

NGOs and Civil Society

Larry Diamond

Twitter: @LarryDiamond

Civil society has a huge role to play more generally in monitoring government performance and monitoring the services that citizens are supposed to be getting and in mobilising political participation, because democracy cannot succeed unless citizens come into the political process-- not only vote, but become active in political parties and in groups that are engaging and linking up with political parties and demanding their accountability and access to them.

And so when citizens become involved in the political process-- enter political parties; force them to become more democratic internally, which is another very important innovation that is deepening democracy in many countries-- democracy becomes more vibrant, more responsive, more participatory, and of higher quality. We're also seeing as well, I think, the potential for coalitions of different types of actors to push through reforms; to have more vigorous accountability, transparency.

Open budgeting is a very good example where not only is the budget open to public scrutiny both in its design and in its expenditures, but it's open to public scrutiny through the proactive provision of information on websites that is intelligible, that is accessible, to ordinary citizens. And reform coalitions come about when civil society presses from below, when it partners or allies with public-spirited officials in the government or the public sector or the party system, and when it finds allies in the international community as well to get assistance from, and some ideas, and sometimes, some technologies.

The Open Government Partnership which has, as one of its most important priorities, open budgeting, is a very important example of this. And you can see the work and the membership of this very promising network by just googling Open Government Partnership and going to the website and seeing not only a number of states that have joined and made a commitment to honour the principles of open budgeting and transparent government, but civil society partners as well. And so here, when you get reform-minded actors within a government, innovators and

activists, and experts within a country's civil society together with peers in other countries and international organisations that want to make these commitments, this is an extremely powerful, synergistic combination that can come together to promote reform and reinforce the goodwill and the energy of reform actors within a country. This is one of the ways and only one of the ways that international actors can support democratic development and the improvement in the quality of governance within a country.

I might mention as well that we are seeing other development progress institutionally in Latin America, in Africa, in some of the new democracies of the former communist countries, and of Asia in improving the quality of governance. Even a country that was as riddled with corruption as Indonesia has been historically has begun making some very serious progress with the creation of a counter-corruption commission that has had some serious institutional leadership and is actually beginning to prosecute people.

There's a lot being done by democracy promotion organisations in Europe, in the United States, and elsewhere in the world to support democratic civil society organisations directly with grants that are carefully monitored and with technological training, including in what I call liberation technology – how they can use social media and the internet safely to promote their cause and to communicate to advocate for democracy, human rights, better governance; to monitor elections; to monitor abuses of human rights; and to engage in more effective reporting along these lines. International actors, particularly development agencies but non-governmental organisations as well, are forming a wide variety of partnerships with states and with non-governmental actors to improve the capacity, both human capacity and technical capacity, of these kinds of organisations to generate better governance and deliver sustained improvements in human well-being.

So this cannot be done alone by the international community. One thing we've learned is international actors who want to do good need the partnership of people on the ground who are taking the lead if efforts to promote democracy and better governance are going to be well-targeted and are going to be viewed as legitimate in the country. But the civil society actors and the state elites who have a will for and an understanding of the need for reform, they need the space. They need the freedom. And they need the climate of readiness for governance reform that can enable these changes to take place. And we know—we have considerable evidence

—that when countries commit to governance reform, when they reign in bribery and corruption, when they reduce the burden of regulation, when they improve the independence of the courts, when they promote greater transparency in the functioning of government and more open media, that all of these contribute to more successful economic development, greater sustainability of development, less of a burden on the environment because people are monitoring how development happens to achieve the environmental sustainability that they need for their own human well-being and the well-being of their communities. And this is how just, sustainable, broad-based development unfolds.