

# The Role of Sovereign Cliques in the Derailing of Democracy

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**E**valuating democracy promotion and diplomacy are important endeavors, but first we must understand the ambiguous world in which we live. Since the early 1980s my fieldwork in Eastern Europe and the US has focused on linkages between state and private roles in the allocation of resources and ideologies of political systems. Studying social networks in the provision of assistance and governing, I have seen the transformation of the roles and rules of both, a transformation that has the power to derail democracy.

After 1989, as the communist regimes were collapsing in Eastern Europe, I began analyzing the established informal social networks skilled at circumventing and accessing the crumbling communist state to attain companies and other resources at a bargain. The members of these networks and groups, I noted, were adept at shifting between state and private roles, and conflating the interests of both. They were skilled at relaxing both market competition and any government accountability. I named these groups “sovereign cliques” after their ability to penetrate key institutions and restructure them to exclude other potential players and control agendas. (I used the term “flex groups” for the same concept in a *Washington Post* op-ed, “Flex Sovereign: A Capital Way to Gain Clout, Inside and Out,” published this past December and continued to consider new descriptive possibilities.)

## VIEWS ON POLICY

Sovereign cliques in Eastern Europe quickly learned that playing multiple roles—both in official government and with a consulting firm or NGO—helped them position themselves for wealth and influence in the emerging system. Polish sociologists dubbed these

boundary shifters “institutional nomads,” because they were loyal primarily to their fellow nomads and their common interests, rather than to the institutions they worked for. These boundary shifters’ flexing of their influence in unraveling communist states obviously differs from what occurs in stable societies such as the US. American laws and regulations, for example, are intended to prevent an individual from acting simultaneously as a

oversee them is proportionately falling. Meanwhile, private contractors are often subject to more relaxed rules governing conflicts of interest than civil servants would be.

### Neocon Network

These changes in governing in the US and in the way in which boundary busters both benefit from and even influence them can serve as a persuasive basis for explaining policy decisions. My current social net-



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government official and a consultant, business executive or NGO official. Still, outsourcing and the restructuring of governance in the US has opened up the field to boundary busters here too.

Today, two-thirds of the people doing work for the US federal government aren’t on the government payroll. A diverse set of private organizations—companies, consulting firms, NGOs, think tanks and public-private partnerships—do more of the federal government’s work than civil servants. Private contractors write budgets, manage other contractors and implement policy, sometimes even making it through their interactions and overlapping roles in governance. And while contracts are on the rise given the demand for military, nation-building, foreign aid and homeland-security services under the current Bush administration, the number of civil servants available to

work study of a core group of Neoconservatives in the US highlights a sovereign clique of a dozen or so players connected since the 1970s. This group’s organizing enabled it to play a pivotal role in shaping US foreign policy in the Middle East, including the war in Iraq. Some of the most visible in this group have been former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, former Defense Policy Board Chairman Richard Perle and former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, all who repeatedly promoted one another for influential positions and coordinated efforts to pursue shared objectives. Arguably this Neocon core is the most prominent identifiable sovereign clique in the US today. Understanding how such a group operates is critical to grasping the implications of current trends in govern-

ing and their potential for weakening democracy.

Part of the effectiveness of the Neocon core’s efforts, with some of its members in an administration that is “in power,” depends on having some of its members outside formal government.

Further, the Neocon core has been successful in establishing duplicative governmental entities or positioning themselves within established ones. This often allows them to bypass the input of other bodies. Two units in the Pentagon, for instance, that dealt with policy and intelligence after 9/11—the Counterterrorism Evaluation Group and the Office of Special Plans—

which were staffed in part from Neocon core-associated organizations did just that in the run-up to the Iraqi war. Neocon members from various foreign policy agencies in the government have also formed small circles of influence that have played a significant role in shaping the administration’s Middle East efforts.

This Neocon core appealed early to the current Bush administration precisely because they bring coordina-

tion to sometimes convoluted government. Not only did the goals of this group for the Middle East and privatization coincide with Bush’s, but it also had a ready-made ideology for advancing them. The biggest problem with these sovereign cliques, however, is that they are ultimately unaccountable to the public and what are rapidly becoming the old rules. Those who do try to define or monitor their activities find it difficult given that the Neocons are deft at shifting between roles and rules, taking full advantage of our increasingly ambiguous world. Rather than curbing such activities derailing democracy, our government often extends opportunities to those who engage in them.

### Value of Network Analysis

The role anthropology can best contribute in understanding these new sovereign cliques and their role in governing and policy rests in part in network analysis—and the social organizational framework that it implies. Such analysis is a useful way to conceptualize the

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should not receive a grant because it was an “old school” organization, run by former communists and socialists. In their view, such an organization would never be able to extricate itself from its patron-client, crony-ridden pedigree and supporting it would not reflect well on the Democracy Network program. I considered this but proceeded anyway to meet with the two representatives again, at their invitation, in Ohrid two months later. The “meeting” resembled a full-court press by a wealthy lobbyist on a lawmaker, complete with a VIP visit to a religious festival, a tour of several spectacular Orthodox monasteries on Lake Ohrid, a four-course meal at the finest hotel in Ohrid, a meet-and-greet with top municipal officials in Ohrid, and as a parting gift, an extraordinary black-and-white portrait of Josip Broz Tito, the late dictator of what was Yugoslavia.

Setting aside the blatant attempts to influence the grant-making process, I had several fascinating conversations that day about the “old days” of the former-Yugoslavia when there were indeed citizen entities, roughly equivalent to what would now be called neighborhood associations, operating throughout the country. These groups performed a myriad of functions along the lines of the activities this NGO wished to carry out, serving principally as a conduit for

citizens in their dealings with local government. While the nostalgia for these historical artifacts was palpable and impressive, it was the way they were described as precursors to modern NGOs that caught my attention. These defunct organizations seemed to represent an indigenous construction of a democratic institution, a local expression of democratic political culture, *not* in donor parlance, but certainly in the view of these two representatives from the “old school” NGO. It was a rare moment of clarity in reconciling local meaning with prevailing democratic development agendas.

The important point is that the donor community could not accommodate this NGO (and perhaps others) partly because it could not—at least at this particular moment—reflect back what the donors valued and prioritized. This marked a classic collision between a culturally-inflected interpretation of a democratic form and a rigid, externally-rendered democracy script. In retrospect, I have wondered how much could have been learned about local constructions of power, citizenship and democracy had donors been both more accommodating, and more skilled at “peeling the onion.” ☐

*Portions of this article are adapted from “Towards Reflective Practice: Understanding and Negotiating Democracy in Macedonia,” a chapter in the forthcoming edited volume of essays Transacting Transition: The Micro-politics of Democracy Promotion in the Former-Yugoslavia (2006).*

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mixes of state and private, of macro and micro, of local or national and global, of top down versus bottom up, and of centralized versus decentralized that today configure many transnational policy processes. Anthropologists are thus well positioned to track the interactions between public policy and private interests and the mixing of state, non-governmental and business networks that is becoming increasingly prevalent around the globe.

The value of a theoretical and methodological framework that can both dissect and connect the local and global and state and private is

difficult to overstate in a multilayered and rapidly changing world. Today many in the world are perplexed by the ambiguous, shifting and overlapping of roles in policy and democratization processes. Analysis of relationships among actors, both individual and collective revealed by network analysis, enables an ethnographer to see different levels and arenas of activity in one frame of study and to observe in a snapshot how they are interwoven. ☐

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