Promote Liberal Democracy

by David Makovsky **(/experts/david-makovsky)**

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Articles & Testimony

It seems a very long time ago that President George W. Bush gave his second inaugural address. In January 2005, he proclaimed that "the best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world." With this soaring idea, deeply rooted in America's Wilsonian political tradition, Bush defined the organizing foreign policy principle for his second term in office. However, exactly a year after uttering those words, Bush's Middle East democracy initiative came to a halt when Hamas won a parliamentary victory in the West Bank and Gaza in January 2006. Suddenly, it became clear that the United States had erred by equating democracy with one election and by not forming policy around the establishment of liberal institutions, which would ensure that liberal means would not lead to an illiberal end.

But that does not mean the vision is unsalvageable. Indeed, American Middle East policy should still have democratization as a component, albeit not the centerpiece. On one hand, "realism" was never realistic for us as Americans; democratization is consistent with our values favoring individual liberty, and ultimately, we seek a Middle East that is more decent and humane. On the other hand, democratization serves not just our values, but our interests. Despite the policies Bush adopted that led to Arab enmity, the United States was never popular, even at the height of its involvement in the Middle East peace process in the 1990s. Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East deflect attention from domestic failures by focusing on foreign enemies, according to Hala Mustafa, an Egyptian editor. Thus, this deflection strategy has been paradoxical -- the United States can reach peaceful relations with Arab rulers, but not with their publics. Moving forward, the United States has a compelling interest to end this dichotomy, and sustainable democratization is key in this regard.

Thus, any new administration needs to resist the traditional Washington "pendulum" effect, swinging to the opposite end of the last policy. Bush's democracy policy was clearly flawed, but we should avoid a return to a Scowcroftian realism of ignoring the domestic dynamics of a country so as long as its external behavior is acceptable. A more nuanced approach is needed between the two poles, one that sees democratization as a long-term goal and promotes it in a sustainable manner that is flexible and aware of different conditions present in different types of regimes. Such an approach would not have elections as its focus, but the building of liberal institutions like courts, civil society groups, and political parties.

The Bush approach to democracy promotion failed because it refused to recognize the difficulties involved. First, it

mistakenly drew a direct line from the democratic revolution in late 1980s Eastern Europe to the Middle East today. Neoconservatives saw themselves as the heirs of Reaganism (some were even in the government at that time), and they brought the same attitude to their Middle East policy. But the reality of the Middle East was more complex: In the Middle East, many opposition leaders were not trade unionists but rather Islamists seeking a theocratic state and, by dint of ideology, largely hostile to the United States.

Second, there was no realization by the Administration that pressing for immediate elections would create unintended consequences. Democracy theorists Jack Snyder and Edward Mansfield say that rapid democratic transitions in places where there is not a consensus on identity tend to spawn backlashes, which they term "illiberal nationalist" strategies. Opposition groups seek to capitalize on governments of weak central authority and gain legitimacy by drawing on religious or nationalist roots, rather than espousing a liberal democratic future. This model has shown itself to be to the advantage of Islamist groups in countries where the only form of free expression outside of the regime is often the mosque and other types of Islamic associations. Thus, Islamist groups receive a windfall when it comes to political organization before an election that the small band of Arab democrats do not enjoy. This tendency is strengthened because Arab regimes virtually never attack the animating ideas of the Islamist ideology, believing it confers on them a patina of legitimacy to unelected leaders. The regime shows no such deference to Arab democrats, who lack a broad constituency of sympathizers.

This problem has been compounded in practice by American reluctance to force Islamist groups to adhere to electoral standards practiced throughout much of the rest of the world. It was a mistake not to insist that U.S. support for Hamas's participation in the 2006 national electoral process for the first time rested with insistence that Hamas decide whether it was a political movement or a militia. It is, of course, possible that Hamas would have refused to make the choice, but the onus of electoral nonparticipation would have been on them. Instead, both Hamas and Hezbollah were effectively allowed to have it both ways and in turn gain legitimacy through a system they actively disdained. The net effect is that they have used their militia to bolster their political standing, and they have conversely used their political standing to insulate their militia: precisely the sort of result democratization was supposed to forestall.

A third problem of the Bush Administration's policy has been its failure to assess probability of democratic success, believing a positive outcome in Iraq would be a panacea. As democracy theorist Thomas Carothers points out, some basic elements of regional state structures made Middle East countries poor candidates for instant democracy: low levels of economic development, concentrated sources of national wealth (such as oil), identity-based divisions (particularly over religion), little historical experience with political pluralism, and a nondemocratic neighborhood.

And finally, as in any complex region, we have seen democracy promotion become the victim of a policy crowd-out effect: Democracy was not and is not likely to be the sole bilateral agenda item in U.S. bilateral ties with specific Arab states, given that we also need cooperation against Al Qaeda, help curbing Iran's nuclear aspiration, and support negotiating Arab-Israeli peace.

So what to do? As has been pointed out by others, mature democracies may not fight one another, but the path to democracy is fraught with turbulence. Therefore, any goal of a new administration should be to make the pathway less turbulent, even if it means the pace needs to be more deliberate. This should not be an excuse for doing nothing, but the guiding principle should be to pursue liberal means to obtaining liberal ends. We need to realize that, for a variety of reasons, democratization is about more than holding one election.

It may be ironic, but the places where democratization seems more likely in the Middle East could be where there is an "enlightened" autocrat who holds ultimate power and enforces the rules of the game, whether it is King Abdullah of Jordan, King Hamad of Bahrain, or King Mohammad of Morocco. This enables evolving democratization to move apace. In Freedom House's democratization ranking of Middle East countries, each are listed as "partly free." In each

case, economic growth has gone hand in hand with democratization. In these three countries, it might be more than coincidence that democratization occurs where there is no oil and there is a requirement for developing human capital. Indeed, there have already been fragile steps to build the institutional building blocks of democracy. In other countries, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, where there is greater resistance by the authoritarian structure and which are listed as "not free" by Freedom House, U.S. efforts will not be easy. Specifically, while the scope of specific reforms in law should reflect the different pace of change in individual countries, the general direction should be clear. However, in all countries, there are programmatic points for the United States that could be attainable if we sustain our focus. Those seeking an evolutionary pathway to democratization know where to put the effort: women's rights, freer media, a more independent judiciary, and education reform, alongside the greater transparency required for economic growth.

Specifically, the United States should encourage countries to reform restrictive political-party laws that could provide the legal framework for parties to form and compete. This is particularly important for non-Islamists who do not have the vast social network and organizational apparatus of Islamists. It should also encourage reform of media laws to widen the discourse on public policy. Such reforms are key to avoiding government's prosecution of journalists who interpret any criticism as "defamation" of a head of state. Finally, it should push for reform of the judiciary laws to facilitate the operation of an independent judiciary. Such reforms must be genuine and not like the one passed in Egypt last year; in spite of that "reform," human rights activists indicate that judges are still paid partly by the Justice Ministry, so that if they rule against the state, their salary can be cut for many months at a time.

These institutions, if properly cultivated, are the foundations for a democratization process that should lead to progress over time. This is not to say that a long-term strategy will necessarily be easy. But it's worth the risk. Otherwise, rulers are likely to use the inability to fully democratize and its backlash of "illiberal nationalist" strategies as an excuse to do nothing but maintain their authoritarian grip.

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