy protest movement that has recently spread throughout the Arab world. Many other examples exist, including in Central Asia, where the United States has been cautious in its criticism of the region’s lack of democracy in the last decade, during which time the Central Asian states have been critical allies in the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

9. In his study of a community development project in India, anthropologist David Mosse demonstrates that the success of a given development project is usually more beholden to the projects’ relevance to prevailing policy than to the performance of project implementation. See David Mosse, *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice* (New York, 2005), 10.


11. Thomas Carothers, for example, makes this point when he notes that a major problem with existing democracy assistance is “a shallow understanding of the society being assisted” among practitioners. Although this certainly is a problem, it still posits the local culture as the object that must be better understood, suggesting that culture in the developing world creates a puzzle for external producers of assistance to figure out. It does not suggest that the culture of the democracy assistance producers also poses an obstacle to development in this context. See Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, D.C., 1999), 261.

from the field of democracy and governance development, the study of which remains dominated by political scientists prioritizing political factors over cultural ones.

This article seeks to fill this void by focusing its analysis of democracy development in the former Soviet Union on the cultural encounter between the two key actors in the development process—development producers and consumers. Such an analysis does not take at face value the concepts of either democracy or development success, suggesting instead that these concepts are always redefined in each new development context and are dependent upon the interactions between these two key actors. In these interactions, development producers and consumers each maintain their own worldviews and biases, and the cultural gap between them creates numerous instances of misunderstanding and conflict. That does not mean the cultural encounter between development’s producers and consumers does not result in change. The encounter inevitably involves a certain degree of negotiation that ultimately both creates change and determines the perimeters of democracy and development success in that given context. Unfortunately for development planners, the resultant change is neither predictable nor likely to match the intended impact of their projects.

The focus here is on Kazakhstan, one of several post-Soviet states managing an ambiguous relationship with the ideal of democracy since the fall of the USSR. On the one hand, the state has shown little political will to adopt the democratic reforms promoted by western donors, and the population appears to be somewhat complicit in this resistance to reform. On the other hand, the state has continued to engage international donors on issues related to democratic reform and desires recognition from the international community as a democracy.

These mixed messages from the Kazakhstan state obviously have political motivations and are suggestive of “faking democracy” as a means of maintaining engagement with the international community. The importance of such political factors is clear and indisputable. The incentives for such faking exist, and the Kazakhstan state’s record of flawed elections, media control, and suppression of dissident voices supports such an analysis. But explaining the stilted political development in the country exclusively from this perspective tells only part of the story. It does not explain why there is not more demand among Kazakhstan’s citizens for change or why similar post-Soviet states, such as Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Georgia, have had such difficulty adopting democratic changes in postrevolutionary contexts where political will for change has existed.

Understanding the trajectory of political development in Kazakhstan, as well as elsewhere in the post-Soviet political space, requires an analysis of the cultural context in addition to that of the political. Furthermore, the cultural context of political development cannot be understood by objectifying Kazakhstan’s culture alone. Instead, this context is defined by the cultural encounter between the people of Kazakhstan and

13. See Wilson, Virtual Politics.
the international actors promoting democratic ideals. Through a focus on this cultural encounter, an alternative narrative of the development of democracy around the world emerges that is less bound to the modernist narratives of inevitability and more solidly based in a discourse of contestation and negotiation.

Theorizing the Cultural Encounter Inherent in Democracy Development

An analysis of democracy development as a cultural encounter requires a theoretical framework that helps explain how different cultures interact, reproduce themselves, and change. In anthropological literature, one of the most analyzed of intercultural encounters is the colonial encounter between imperial powers and their colonized subjects. Indeed, colonialism shares much with international development for both offer Eurocentric ideologies of social development.14 But more important here is what studies of colonialism tell us about the dynamics of the cultural encounters that transpire through development.

Marshall Sahlins’s study of the colonial encounter in the South Pacific, *Islands of History*, for example, is instructive for exploring the vicissitudes of democracy development in the former Soviet Union.15 Sahlins’s study is filled with descriptions of colonizers and colonized interacting at cross-purposes, misunderstanding each other’s motivations, rituals, and values. The follies of these interactions are comparable to those observed among foreign democracy promoters and local citizens in the former Soviet Union, complete with their misunderstandings, unintended outcomes, and awkward engagement. Sahlins elucidates the historical dimensions of clashes in worldviews and the associated cultural categories, showing how the encounter gives rise to a novel situation with its own logic, rules, and motivations that still remains rooted in preexisting assumptions on both sides.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offers another analytic tool for understanding cross-cultural encounters. He describes as *habitus* the mode of consciousness emerging from one’s experience of daily practice within a given society.16 From an early age individuals learn the “rules of the game” within a given community. Having internalized certain assumptions about these rules governing social interaction, people reproduce the practices dictated by the rules throughout their lives, passing on their assumptions to others who subsequently become socialized into the same community. Although Bourdieu developed his theories based on research in an isolated society, the concept inevitably becomes more dynamic in the context of globalization where the socialization of people is no longer contained within a limited local context. Still, when different societies

14. The commonalities and continuity between these two historical processes have been discussed at length elsewhere and are not central to the argument of this article. See, for example, Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development from Western Origins to Global Faith*, 3d ed. (London, 2009).
interact, especially after being isolated from each other over multiple generations as was the case with the United States and USSR, they approach each other according to the respective “rules of the game” internalized by each. Although this creates misunderstandings and awkward engagements, it also inevitably facilitates change in each other’s respective outlooks and practices over time.

These ideas help clarify the interaction between producers and consumers of democracy development assistance in Kazakhstan over the last two decades. This interaction is like an awkward improvised dance where each side, restrained by the assumptions of its own habitus, appears to be trying, often unsuccessfully, to interpret and follow the other’s lead. Consequently, its outcomes are unpredictable and tend not to conform to the expectations of either side, yet it nonetheless results in something new and different, as is the case in improvised dance. Drawing on this metaphor, this article refers to this interaction as the democracy dance.

Toward an Ethnographic Analysis of the Democracy Dance in Kazakhstan: Democracy Assistance Producers and Consumers

In order to better understand the political development of Kazakhstan and the democracy dance that influences it, we must understand the cultural assumptions, or habitus, of the different dancers: the American producers of democracy assistance and the Kazakhstani consumers of this assistance. Rough sketches of the different worldviews of these two actors will help us understand how they have interacted over the last twenty years. Given the increasing role of the state in our lives today, these sketches focus particularly on the different taken-for-granted assumptions about citizen-state relationships that influence the worldviews of these two groups.

Beginning with the producers of U.S.-funded democracy assistance, primarily American-born development professionals working on USAID projects, one must acknowledge that it is problematic to characterize a singular cultural pattern for the United States given the country’s diversity and large immigrant population. Nonetheless, some general conclusions about Americans’ assumptions regarding the relationship between citizens and the state and the nature of governance can be noted. This is particularly true of those American citizens who promote the strategy of democracy development abroad, since such people have embraced the U.S. system of governance enough to believe it is worth trying to replicate it elsewhere in the world.

These people assume that state institutions should be facilitative and fair. Although many Americans are critical of government interference in their private affairs, sometimes passionately so as present libertarian political movements in the country demonstrate, people in the United States overwhelmingly comply with laws and view law as an objective and fair

17. Although a variety of European donors, as well as the United Nations, also provide democracy assistance to Kazakhstan, the focus here is only on U.S.-funded democracy promotion projects, which constitute the majority of democracy assistance to the country.
determinant of the permissible and forbidden. More important, Americans generally honor their system of governance to such an extent that they often seek to change its rules rather than circumvent them. And, most important, Americans tend to believe in their ability as individuals to effect such change, usually through either grassroots activism or representational means via elections. In short, most Americans trust the institutions of the state and believe in their ability to alter them when the institutions fail to serve them. While this compliance with the formal “rules of the game,” often referred to as the “rule of law,” is partially reinforced through deterrents—in other words, the threat of punishment for non-compliance—the real power of the American system of governance lies in a certain internalized faith in “the system” among the country’s citizens.

Kazakhstanis and other former Soviet citizens generally find it surprising that Americans have such confidence that their government will act on their behalf. The stereotypes one hears most often from Kazakhstanis when characterizing Americans are “patriotic” and “simple” (or naive). These stereotypes are interrelated and suggest Americans’ unquestioning faith in and compliance with their own system of governance.18

Certainly such impressions of Americans and their “democracy” are not new. Alexis de Tocqueville offered many of the same observations about the American character more than a century ago in describing the reverence Americans hold for the “rule of law.” As de Tocqueville noted, Americans “cannot understand why a rule that is applicable to one man should not be equally applicable to all others; . . . the slightest privileges are repugnant to his reason; the faintest dissimilarities in the political institutions of the same people offend him, and uniformity of legislation appears to him to be the first condition of good government.”19 Yet, de Tocqueville, like Kazakhstanis today, was also surprised at Americans’ overwhelming faith in the institutions of the state. As he noted, “Americans hold that in every state the supreme power ought to emanate from the people; but when once that power is constituted, they can conceive, as it were, no limits to it, and they are ready to admit that it has the right to do whatever it pleases.”20

While one might argue that de Tocqueville’s descriptions are no longer relevant to the present-day United States, his discussion of Americans’ convictions and beliefs about citizen-state relationships is remarkably consistent with the implicit assumptions of U.S. citizens to this day. Americans as a whole continue to have a high level of compliance with the formal “rules of the game” set down by the state in law as well as a strong faith in the ability of their political system to ensure that the state serves their interests.

18. The Russian word for “simple” (prostoi) indicates a certain child-like naivety that usually has positive connotations but is a slightly “backhanded” compliment. Although citizens in Kazakhstan tend to view Americans’ faith in their government as naive given the realities of power, they also admire the fact that Americans can maintain this belief in the same way one envies a child who believes in Santa Claus.
19. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America and Two Essays on America (1840; reprint, New York, 2003), 290.
20. Ibid., 291.
Americans’ general assumptions about citizen-state relations are particularly pronounced in dealings with the former Soviet Union due to the legacy of the Cold War and the perceived victory of democracy over communism this event represented, especially for those involved in democracy promotion. Thus, whether they are familiar with the argument or not, U.S. democracy promoters in Kazakhstan are, on some level, influenced by the neoconservative manifesto of Francis Fukuyama, which posited that the Cold War marked the end of history, “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

As a result, they either consciously or unconsciously see themselves as missionaries promoting the American system to Kazakhstanis who, having long been denied access to it, are destined to embrace this system.

These internalized assumptions about the relationship between citizens and the state, the importance of state institutions in serving citizens, and the inevitability of democracy as the best form of governance are all evident in the strategy developed by USAID’s democracy office in Kazakhstan in the 1990s. According to this office’s strategic results framework (see figure 1), USAID decided to target citizen participation in government decision making as its main goal and generic citizen participation, increased availability of information, and more responsive government as the means to reach that goal. In putting this results framework into practice, the agency developed projects almost exclusively focused on building institutions or capacity within existing institutions. To increase citizens’ participation, it promoted the development of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); to increase the availability of information, it helped form private media outlets; and to increase the responsiveness of government, it sought to promote elections, the judiciary, and the legislative branch.

In short, the strategic plan for achieving democracy in Kazakhstan

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in the late 1990s assumed that the establishment of more effective and capable institutions could facilitate a change in the relationship between citizens and the state. Such an approach reflected a belief that it was exclusively the strong arm of government that had cultivated the relationship between citizens and the state during the Soviet period. Given the opportunity to relate to the state differently, USAID believed that the people of Kazakhstan would do so. This would have made sense if the citizens of Kazakhstan came to the democracy dance with the same assumptions about state-citizen relationships as their American dance partners. But I suggest they did not.

In Kazakhstan and elsewhere in the USSR during the twilight of Soviet rule, people’s relationship to the state and its political system was quite different from that in the United States. In the Soviet Union people had been conditioned to believe they had no influence over policy issues. Political behavior outside the Communist Party was literally a criminal offense, and the examples of Stalinism and its aftermath had shown that being involved in such activities was a futile endeavor that only brought misery. Although various dissident movements existed throughout much of the Soviet period, they were largely marginalized by the state through infiltration and other forms of subversion. The strong position of the state vis-à-vis political opposition created a certain respect—mixed with fear—for the power of the state among Soviet citizens, but, unlike in the United States, that respect did not translate into compliance with the rules governing the more mundane aspects of the wide-reaching institutions of the Soviet state in the post-Stalin years.

During the later Brezhnev years in particular, informal mechanisms of interaction that circumvented formal state institutions began to play an increasingly significant role in the daily life of the Soviet Union. As the Moldovan political analyst Oazu Nantoi recently told me, this created a “double life” where people maintained a public illusion of compliance with state institutions, even though they saw these institutions as mostly symbolic and only really effective when navigated through informal relationships. In recent years, as social scientists from outside the former USSR have benefited from almost two decades of fieldwork in the region, a substantial literature has emerged that examines these informal structures.

One scholar studying these phenomena is Alena Ledeneva, whose book, *How Russia Really Works*, offers an extensive examination of the ways in which Soviet citizens accomplished everyday tasks. Ledeneva describes a variety of informal strategies employed by Soviet citizens to make the ineffective Soviet system function, including the widespread system of favor-exchange known colloquially as *blat*, the use of blackmail (known in Russian as *kompromat*), a generally accepted mutual-support system that allowed workers to help each other to “cheat the system,” and finally, a variety of financial schemes ultimately based on purposely falsified bookkeeping. As Ledeneva notes, summing up this system: “The Soviet system

was not a planned economy. It was meant to be, but those living within its borders found that they had to counteract its over-centralization and its ideological limitations through intricate schemes of informal exchange, regional and industrial lobbying, and a variety of practices for cheating the system.  

In Kazakhstan, these practices were further articulated through longer-standing informal networks developed via extended families among the formerly nomadic Kazakhs. Kazakhstan's indigenous population had primarily been nomadic prior to Soviet rule, and it had little experience with the idea of a centralized state. Instead, Kazakhs governed themselves through herding groups, organized along kinship lines, led by a patriarch, and regulated by a combination of customary and religious laws. While the combination of Russian colonialism and the Bolsheviks' forced settlement of Kazakhstan's nomadic peoples in the 1930s virtually decimated most aspects of this social structure, during the Soviet period and today the Kazakhs have continued to rely on kin networks to navigate daily life.

The primacy of such familial networks have led some political scientists in recent years to examine formal “tribal” or “clan” affiliations among the Kazakhs as a means of explaining political behavior. Although the evidence that such historical affiliations substantially influence political behavior is quite weak, it does appear that ethnic Kazakhs do use familial ties and other allegiances, such as the regionally based zhuzhes, to obtain employment and gain favor. The reality of making ends meet in Kazakhstan is a matter of knowing people who can help facilitate action through mutually beneficial exchanges of favor as described by Ledeneva, but these relationships of exchange also often depend upon the family or even zhuz to which one belongs or into which one marries.

Despite the Soviet state’s periodic campaigns to obliterate Kazakhs’ reliance on informal kin ties, more recent scholarship suggests that Moscow largely allowed the logic of such traditional social organization to remain in place in the region to ensure stability while minimizing Moscow’s governance responsibilities. This was particularly true during the Brezhnev period, when Dinmukhamed Kunaev served as the leader of the


27. Edward Schatz’s research on clan affiliations in Kazakhstan during the 1990s suggested that while such affiliations did not influence political allegiances, they did serve instrumentally to help people obtain employment and other resources. Still, the reliance on immediate kin networks proved more salient in these cases than did fictive kin “clans” such as the Kazakh zhuzhes. See Schatz, Modern Clan Politics.

Communist Party in Kazakhstan. Kunaev often deferred to local traditions of authority and favored informal kin networks over party discipline, attributes for which he continues to be revered in the country to this day.\footnote{Collins, Logic of Clan Politics.}

No longer hampered by Soviet ideology, Kazakhstan’s current president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, has adopted these values to an even larger extent, fashioning himself as a nomadic Kazakh khan who can bring together and balance the influence of the different powerful kin, zhuz, and oligarchic groups in the country.

These informal structures facilitated the operation of the Soviet system in the background of public life, but they have proven a substantial deterrent to what Americans assume to be the effective implementation of democracy in the post-Soviet context. Most citizens of Kazakhstan, and perhaps most post-Soviet peoples outside the Baltic states, engage the concept of democracy much as they embraced communism before—as a mostly empty ideological framework to facilitate deference to the authority and power of the state, not as a system of formal institutions that can effectively represent people’s interests and make governance more successful in serving the people.

This attitude toward democracy is further bolstered by the fact that most Soviet citizens met the end of the Cold War more with exhaustion than with enthusiasm, especially among the “last Soviet generation,” for whom, as Alexei Yurchak argues, the ideological meaning of socialism had been long lost.\footnote{See Alexei Yurchak, Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation (Princeton, 2006).} If many Americans saw in the end of the Cold War the victory of American ideals, per Fukuyama’s “end of history,” most former Soviet citizens viewed it more as an “end of ideology,” or a sign that grand ideals are essentially incompatible with the realities of life. This sentiment is exacerbated in the periphery of the USSR, such as in Kazakhstan, where externally driven “reform” has been a constant reality that began during Russian colonialism, continued during Sovietization, and has reemerged in the post-Soviet era of democratization.\footnote{This point has been made by Bruce Grant for Sakhalin and by Yuri Slezkine for the indigenous populations of Siberia. See Bruce Grant, In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas (Princeton, 1995); and Yuri Slezkine, Russia and the Small Peoples of the North: Arctic Mirrors (Ithaca, 1994). Both authors only touch briefly on the post-Soviet period, but their arguments about the long history of externally driven “reform” on the edges of Soviet power are suggestive of the lack of enthusiasm with which such formerly colonized people, Central Asians included, have greeted western-funded democracy programs.}

Throughout this history, the people of Kazakhstan generally paid lip service to the goals of such externally driven reform, not allowing these goals to interfere with the ways they had previously operated. In many ways, the same holds true today in the context of democratization.\footnote{A joke I heard told in Kazakhstan epitomizes this attitude. A women in a rural region comes home and tells her mother that she just had the strangest experience. A group of Americans gave a seminar on how to breastfeed children. The mother looks shocked and says, “Americans!? I was at one of those seminars thirty years ago, but it was run by people from Moscow. Just smile and say thank you; they have no idea that we have been feeding children for centuries.”}

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Given the divergence between the lived experiences and beliefs of Kazakhstan's citizens and those of American democracy promoters, it is not surprising that the USAID results framework for developing democracy in Kazakhstan has had difficulty in meeting its goals. As a means of facilitating democracy, American democracy assistance has promoted formal structures, such as NGOs, parliaments, new court systems, open elections, and privately owned media outlets. Both the leaders and citizens of Kazakhstan have graciously engaged these externally promoted structures, but, following past examples, they have also subverted them in practice through informal means. This situation has led both producers and consumers of democracy assistance in the country to frequently work at cross-purposes, occasionally creating misunderstandings and conflict. At the same time, however, this democracy dance has resulted in a certain negotiation of the political sphere in Kazakhstan that inevitably creates change, albeit likely not in the ways that either producers or consumers of democracy assistance intended. Instead, this change shares much with the outcomes of the cultural encounters of colonialism, from which, as Sahlins has suggested, a new context arose with its own logic, rules, and motivations, but which remained anchored in preexisting assumptions on both sides.\textsuperscript{33}

A full understanding of this dynamic would require intensively researching the range of democracy development projects implemented in Kazakhstan over the last twenty years, highlighting the interaction between producers and consumers of this assistance. Such a broad study is beyond the scope of this article, but a case study of how this cultural encounter plays out in the context of the implementation and reception of development projects during an event of political importance provides at least an introduction to the cultural analysis of democracy development proposed here. The remainder of the article does exactly this, applying a cultural analysis of the democracy dance to Kazakhstan's 2004 parliamentary elections.

\textbf{Doing the Democracy Dance in Kazakhstan: The 2004 Parliamentary Election}

Elections in the former Soviet Union offer a particularly vivid example of the missed cues and cross-purpose actions in the democracy dance. Both Americans and former Soviet citizens have relatively long histories of experience with elections, but those experiences vary dramatically. Americans generally view elections as the ultimate articulation of their democratic system, and most accept electoral results under the assumption that they are the outcome of a free and fair process.\textsuperscript{34} Most former Soviet citizens,

\textsuperscript{33} Sahlins, \textit{Islands of History}.

\textsuperscript{34} Given that many elections in the United States attract fewer than half the eligible voters to the polls, one might question this assertion. Voter turnout, however, does not tell the entire story. A 2004 survey by the California Voters Foundations, for example, found that 95 percent of infrequent voters and 81 percent of nonvoters in that state agreed that "voting is an important way to voice your opinions on issues that affect your family and your community." See California Voters Foundation, \textit{California Voter Participation Survey} (2004), at www.calvoter.org/issues/votereng/votpart/index.html (last accessed 2 March 2012).
with some notable exceptions, view elections as an almost theatrical reaffirmation of the structure of power, in which the results are deemed neither in doubt nor of relevance to people’s lives. This attitude mostly emerges from the Soviet history of elections: candidates were always pre-selected by the Communist Party and elected officials were limited to positions on local councils. Although today former Soviet states hold elections for national, local, and sometimes regional positions of importance, most of these states attempt to manage elections in a way that allows them to ensure certain results. Although there are some important exceptions to this rule, such as Moldova, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia, Kazakhstan is certainly not an exception.

Kazakhstan has never had an election deemed to be free and fair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the country’s president recently began his twentieth year in that position after winning more than 95 percent of the vote in a reelection bid. The people of Kazakhstan, therefore, have very little experience with electoral competition and approach the concept of elections quite differently from American democracy promoters. In the case of the 2004 parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan, this divergence in cultural assumptions between producers and consumers of democracy assistance created an event that was interpreted very differently by each side. To understand the dynamics of those events, it is first important to provide some background about the elections in question.

When the Kazakhstan government called early parliamentary elections for September 2004, USAID decided to engage these elections more robustly than it had done at any time since the early 1990s. This was partly a product of the George W. Bush administration’s increased attention to democracy issues, but it was also related to what appeared to be a viable political opposition called the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK). Two prominent young government officials, Mukhtar Abliazov

This suggests that infrequent voters and nonvoters recognize elections as legitimate; they do not vote for other reasons. This did not change dramatically during the crisis of the 2000 presidential elections when the entire election hinged on recounting the ballots in a few polling stations in Florida. Although in the end the Supreme Court essentially decided the election, American voters have responded since by calling for electoral reforms and by turning out in larger numbers to vote, as the 2008 elections demonstrated.

35. The history of elections in post-Soviet space outside the Baltics has been one of state manipulation. As already mentioned, some states, such as Moldova, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and to some extent Georgia, have begun to break out of this model. The elections in other states, including Kazakhstan, however, have generally not been deemed free and fair by the international community. For various reports from these countries’ elections over the last twenty years, see the Web site of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, at www.osce.org/documents?keys=election&document_type=472 (last accessed 2 March 2012).

36. USAID had funded electoral assistance as part of its initial package of democracy assistance to Kazakhstan in the early 1990s, but it gradually reduced this assistance as it became clear that elections were not an area where there was any political will for reform within the host government. By 2004, there was no election support project funded by USAID, and the engagement of this election was pieced together by supporting existing projects to do short-term additional work.
and Galymzhan Zhakiianov, originally established DCK in 2001 with the support of a broad group of young “reformers” and businessmen. Although the government quickly moved to neutralize DCK and arrest its leadership, the group’s legacy as an alternative political force still posed a threat to the president in 2004. Some of the organization’s secondary leaders who had retained a working relationship with the government succeeded in registering a more moderate opposition party named Ak Zhol (White Path) for the 2004 elections. This party was less threatening to the government, but, like DCK, it appealed to a larger base in society beyond the small number of dissidents who usually dared to oppose the president. In addition to such dissidents, Ak Zhol had the support of many of the young businessmen who had originally backed DCK, and these constituents gave the party probably the most important resource in modern politics—money.

As elections approached, a variety of opposition groups, including the Communist Party and the remnants of DCK who had registered their own block for the election, cooperated with Ak Zhol. In the aftermath of the rapid rise and fall of DCK, the growing power of Ak Zhol suggested the election might be more contested than previous ones in the country. As a result, American democracy promoters, always in search of the illusive “democratic breakthrough election,” were more eager than usual to engage it through development assistance.

As a result, USAID responded to the elections with a package of assistance that included initial support to electoral law reform, robust political party campaign training, a grant program for NGOs and media to conduct voter education and to campaign for transparent elections, and a large domestic election observation group trained to conduct a parallel vote count that could place a check on the official results released by the government. Indeed, this package of assistance appeared sufficient

37. Allegedly, DCK had been created with the consent of President Nazarbaev on the promise that it would neutralize his son-in-law, Rakhat Aliev, who had become a nuisance to Kazakhstan's elite by usurping the successful businesses of others and by appearing to have political ambitions beyond those his father-in-law had prescribed. See Cummings, Kazakhstan. As DCK developed, however, it became increasingly critical of policies in the country, and, by implication, of the president. According to Azamat Junisbai and Barbara Junisbai, DCK’s expanded platform included calls “for decentralization of political authority (via the direct election of regional governors) and a strong legislature and independent judiciary to balance the power concentrated in the presidency.” See Azamat Junisbai and Barbara Junisbai, “The Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan: A Case Study in Economic Liberalization, Intraelite Cleavage, and Political Opposition,” Demokratizatsiya 13, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 378. As soon as the movement began to articulate this platform for concrete reforms, however, the government moved to dismantle it, arresting its leaders, Abliazov and Zhakiianov, for alleged corrupt actions while in office. Abliazov was soon released on the promise that he would leave the country and refrain from trying to influence political events in Kazakhstan. Zhakiianov chose to remain in jail for most of his term rather than make a deal with the government. After these dramatic events, most of the other young officials and businessmen who had supported the movement withdrew their support.

38. It is difficult to recreate this package of assistance from available documents since most of these activities were added onto existing projects that had broader objectives. For this reason, the activities funded by USAID for the elections only appear as brief footnotes
to help create a more level playing field for the election, at least formally. The result, however, was quite different.

In addition to the president’s party, Otan, seven other seemingly pro-presidential parties registered for the election, including Asar, established by the president's daughter Dariga Nazarbaeva, as well as a second and more regime-loyal communist party, which appeared to be constructed in order to weaken the support of the oppositionist oriented Communist Party. The election, therefore, was slated to have a total of ten parties, which would vie for both single-mandate seats and several proportionally decided seats determined by nationwide voting for each party.

Initially, the government adopted several seemingly “democratic” changes to the election law. They allowed for political party representatives on the seven-person local election commissions that run the polling stations. They also pledged to post results publicly outside each polling station and to allow observers access to the vote count. All of these measures were greeted with approval from the international community, which took at least partial credit for pushing these reforms through.  

The government of Kazakhstan, however, subsequently subverted these improvements to the election law by making other changes to the process. First, a new electronic voting system that directly tabulated results without paper ballots made it much more difficult to conduct a parallel vote count and rendered the entire counting process less transparent. Second, although the new law allowed for political party representation on the committees at polling stations, it limited the number of such committee members to seven. The government subsequently appeared to take advantage of this stipulation by registering ten parties for the election, only three of which were in open opposition to the president. Thus, it was not surprising that few opposition party members ended up on committees in polling stations.

Although the government closely watched the USAID-funded political party training program to ensure that it did not provide material support to parties or favor one party over another, it did allow USAID to conduct seminars on campaign techniques. Later, as the elections drew nearer,
however, party representatives, both pro-presidential and oppositionist, ceased coming to trainings, allegedly because they had been told by the government to stay away from any foreign assistance. More important, the opposition parties were virtually unable to use the skills they had gained during training. When these parties held press conferences, television journalists would attend, but little or none of the substance of the meetings would be broadcast. When they attempted to hold rallies around the country, the gatherings would frequently be closed down, or they would be denied access to a meeting place entirely.  

Similarly, the NGO and media grant program had minimal impact. Implemented as a demand-driven grants program, it relied on proposals from local organizations for projects that could push the envelope on holding the government accountable for fair elections. Very few NGOs or media outlets, however, proposed projects that would give an equal voice to both opposition and pro-presidential candidates or that would educate voters on their rights to defy employers’ ultimatums to campaign or vote for a given candidate. Instead, most projects focused on soft voter education issues such as the importance of elections to a democratic society, thus failing to better prepare citizens to make an informed decision on election day. In particular, the media grants made virtually no difference given the controlled broadcast environment, as media outlets receiving grants felt they needed to avoid controversial issues or too much coverage of the opposition if they did not want to face repercussions from the government.

On the day of the election, observers recorded numerous cases of citizens being manipulated or pressured to vote for certain candidates. In the polling place where I observed the vote count in the city of Pavlodar, for example, large and intimidating workers from a local aluminum plant were present inside for most of the day, presumably to let voters know their employers were watching. Furthermore, the government did not fulfill its promise to post results by polling stations or to give all observers full access to the counting procedure, which was already compromised by the nontransparent electronic voting process. Various complaints were registered with the Central Election Commission regarding such instances of voter intimidation and other violations, but these were left mostly unresolved.

According to the parallel vote count conducted by the domestic election observation group, Republican Network of Independent Monitors (RNIM), the results reported from many districts did not correspond to the votes counted on the evening of the election. The parallel vote count suggested, for example, that if votes had been properly tabulated, Ak Zhol would have won at least two seats in the city of Almaty that were reported as having been won by pro-presidential parties. Although RNIM did inform the Central Election Commission about this discrepancy, it unfortunately did not mention it publicly in its preliminary post-election report.

42. Ibid., 11–12.
43. Ibid., 12.
or in its press conferences, thus rendering the parallel count funded by USAID mostly ineffective in holding the government accountable.\textsuperscript{44}

When the dust settled from the election, the official results did not reflect any opposition victories, save one seat that Ak Zhol had won through the national party-list vote. In protest, Ak Zhol subsequently refused to occupy the seat it had been awarded. Observation groups, both domestic and international, filed relatively critical reports on the election, but these reports were barely mentioned in local media. Instead, international election observers brought in by the government occupied most of the media space, offering accolades to Kazakhstan for its successful and transparent electoral process.\textsuperscript{45} While the Central Election Commission called the election “the clearest possible sign that Kazakhstan is continuing on the path to democratic reform,” the primary domestic independent observation group reported that, in comparison to previous elections in the country, this election “was by no means a step forward in the development of democracy in Kazakhstan, but rather demonstrated a significant regression.”\textsuperscript{46}

Although opposition parties threatened to organize gatherings around the country to protest the falsification of the election, these protests never took place, and the government continued to depict all criticism as politically motivated, claiming that the results were well tabulated. Furthermore, the U.S. Embassy, while not verifying the free and fair nature of the election, did not directly criticize the government or its electoral process.\textsuperscript{47} Likewise, very few local NGOs openly questioned the election results and process, and those that did soon ceased their criticism to avoid repercussions. Essentially, all parties involved, including the U.S. Embassy, in the end acknowledged the event as a legitimate demonstration of the state’s power and authority.

Despite the hundreds of thousands of dollars spent, the USAID assistance package to the election had made virtually no impact on the free and fair conduct of the elections. USAID worked through formal structures, including NGOs, media outlets, political parties, and a working group on


\textsuperscript{47} Democracy promotion is not the only aspect of U.S. foreign policy in Kazakhstan. Embassy employees in many countries are frequently less enthusiastic about pushing host governments on democratic reform than are those working directly on democracy development projects. This has often been the case in Kazakhstan, which is important to U.S. interests in a variety of ways, including as a major supplier of oil and gas.
Doing the Democracy Dance in Kazakhstan

the election law, but its efforts had been completely subverted by informal machinations. Ironically, it was also in the informal sector that the real competition around the election was taking place and where foreign assistance, unbeknownst to donors, had perhaps made an impact.

Despite the official results, this election could also be interpreted as perhaps the most competitive in the history of Kazakhstan. The competition, however, played out less at the polling stations and more in the unofficial arena of Kazakhstan's elite power networks. As Azamat Junisbai and Barbara Junisbai suggest, “an important political by-product of economic reform in Kazakhstan is the transformation of the country’s elite from a monolithic group with more or less homogenous interests to one of intraelite cleavage, which some scholars have suggested is a critical step in creating the necessary underlying conditions for political transition.”

Although the 2004 election did not mediate the political competition inherent in these cleavages in a transparent or fair manner, it brought this competition into the public arena for perhaps the first time in Kazakhstan’s history.

Family Power Struggles and Political Competition: An Alternative Reading of Kazakhstan’s 2004 Parliamentary Elections

Beneath the surface of the formal elections, the parties involved and their actions reflected significant divisions in the country’s elite. In this respect, the key figure in the election was actually the president’s daughter, who had campaigned passionately for the Asar Party. While most of the international community viewed Asar as a loyal puppet of her father’s political machine, in retrospect it was likely the greatest challenge to her father’s grip on power in the election. That there were divisions within the family and that Dariga did not always support her father had long been rumored, but it was only during this election that this conflict became public.

As a result, it is not entirely surprising that Asar, despite strong public support, only received four seats in the new parliament according to official results.

Nazarbaeva’s entry into the political arena appeared to be well calculated. She had made the decision to create Asar on the heels of the brash political actions of the young officials who created DCK and accused her

49. The rumors surrounding the divisions within the Nazarbaev family resemble the intrigues within European monarchies historically and are largely focused on personal issues rather than politics. Although Nazarbaev remains married to his wife Sarah, it has long been rumored that they do not live together and that he has secretly married a series of women since being estranged from her (often described as his attempt to sire a son). It is also rumored that Dariga is not the president’s actual daughter, but a step-daughter from his wife Sarah’s first marriage. In this context, Dariga’s conflict with her father is seen as her attempt to ensure that her family enjoys its deserved share of his power. These rumors have never been substantiated but circulate widely in Kazakhstan as people try to make sense of the actions of different family members. Some of these rumors, such as that Nazarbaev has taken a new wife, have been voiced by Dariga’s former husband, Rakhat Aliyev, in his book about President Nazarbaev. Rakhat Aliyev, The Godfather-in-Law: The Real Documentation (Vienna, 2009).
husband, Rakhat Aliev, of planning a coup against her father. The creation of Asar also coincided with the height of speculation concerning the increasing conflicts within President Nazarbaev’s own family. Among those who closely followed politics in the country, it was considered a thinly disguised secret that Dariga Nazarbaeva and her husband were in direct competition with the president’s other son-in-law, Timur Kulibaev, for power in the country and the position from which to inherit the mantle of succession.

During the election, this intrafamilial competition was formally played out between Asar and Ak Zhol. Several Ak Zhol leaders were rumored to be Kulibaev’s close friends, as was the alleged primary financier of the Ak Zhol campaign, Nurzhan Subkhanberdin of Kazkommertz Bank. Although Kulibaev never publicly expressed support for Ak Zhol, many believed that he helped facilitate its participation in the elections or was at least sympathetic with the party’s agenda. As a direct competitor to Ak Zhol, therefore, Asar placed Dariga in public competition with her brother-in-law.

Given Kazakhstan’s history of manipulated elections, one might argue that this public demonstration of intrafamilial and intraelite competition was merely symbolic or was even staged as a “false opposition.” Yet Nazarbaeva’s passionate campaigning suggested differently. She recruited numerous NGO activists who had benefitted from years of organizational training provided in projects sponsored by USAID and other donors, and she used her media holdings to her full advantage, airing Asar’s campaign successes on the nightly news. She even used the media to criticize regional government officials’ use of administrative resources to aid her father’s party. The one thing she never did was to directly criticize her father or his policies. Otherwise, Nazarbaeva appeared to be taking the elections at face value and was doing her best to establish a power base, perhaps in preparation for an eventual succession of power. If Nazarbaeva’s intentions in the 2004 parliamentary were in doubt at the time, her seriousness of purpose was largely confirmed over the next several years as her political statements grew increasingly bold, and she estranged herself and her husband from the president and his allies.50

50. When the opposition politician Altynbek Sersenbaev was found killed outside the city of Almaty in February 2006, Dariga used her media holdings to voice views contrary to official disclosures made by the government. In her now infamous article “Déjà vu,” Nazarbaeva preempted what she suggested was an attempt to frame her husband for Sersenbaev’s murder and placed the blame at the feet of some of her father’s long-time allies. In the article, however, she went beyond the personal, suggesting that the government’s security forces were corrupt, that the parliament had no political voice, and that something similar to the state terror employed in Chile under Augusto Pinochet in the 1970s was beginning to be felt. See Dariga Nazarbaeva, “Déja Vu,” Karavan, no. 10 (10 March 2006). Although no actions were immediately taken against Dariga for these transgressions, which many viewed as publicly exposing the rifts in the family, her empire was gradually dismantled soon afterwards. First, Asar was officially folded into the party of the president, Nur-Otan, in July 2006. Then, in May 2007, another scandal arose around her husband regarding Nurbank, a financial institution over which he had control. Under accusations of assaulting and kidnapping two executives of the bank over business
The details of this intrafamilial conflict remain murky, but it is obvious that a real power struggle was underway within the Nazarbaev family involving many figures in the financial and political elite during the 2004 elections. This was not what either the government of Kazakhstan or USAID had expected from their engagement with the elections. U.S.-funded democracy assistance had focused on bolstering institutions to make them more capable of facilitating free elections, which the government had no intention of allowing regardless of its capacity to do so. U.S.-funded democracy activities were also focused on ideological debates, assuming that Ak Zhol’s participation in the election was suggestive of a pro-democracy force that would inevitably appeal to the citizens of Kazakhstan and possibly facilitate a democratic transition. Kazakhstan’s government, by contrast, concentrated on making these elections into a theatrical event intended to demonstrate the power of the state and its president while informally ensuring that any competition was controlled and manageable. Although it largely succeeded in this goal, the informal competition surrounding the election became more heated than the president or his allies likely anticipated, and this competition eventually became less manageable as it led to political scandals in the years following.

Having been pushed by American democracy promoters for over a decade prior to 2004 to adopt elections, a multiparty system, and election campaigning, the elite of Kazakhstan engaged these concepts during this particular election through the lens of the traditional categories with which they were familiar—the various patron-client networks, whether based on familial ties or economic connections, that have facilitated life in the region for generations. The election’s competition, therefore, was not between the organized ideologically based political parties envisioned by USAID, but between elite groups dominated by members of the Nazarbaev family.

At the same time, the traditional categories that American democracy assistance producers brought to the election also had a certain salience. Dariga Nazarbaeva, for example, recruited NGO activists trained in organizational development and advocacy by U.S.-funded democracy assistance to work for Asar, and she employed her access to media in order to establish her party’s public image, much the way that politicians do in the United States and Europe. These exported tools of political disagreements, a warrant was issued for Aliev’s arrest, and he subsequently took refuge in Austria where he had formerly been the Kazakhstan ambassador. See Bruce Pannier, “Kazakhstan: Criminal Scandal Widens around Ex-Ambassador Aliev,” Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 28 August 2007). As a result of this final scandal, Dariga and Rakhat lost control of their media holdings and most of their other commercial holdings. Thus, almost three years after the September 2004 parliamentary elections, the president’s daughter had been disinvested of most of her political power and had filed for divorce, many think against her will. In the meantime, Aliev, while in exile in Austria, came out in open opposition to his former father-in-law, publishing a book critical of President Nazarbaev. See Aliev, Godfather-in-Law. Around the time of the book’s publication, Dariga left for England allegedly to study English, and she has since only occasionally returned to Kazakhstan. In the recent 2012 parliamentary elections, however, Dariga was once again awarded a seat in parliament, and she will most likely resume her political activity as a result.
competition, however, were used to wage a battle that was quintessentially Kazakhstani—that between the informal patron-client networks of power in the country.

While it is debatable whether the competitiveness of these elections indicated progress toward the establishment of representative governance in Kazakhstan, it did reflect an important shift in the articulation of political opposition there. In particular, it publicly introduced a narrow, yet diverse, group of power brokers into the political sphere, thus allowing Kazakhs to imagine a political world after Nazarbaev. President Nazarbaev has since responded by narrowing the political space over the last eight years by establishing a “mega-party” of power and by avoiding any more instances where intraelite cleavages can be brought into the public, at least through political processes like elections.\(^{51}\) This was most recently demonstrated by the 2011 presidential election, in which no actual opposition candidates challenged the president, and the 2012 parliamentary election, which again resulted in virtually no opposition representation in parliament.\(^{52}\)

Still, the seeds of doubt about Nazarbaev’s total grip on power that were planted in 2004 continue to grow gradually in the country. When the Kazakhstan parliament debated making Nazarbaev president for life in 2010, for example, the question of succession seeped into the public domain as high officials were forced to field questions from journalists and diplomats about a Kazakhstan after Nazarbaev. With the aging Nazarbaev recently elected for yet another term until 2016, this question will not go away, and the intraelite competition that was so vicious in 2004 may only intensify. Whether or not that competition will further a more pluralistic, stable, and democratic political system, however, remains to be seen.

**Conclusions: Democracy Development and Globalization**

Culture, of course, is not the only variable in democracy development. One would not question, for example, that the political will of leaders remains one of the most important issues in determining the trajectory of democratic development. But political will alone does not determine a country’s political development. As this article was being written, grassroots movements were developing throughout the Middle East to overthrow entrenched leaders with little interest in democracy, but great uncertainty remained concerning the type of political regime that would replace that which was being overthrown. Closer to the region explored here, Kyrgyzstan has been struggling to establish a democratic system after

51. In characterizing the present political situation in Kazakhstan, Freedom House recently noted that “President Nursultan Nazarbayev and his Nur-Otan Party maintained almost complete control over the political sphere in 2009, using tactics including arbitrary arrests, restrictive new laws, and politically motivated prosecutions to muzzle critical media outlets and individuals.” Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2010: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties* (New York, 2010), 346.

popular protest movements backed by powerful patron-client networks twice deposed nondemocratic leaders. Both of these cases suggest that a lack of political will for reform can be overcome by public demand for democratic change, but they are also emblematic of how difficult democracy development can be even when will for change exists.

In the final analysis, creating democracy where it has not previously existed requires cultural change, and such change is neither predictable nor rapid. When external actors, such as those implementing USAID democracy programs, are involved, the equation inevitably becomes more complex and even less predictable. Such instances, like the democracy dance described here, involve a cultural encounter with inevitable miscommunications and misunderstandings. Analyzing such cultural encounters is an important step toward understanding the dynamics of democracy development in general and in the former USSR in particular.

Although such analysis may not satisfy policymakers since it does not lend itself to predicting outcomes, it does offer important lessons for those who design and implement democracy assistance projects. First, the unpredictable nature of the cultural encounter that defines the democracy dance suggests that democracy development does not follow linear paths as imagined by the indicators of success against which most development organizations measure their performance. Second, as I have argued elsewhere, it suggests that democracy development is a long-term endeavor that does not quickly result in change. Finally, and most important, it suggests that democracy development is inevitably a contested and negotiated process that defies rigid definitions of the “democratic system” and easy recognition of success and failure.

This last point is particularly important because it suggests an alternative to conventional views of agency in international development. Instead of assuming that development is a technical problem that can be solved with the help of outside experts, this perspective posits that it is a highly contested process, not only in terms of its implementation and results, but also in terms of its goals. As development theorist Jan Nederveen Pieterse suggests, “it follows from the plurality of development actors that development is polycentric in its meanings, objectives, agency, and methods of implementation and therefore what constitutes improvement in development is inherently contested.” In the case of democracy development, this discourse inevitably brings into question what constitutes “democracy” itself and whether international standards for governance and the stable transfer of political power exist.

Indeed, as we gain distance from the end of the Cold War, when many thought that the American model of liberal democracy would readily become the international norm for governance and the transfer of political power, the world is faced with the uncomfortable question of defining global standards of governance and political succession that can be


applied across cultures. Given the political nature of this question and the multipolar geopolitical situation in the world today, these standards are unlikely to be dictated solely by great powers such as the United States or to be decided by consensus through international bodies like the United Nations. Rather, they are more likely to be negotiated through contested interaction between states, geopolitical powers, international organizations, and citizens around the world. The practice of democracy development and the cultural encounters inherent in the democracy dance are one site of that negotiation. Although the outcomes of this democracy dance, which occurs on a daily basis throughout the developing world, are unpredictable and frequently the target of critics, this should not suggest that it is a futile enterprise. Perhaps the long-term contribution of democracy development efforts should be viewed, not as spreading democracy around the world, but as providing a contested field where what defines good, stable, and acceptable governance in the context of globalization will be negotiated.

In this context, democracy development efforts represent a critical arena of international affairs that deserves continued support and attention from policymakers. That being said, policymakers must also understand that democracy development is a contested process that takes time and is unlikely to unfold everywhere in a similar manner. This process defies the uniform logical results frameworks that dominate development planning and should be afforded the flexibility and time necessary to allow for a strategic approach tailored to the ever-changing local and global contexts. Finally, given the important role that the local context plays in political development, there is a critical need for more regional experts with knowledge of local languages and cultures among the producers of democracy assistance. The inclusion of such experts cannot remove the misunderstandings that are inherent in development’s cultural encounter, but their participation in this process might lead to a more productive and collaborative relationship between producers and consumers of democracy development as they negotiate what “democracy” means in today’s globalizing and multipolar world.