

A comment on Landman, deSouza, and Tommasoli

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There are two distinct concerns in the three papers: Todd Landman and Peter deSouza are concerned with attempting to use the State of Democracy framework in new contexts; Massimo Tommasoli is more concerned with the efficacy of the State of Democracy approach, and its potential to overcome the shortcomings of other approaches to assessing ‘governance’ that have been used by donor agencies. However, there are a number of concerns that all three raise, particularly relating to the State of Democracy framework.

Firstly, the State of Democracy framework grew out of the first Democratic Audit, established in the UK in 1991, which was very much a product of the concern with ‘actually existing democracy’ and the quality of democracy that it was delivering in practice. The Democratic Audit’s normative basis was clear, with the values of popular control and political equality paramount¹: it was very much concerned to judge liberal democracy on its own terms. Whilst certainly not a minimalist conception of democracy, neither was it a radical one; it was concerned with more fully realising true, liberal democratic values rather than rewriting them.

But the papers by both Peter deSouza and Massimo Tommasoli highlight the very different demands placed on democracy: democracy is variously expected to deliver social change *and* social stability; stable government *and* radical political change; greater protection *and* greater freedom; as well as economic dynamism, value for money for donors and so on almost *ad infinitum*. So the first issue raised by the papers is the extent to which the State of Democracy framework has managed to overcome its original design for assessing the UK and is now sufficiently sensitive to capture all the different demands that are placed on democracy ‘from London to Ulaanbaatar’.

¹ The Democratic Audit of Australia has added the values of civil rights and inclusive public debate, to the State of Democracy’s original two.

Secondly, all three papers emphasise the particular strength of the State of Democracy approach in providing a deeper, more thorough understanding of the political process in a specific country: the qualitative emphasis, as well as factors like the need to have citizens of the country carrying out the audit of it, give a more rounded picture than comparable approaches to assessing the quality of governance. However, could this strength also carry with it a potential weakness? Specifically, given the emphasis on deeper, context-specific understanding, is there a danger that a degree of perspective and objectivity is lost, and, consequently, consistency between cases? Most of those involved in State of Democracy assessments have clear normative commitments and are no doubt frustrated when these commitments are frustrated. Given this emphasis on deep, country-specific understanding, the inevitable frustration of those involved, and the absence of any means to ensure consistency across the different State of Democracy projects, be it an 'objective' comparative scale or some other measure in the State of Democracy framework, is there a danger that the results of the assessments have a tendency to always yield the same overall negative result, in spite of the massively different contexts in which the State of Democracy framework has been applied? Or, alternatively, that there are different expectations of what standard should be achieved between, for instance, an old, industrialised democracy and an emergent one? This might lead to a highly condemnatory assessment of the old democracy for failing to achieve the standards we might expect, whilst the emergent democracy, in spite of manifest problems and shortcomings, be given a more positive assessment on the grounds that it at least is heading in the right direction and the expectations are lower. Whilst if the two were compared against each other, the old democracy would rate more highly, in the absence of a common standard, are comparisons between the assessments at all possible at present? And if not, is it something that should be prioritised for revision?

This leads to a third, related point. Todd Landman notes in his paper that, in the Mongolian assessment, a more quantitative approach was adopted, supplementing the State of Democracy. This would appear to represent at least something of a divergence from past State of Democracy/Democratic Audit assessments and has been

the preserve of other approaches, such as Freedom House.² But does a more quantitative approach, if used in conjunction with the qualitative approach that has been the State of Democracies traditional strength, have the potential to overcome the potential weakness about perspective and the lack of comparatibility.

² <http://www.freedomhouse.org>