



eDiscussion Summary on Democracy Promotion

**Policy Research Division, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada
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From January 22 to March 30, 2007, Canadians were invited to share their views on democracy promotion. Participants were provided with numerous online resources to foster clear and informed discussion. A total of one hundred and forty-one postings to the eDiscussion and three policy papers received from Canadian universities are summarized here. The policy position paper received from Colombia is not included in this summary for Canadian international policy development purposes. Nonetheless, all papers are posted on our [resources page](#), as they present interesting views and can stimulate debate.

Several questions were posed to participants on different themes related to democracy promotion by policy makers at Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada to guide and frame the eDiscussion. The main points raised in relation to these themes are summarized below:

Note: The opinions presented are not those of the Government of Canada.

Principles Guiding Democracy Promotion

There was great debate among participants about the principles that should guide Canadian promotion of democracy abroad. Participants acknowledged that there are sensitivities involved in promoting democracy and cautioned that Canada should be mindful of how its democracy assistance is perceived in recipient countries. Others raised the importance of democratic assistance to Canadian interests and values.

Those that saw democracy promotion as a key foreign policy responsibility suggested that Canada focus on a holistic approach with a specific focus on developing civil society and establishing long-term goals. Participants noted that Canada needs to be accountable for its actions abroad and that it can best promote democracy by leading by example. Some noted that Canada should only engage in democracy promotion activities when invited by other states, citing that democracy must take root from within. Still others felt that democracy promotion was best left to Canadian NGOs with indirect support from the Government of Canada.

Critical Elements of Democratic Governance

Discussants supported a wide variety of elements of democratic governance. Some thought that Canada should focus on civic education of children (particularly girls) and youth while others thought the establishment of democratic institutions and rule of law were of greater importance.

There was great debate on what should come first: democracy or development – but no consensus was formed. Views diverged on whether economic development was sufficient to bring democracy to other countries. It was suggested that a market economy is not a precondition or impetus for democratization.

Many participants, although not a majority, focussed on the need for an empowered civil society, human rights and free media as essential elements of democratic governance.

How Canada can Promote Democracy

Following along from the discussion of guiding principles above, almost all discussants agreed that democracy is best cultivated using a bottom-up approach. One participant made the important distinction between democracy *promotion* and *imposition*.

In this light, participants felt that Canada can promote democracy through its participation in international or regional fora (i.e. by sharing best practices). It was also raised that Canadian missions abroad could support democracy promotion by engaging citizens who had previously lived in Canada.

It was suggested that Canada could assist with enhancing the elements of democratic governance. For example, Canada could contribute to vibrant civil societies, support the logistics of a free media, encourage forums of assembly, encourage international exposure of grassroots democratic struggles, promote human rights and generally provide consultation and support for countries who request it.

Participants noted that barriers such as conflict and state fragility, poverty and authoritarian regimes were often interlinked. It was suggested that Canada can work to increase transparency and accountability through its efforts to strengthen corporate social responsibility, meet an Official Development Assistance (ODA) level of 0.7% of GDP and restrict financial support to countries with authoritarian regimes.

One participant noted that Canada might do better just to focus its resources on one region of the world.

Several participants mentioned that Canada could best assist democracy by focusing at home and implementing, for example, a proportional representation electoral system.

Prominent Obstacles to Democracy Promotion

The state, whether authoritarian or overly bureaucratic, was seen as the main obstacle to democracy promotion. In these situations, participants encouraged Canadian support for community-based democratic initiatives and a strong focus on the mobilization of civil society and a strong middle class.

Lessons Learned from Other Countries

One participant noted lessons learned from the South African experience. Citing the Institute for Security Studies, four critical elements were noted as being particularly important to strengthening democracy: 1) fairness of elections and electoral processes; 2) freedom to form and participate in an opposition party; 3) adherence to limits on time served in office as outlined by constitutions; and 4) independence of the judiciary.

Another participant remarked on the relative success of US NGO involvement in the colour revolutions that occurred in three countries of the former Soviet Union. They were careful to note that although this method was an example of productive outside intervention, it may not be appropriate in other areas of the world.

Official response by Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada

This summary of views received during the eDiscussion on democracy promotion is being reviewed by policy planners within Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. Their response will be posted on the Canadian International Policy site shortly.