

Abandoning our Democratic Allies

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Articles & Testimony

A few weeks ago, President George W. Bush called Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to congratulate him on the wedding of his son and political heir apparent, Gamal. Meanwhile, Mubarak's pro-democracy opposition was protesting because it understood Gamal's nuptials as yet another step in the 79-year-old president's plan to transfer authority to his son. Adding insult to injury -- based on the administration's most recent policy turn on Egypt -- the opposition saw President Bush's phone call as Washington's tacit blessing for Mubarak's undemocratic transition plan.

Across the Middle East, Arab democrats are under siege by authoritarian governments and are increasingly discouraged by the apparent US move away from supporting democracy. The administration's policy shift on Egypt is perhaps the best example of the departure from the six-year focus on democracy promotion in favor of a more pragmatic approach.

Once the anchor of Washington's Middle East initiatives, Egypt has lost much of its luster. In 2002, the administration threatened to withhold \$130 million in assistance if Egypt did not release pro-democracy activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim from prison. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice cancelled a 2005 visit to Cairo after Ayman Nour -- a rival candidate to Mubarak -- was jailed prior to elections.

That was then. Concerned about Egypt's diminished status in Arab politics -- and by an apparent increase in the threat posed to Cairo by Islamists -- Washington is taking steps to rehabilitate the bilateral relationship. The first step has been to shelve the democracy agenda.

For example, the administration only offered tepid criticism of Egypt's arrest and conviction this spring of an Egyptian student blogger, and of the subsequent passage of new draconian security amendments to the Egyptian constitution. Moreover, Francis Ricciardone, the US ambassador to Egypt, described Ayman Nour's fate "an Egyptian issue," and seemingly legitimated Nour's arrest by saying "this case is known in Egypt to have both political and criminal dimensions, predominately criminal."

The administration shift on Egypt is the most pronounced, but the policy has changed dramatically throughout the Middle East and has had a pernicious affect on regional democrats. In May, the administration ended its policy of isolating the terrorist-supporting authoritarian Asad regime of Syria, which had been in place since the 2005

assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, a crime for which Syria is largely believed to have been responsible.

At a conference in Egypt, Rice met with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mualem to discuss Iraq. The next day, Syria sentenced leading democracy advocate Anwar Bunnī to five years in prison. And this past week, Kamal Labwani, who was imprisoned nearly two years ago for traveling to the United States and meeting with senior administration officials, was sentenced to 12 years.

Next door in Lebanon, the pro-West, pro-democracy, anti-Syrian government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora is understandably nervous. The concern in Beirut is that the United States may let Damascus off the hook for the Hariri killing in exchange for Syrian cooperation on Iraq. Even though the administration continues to assure Siniora that it will not make any deals sacrificing Lebanese democrats, given Washington's recent track record of not standing by its liberal Arab allies, there is justifiably little faith.

Topping it off, Deputy of State John Negroponte recently traveled to Libya, the highest-ranking US visit in decades. At one time the administration considered Libya problematic in regard to its weapons of mass destruction, support for terrorism, and authoritarian system of government. But since Libya renounced its WMD in December 2003, the administration has pursued a normalization of relations without regard to governance.

Arab liberals recognize that Washington is backing away from its democracy agenda and understand the implications. While the administration cannot be faulted for looking for new remedies to the ills of the region, abandoning Middle East democrats -- that small, persecuted minority of Arabs who actually share US values -- is not a winning long-term strategy. Not only are these courageous individuals subject to government reprisals in the region, the US policy shift serves as confirmation that Washington is an unreliable ally. The result, of course, is that Arab democrats will be less likely to challenge their governments in the future.

While the administration's policy of supporting democrats has not been as successful as had been hoped, US experience in the Middle East suggests that a return to the old policy of relying on autocrats is not the answer. A more pragmatic approach may be warranted, but Washington need not abandon its democratic allies in the process. The current policy serves neither US allies nor US interests in the region.

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