

Posted July 20, 2015

WELCOME, TRAVELERS!

-A BOOK REVIEW-

Julie Fisher's "Importing Democracy: The Role of NGOs in South Africa, Tajikistan & Argentina" Presents a Pliable Puzzle Piece in Foreign Policy*

By Arelya J. Mitchell, Publisher/Editor-in-Chief
The Mid-South Tribune and the Black Information Highway

"In neither its foreign policy nor its foreign aid has the United States consistently supported democracy in the developing world. Indeed, its frequent support of politically convenient authoritarian leaders suggests that US support for democratic regimes has never enjoyed top priority and invites the question of whether, on balance, the United States has more often supported democracy. Foreign policy continues to be determined by multiple interests, of which democracy promotion is only one."

"Democratization is not only a long-term process; it is also intricate and complex, and sometimes requires a broader perspective that is difficult to achieve. It is understandable, therefore, that NGOs do not always coordinate or match the pieces of the democratization puzzle. Despite the value of networking, its costs in time and money are often too high for most NGOs."

"Debate over promoting democracy abroad is polarized in the United States, particularly in the wake of the war in Iraq."

The above excerpts are only a few raw insights from "Importing Democracy: The Role of NGOs in South Africa, Tajikistan & Argentina" by Julie Fisher. It is published by Kettering Foundation Press.

As the title says, the study focuses on importing democracy in these three specific nations. Fisher's methodology is based mainly on content analysis from: "The highlight of my eight years as a program officer at the Kettering Foundation was talking with people who came to our international meetings from all over the world. Some of them later returned to the international fellows program, where I had the privilege of teaching a seminar on democracy, public deliberation, and civil society..." These conversations and observations contributed to the bulk of what could also serve as her 'contextual variables' hinging from her framework of analysis based on these conversations and observations from those in NGOs in these three nations rooted in a Third World

environment, and in South Africa's case, a nation rooted in apartheid (and one does not need to stretch his/her imagination in seeing that South Africa's unique dilemma parallels with that of Black America under segregation and coming out of segregation if one were to do a domestic replication of Fisher's study.).

Fisher published two previous books on NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) and their influence on Third World nations.

Fisher study examines exclusively the 'democratization NGO' as a tool and as an impetus in sustaining democratic governments in these three nations. Right off, you should note in spite of the excerpt relating to Iraq, the study does not include Iraq but it does offer political behavioral insight into what is going on in Iraq such as the United States' attempts to import democracy in Iraq under the auspices of free elections.

And yes, Fisher's definition of a democracy includes free elections. Naturally, the concept of free election is the traditional way of determining what is as near of a pure democracy in the American perception of a 'we-the-people' government as can be. But what sustains these fragile Americanized democracies in these three nations emerging out of Third World roots? Fisher asserts that the sustainability depends or rather can depend on the nature of the democratization NGO.

Her definition of a democracy: "Although free elections continue to be seen as a necessary, if insufficient, ingredient of democratization, the rise of civil society has led scholars to extend and deepen definitions of democracy. One older definition, however, designed around stricter political boundaries and more formal institutions, is particularly useful for this discussion, because it focuses on democratic processes as central components of democracy. These processes also happen to be crucial to institutionalizing democracy and protecting it from hostile forces."

Fisher's framework of analysis includes four dimensions upon which to measure the effectiveness of the democratization NGO: political opposition, public participation, law-based civil liberty, and a democratic political culture.

In my estimation her four dimensions can also serve double duty as 'contextual variables'. I say this because in traditional thinking of what defines a democracy, American foreign policy mainly asserts that it is enough just to have free elections. And just having a free election has miserably failed to sustain the newly imported democracy because that traditional thinking neglects economic components (or shall I describe it as economic components that have morphed collectively in what America views as the middle class). There remains still an overall naiveté on behalf of the democratization NGOs to utilize traditional grassroots building that focuses on the 'socio' portion of socio-economics. This is mainly due in part to the NGOs being stilted in white Americanized paternalism which is to underscore white Americanized defunct idealism. Her study somewhat fails to take into consideration the political leadership culture of the NGOs themselves—that is, the makeup of those in a leadership capacity of the NGOs. The failure to take in the NGOs leadership make-up continues to be the invisible 'contextual variable' in measuring the democratization NGOs' ability to aid and abet in the sustainability of democracies in Third World nations. As usual, the traditional perspective is to consider the problems democratization NGOs face from governmental leadership (the powers-that-be) and not consider the nature of leadership in the democratization NGOs as well.

I am ascertaining that Fisher developed a democratization NGO leadership model of some type without realizing that she had. She had to have done so simply because of the content analysis she'd gathered through hundreds of interviews from those serving in leadership capacity of the democratization NGOs in these nations.

Be that as it may, Fisher is a realist when she asserts: "Even in nations with a healthy civil society, democracy building is daunting."

She further expounds: "Despite the coincidence between the growth of civil society and the increase in democracies, the causal connections between the two are neither automatic nor easy to analyze." But some causal connections can be analyzed, and unwittingly she has presented a goldmine of a foundation to go deeper into linkages between the "growth of civil society" and "the increase of democracies".

This is a valuable and much needed study because of the NGOs' role in sustaining democracies, especially in their propensity to create political opposition. And it is the creation of political opposition which, ironically, makes the democratization NGOs' existence inside a newly formed democracy precarious at best.

Yes, Fisher expounds on the troubles some NGOs have had to endure and are still enduring. That in itself is worth the read.

What is good (if I may be so bold to use this adjective) about "Importing Democracy" is how the study is laid out in a way that the political science college student to the seasoned political scientist can appreciate. And even for that matter, for America's foreign policymakers to understand and to utilize as an acknowledgment that America's foreign policy needs revamping in the 21st Century. In my observation: Mistakenly these policymakers and the democratization NGOs remain under the delusion that having a free election in a Third World and/or Developing Nation will trickle down to positive economic results to the masses when in fact the masses collectively remain jobless and within the masses' core there is no group which owns its means of production. Poverty remains over such a long period of time that whatever free elections occurred become worthless. That is certainly worth a longitudinal study.

Her case study and observations in the democratization NGOs in South Africa are especially comprehensive and poignant: The "contextual variable" of the history of apartheid shows that even with the downfall of apartheid and free elections that the socioeconomic benefits to the Black South Africans have yet to fully materialize (Again, such a case can be made in the U.S. African American population which has enjoyed free elections post 1964 but economic benefits overall have failed to materialize to give parity with white American economic growth. This is why Fisher's study is fit for replication and interpretation inside domestic policy.).

Fisher's study on the democratization NGOs in Tajikistan's authoritarian-prone and Argentina's post Peron governments still operate on traditional grassroots strategy of strengthening the underclass such as women. Yet these NGOs still walk a tightrope of sensitive governments which could either throw them out at will or annihilate their achievements among the 'people'. Like any form of government, politicians in charge of the government have their own self-interests (and sometimes selfish interests) in sustaining their party's control of government. These governments are quite aware that these NGOs can serve as a quasi-political opposition party, which is indicative of one of Fisher's four dimensions which is, of course, "political opposition".

She cites a study from 2000 which "...showed through extensive statistical analysis that in richer countries democracy never breaks down, with the sole exception of Argentina. On the other hand, in the poorest countries, democracy has an average life expectancy of only eight years. Democratization is not, however, wholly dependent on fortunate economic circumstance." Of course not. These "economic circumstances" should be part of the democratization NGOs' agenda, but its agenda is representative of its leadership (or lack thereof) which primarily defines its primary objective as providing free elections and little else. In all fairness and to reiterate, Fisher did not bring in the component or dimension of the democratization NGOs' leadership, and I cannot wholly judge this work on what I think she unwittingly created which is an invisible model of the democratization NGOs' leadership as a by-product.

As stated earlier, Fisher's book is constructed in a manner the novice to the veteran political scientist should appreciate: "This book is organized around three chapters for each country. The first chapter of each country's section begins with the historical, political, and economic context and continues with a discussion of the general contours of civil society. The second chapter in each section deals with the role of democratization NGOs in promoting both loyal opposition and law-based civil liberties. The third chapter focuses on their role in promoting political culture and political participation."

This should be clear enough to delve into the body of Fisher's study or what she views as her puzzle and democratization NGOs as puzzle pieces in putting together a full picture of importing sustainable democracies.

The dimensions of public participation and law-based civil liberty dovetail into Fisher's puzzle of what comprises a civil society. She makes this extension of other dimensions: "Civil society includes markets, associations, and spheres of public debate. Public debate is based on media as well as participatory processes, such as public deliberation..."

She doesn't much touch upon media as linkages in measuring and sustaining democratization NGOs, except to assert as noted above that "public debate is based on media..." However, the media itself (or themselves) can be precarious depending on how much freedom the democratized government gives it. The medium (media) may be the message of the newly imported democratized government. Yet, minority and/or grassroots-oriented media may be cut out of the "public debate" process altogether or merely subsist in a realm where Fisher's idea of media may be equivalent to what is called mainstream media in the United States. I am apt to state that democratization NGOs seldom consider minority media legitimate and that they have no more political weight than newsletters that were once run off on stencil machines! The NGOs make no or nil monetary investment in utilizing these minority/grassroots media to serve as strengthening their presence in the imported democratized government; thus, missing out on capitalizing on what could be a measurable 'contextual' variable.

Fisher's study provides an interesting roadmap at least to add substantially to the dialogue on the importance and credibility of the democratization NGOs in political influence on those governments which have imported democracy or have had imported democracy thrust upon them.

To reiterate, importing democracy is still about America's foreign policy looking after its own interests. That's the nature of governments and their respective foreign policy. It is the nature of the beast hiding behind the lace curtains of civil society.

After reading Fisher's work, I have also come to the conclusion that perhaps it is the democratization NGOs that should be imported first and from there should trickle 'up' democracy to the government.

"Importing Democracy: The Role of NGOs in South Africa, Tajikistan & Argentina" is rich in detail and implied ideals (as in economic models) that have yet to be fully explored and exploited for a study of democratization replication utilizing the significant nuances of democratization NGOs in foreign policy implementation. Yet, in my opinion, it also might do well for these NGOs to form viable pockets of capitalism owned and operated by those Third World nations' entrepreneurs to form the basis of a middle class which, too, can sustain both a humane welfare system for those who fall through the cracks and a democratized government entailing free elections and what Fisher labels a "public debate sphere".

Again, this is an insightful study.

-30-

*The above is on the Book and International lanes on The Mid-South Tribune and the Black Information Highway at www.blackinformationhighway.com . *Welcome, Travelers!*