

Policy Review

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Articles & Testimony

Has America abandoned the cause of democracy in the Middle East? Recent events give plenty of reason for concern. Last month in Egypt, police beat hundreds of anti-Mubarak demonstrators, while in Syria the Assad regime rounded up civil-society activists. The White House issued only a relatively perfunctory condemnation of Egypt, while the State Department did the same for Syria -- a stark contrast to the reaction one year ago when Egypt assaulted pro-democracy activists and President Bush himself denounced the attacks. What's more, the Bush administration recently announced the normalization of relations with Libya, one of the world's worst abusers of human rights, and initiated a "strategic dialogue" with Saudi Arabia whose agenda plays up security and trade but plays down political reform and human rights. Connect the dots and it seems as if the administration is shifting away from its heady rhetoric and strong action in support of democratic transformation throughout the Middle East -- and back toward a cold realism that counsels warm relations with dictators in exchange for their help on counterterrorism and other strategic matters.

Since September 11, when President Bush adopted political reform in the Middle East as a cornerstone of his national security policy, Washington has been champion and cheerleader for democratic development in the region. A shift in policy -- if that's what we are witnessing -- would represent a change for the worse. At minimum, Arab pro-democracy advocates would be demoralized and less inclined to press for change. Meanwhile, repressive regimes would be emboldened to backslide on human rights.

For further evidence that the administration is reverting to a policy of promoting "stability" in the Arab world, consider the sad fate of Kamal Labwani. Last year, the Syrian dissident was arrested following his return from Washington, where he met with administration officials responsible for democracy promotion. (Labwani attended meetings at the White House and at the Departments of State and Defense. I was among those who met with him at the Pentagon.) Shortly after Labwani's arrest, Bush mentioned him in a speech and demanded his release. The president's statement did not win Labwani his freedom, but Bush's hope may have been that at least it might shield him from the worst torture. (It is unclear whether or not this worked.) Now, however, the administration seems to have lost interest in publicizing Labwani's plight altogether: A few weeks ago, after Labwani was charged by Damascus with offenses carrying the death penalty, the State Department's only reaction was to bury his name in a de rigueur condemnation of Syrian repression. Yes, Labwani was aware of the risks he was taking by meeting with

U.S. officials, but he likely believed his association with America offered a degree of protection. The message to others who would take risks in the name of promoting Arab liberalism is clear: Don't count on the United States to exert real pressure on your behalf.

Why has the administration seemingly chosen this moment to soft-pedal democracy promotion? Perhaps, with the project in Iraq in the balance and the ongoing crisis over Iranian nuclear weapons, the administration has concluded that now is not the right time to tip the apple cart in Egypt, Syria, or Saudi Arabia. If the United States pushes too far, too fast, after all, the Islamists waiting in the wings will gain the upper hand. Witness the triumph of Hamas in January's Palestinian Authority elections.

Or so the argument goes. The problem with this line of reasoning is that U.S. pursuit of stability in the Middle East over the course of many generations did not improve American security but rather accomplished the opposite: By supporting repressive regimes, we merely strengthened radical Islam. Moreover, the Hamas victory does not highlight the danger of democracy so much as the danger of an excessive focus on elections as a substitute for real democratic development -- including the principles of rule of law, balance of powers, and accountability.

It is not too late for the Bush administration to get back on track. A good start would be for senior administration officials to condemn the crackdowns in Egypt and Syria. Subsequently, Washington should also take steps to ensure that human rights and political reform are integrated into our dealings with Libya and Saudi Arabia.

Democratic development is an arduous and time-consuming process, and progress will not be linear. The administration's commitment to the democracy project was the right decision five years ago and remains so today. Although difficult to see, there has been real progress in recent years in the development of Middle East civil society (for instance, the emergence of vocal albeit suppressed opposition organizations in Egypt and Syria and a trend toward increasingly open politics in Lebanon). A return to the policy of promoting stability over democracy will reverse this trend and undermine U.S. interests in the long-run. Of course, for President Bush there may be good political reasons for a shift towards stability: namely to quiet domestic critics -- on the left and right -- who have long been critical of his push for Middle East democratization. Besides, those who benefit most from Bush's democratization agenda -- Arab reformers -- won't be voting in the upcoming midterm elections. Then again, if the administration returns to a stability agenda, those reformers won't be voting in any real elections for a long time to come.

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