Third, there is no clear single goal that Protestant parties seek to achieve. Instead individual objectives are linked to the particular circumstances and histories of individual polities.

In sum, this is a valuable and thought-provoking book that will be of use to anyone interested in the phenomenon of ‘religion and politics’, especially in the context of recent and current moves towards democracy. Moving beyond supposition and conjecture, Freston describes what is in effect a global phenomenon – the Protestant political party – and explains its increased importance by allusion to both local and global factors.

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Most of the actors involved in international democracy promotion long ago realized that elections a democracy do not make, but events in the Ukraine in late 2004 served to confirm the continuing importance of election monitoring. Bjornlund’s study distils the author’s many years of close involvement in the activity in over 25 countries, into an account of its origins, the state of the art, lessons learned and recommendations for improvement.

The book is structured in four parts: democracy promotion, elections and monitoring; international monitoring; domestic monitoring; and ‘toward more meaningful’ monitoring. Election monitoring is distinguished from election observing: the former, while more likely to be domestic than international, is also more engaged with the electoral process, suggesting at least the possibility of some modest interventions to correct imperfections or make recommendations for action. While monitoring can shade into mediation (on this, Chapter 5 is devoted to the work of the Carter Center) both are distinguished from elections’ supervision and administration. While much of the ground covered in the book will make familiar reading for close observers of the existing literature, its special value lies in bringing together such a large amount of detail into a comprehensive study, together with authoritative and ‘insider’ nature of the author’s insights and critical remarks.

Conflicts of interest with the diplomatic community, when a preference for smooth bilateral relations take precedence over interest in seeing a completely ‘free and fair’ election (a notion where alternative formulae suggest different benchmarks, most of them unattainable), are mentioned. And the Cambodian 1998 example
of divisions within the international community is particularly instructive. But more examples and a more extended discussion of such conflicts would be welcome. The claim that the US ‘has largely separated democracy assistance from decisions about foreign policy, such as decisions about diplomatic relations and foreign aid’ (p.174), if intended as a generalization beyond the Cambodian case, looks contentious and it too merits further investigation.

Perhaps the most serious shortcoming Bjornlund identifies is the international community’s failure to get to grips with situations where governments claim or maintain power on the basis of fraudulent or manipulated elections. The seeming inability of monitoring to prevent this sort of thing happening undermines popular confidence in the electoral process; the ruling party’s political domination is cemented further. The obvious temptation is to criticize monitoring for what it has hitherto not been intended to be nor purported to be, that is to say for failings that lie beyond the remit of observers and monitors. Thus the book’s main argument is the imperative now to pay more attention to developing monitoring’s potential to make a longer-term contribution to democracy – by empowering civil society. International strategies for supporting non-partisan domestic monitoring should be redesigned accordingly, if they are not to run the risk of hindering that ultimate goal. The Indonesia 1999 election is discussed as a wasted opportunity in this regard.

Just as recent events in the Ukraine tell us, so election observing and monitoring are likely to have a role to play for some considerable time to come, and therefore Bjornlund’s book should be included as a standard item in the typical briefing pack issued to monitors and observers. A major strength is that it contains comparisons of European and multilateral as well as United States organizations. In contrast The UN Role in Promoting Democracy, which aims to answer the relevant where, when, what and how questions, dwells on only one organization but covers a much broader set of activities. The book is structured in three parts: thematic perspectives; perspectives from the UN; and five case studies.

In the first part, following the editors’ general introduction, Tom Farer explains the basis for a ‘latently coercive’ approach to democracy promotion by the UN in international law and norms. Roland Rich investigates the relationship of the secretary-general to the members of the Security Council in crafting mandates. Council resolutions quadrupled between 1946–89 and 1989–2002, including 26 key mandates embracing democratization or state-building aspects. Simon Chesterman highlights the internal tension involved in building democracy through benevolent autocracy, in the context of UN transitional administrations. Benjamin Reilly describes why democratic elections are not always conducive to post-conflict peace building and shows how tensions between the two might be reduced. Lawrence Whitehead reviews changing features of the international landscape and how they demand revisions to the analytical framework we use to describe and understand what is going on. For example, he observes that ‘democracy as liberation’ has been substituted by the contemporary harnessing of democratization to security interests – not least those of the external democracy promoters – such that the ‘key point’ is ‘democracy promotion is typically embedded in a broader set of conflict-resolution objectives’(p.151).
The second part assesses UN electoral assistance (Robin Ludwik), the comparative advantages and constraints of UN democracy promotion (Edward Newman) and the contribution the UNDP makes to strengthening electoral institutions and legislatures (Richard Ponzio), as it moves from emphasizing governance issues to democratic capacity. The case studies in part three are Namibia (Henning Melba), Cambodia (Sorpong Peou), Kosovo (Ylber Hysa), East Timor (Tanja Hohe) and Afghanistan (Amin Saikal). They are well chosen to illustrate a number of themes from the preceding chapters. The editors’ general introduction also serves the purpose of a concluding chapter by summarizing some highly important overarching themes – the constraining forces, political pressures, the incompatibility of objectives and inevitable trade-offs.

Such is the weight of insights and density of information that it would be invidious to select just one or two points, and impossible to give a representative flavour here. Many of the findings and lessons that keep recurring in more than one chapter will come as little surprise to dedicated followers of international democracy promotion. The most banal but nonetheless significant being that it works best where the conditions are most conducive; the bigger the problem, the less impressive tends to be the achievement.

Yet in the current historical juncture it is worth being reminded that the UN has not so far made democracy a legally privileged political arrangement, and there is no coherent doctrine establishing a right to coercive (military) intervention to establish democratic rule. Farer’s indication of the extenuating circumstances where such a right might be invoked – namely where there are crimes against humanity, or a humanitarian crisis resulting from collapse of political order – still begs many legal and ethical as well as political questions. The debate will continue. But more self-assurance would be gained if only the evidence allowed a greater confidence in the UN’s ability to promote democracy effectively. In reality the case studies share what at best can only be described as a very modest assessment of its achievements to date; these accounts are strong on the outstanding problems and unresolved difficulties. In Rich’s words, a UN mandate can only ‘begin the process of democratization’ (p.83); and the UN’s ‘facilitation’ of democracy prompts Newman to reflect that ‘it may be logical to suggest that the UN role is not decisive’ (p.205). Thereafter many other actors and political forces especially domestic ones will determine the outcome. And, arguably, democratization neither can nor should be the overriding priority in situations of extensive civil conflict or state collapse (the task of the UN interim mission in Kosovo to build democratic institutions but not a state being only the most notable and problematic anomaly). While the UN still (in most people’s estimation) possesses legitimacy as its greatest asset – which should bestow a major comparative advantage, vis-à-vis national agencies for democracy promotion – the editors’ overall assessment based on the evidence across all the chapters is low key. Connecting with and being accountable and responsive to local people remains perhaps the UN’s greatest challenge: there is considerable scope for it to do much better.

While Bjornlund’s book has the merit of comparative analysis the well-integrated collection from Newman and Rich makes a very valuable addition to the literature,
which hitherto has tended to neglect the UN’s role. Although the collection was written before the November 2004 report commissioned by Kofi Annan into the future of the UN, its contents make essential reading to an informed consideration of that report, in particular its principal recommendation that the UN take a more pre-emptive role. The UN was not created to be a democracy-promotion body. And it is customary to say that many of the failings and shortcomings it has shown with respect to its original purpose should not be laid at the door of the UN but instead at the great powers that use and abuse it for their own ends. These two books – together providing material that can be used by both the UN’s friends and its severest critics – will be useful for commentators who are sceptical of democracy promotion by outsiders, and also for visionaries who look forward to the prospect of a reformed and more unreservedly successful performance.

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