

Selective Service

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Articles & Testimony

Critics of the Bush administration's pro-democracy strategy in the Middle East have been pointing to this week's Egyptian election, which resulted in a landslide for Hosni Mubarak, as proof of a policy that's got little bark and even less bite. A policy with real teeth, they argue, would have demanded that Mubarak and other Middle East autocrats open up their political systems to all comers, even the most radical Islamists in society. Only a policy that offers a pathway to power for all Arabs -- extremists and moderates alike -- deserves American support, they contend.

This isn't the looney fringe talking. On the contrary, such sentiments come from some of Washington's most astute, insightful foreign policy observers. In a recent Washington Post op-ed, for example, the Carnegie Endowment's Robert Kagan correctly critiqued the Bush administration for failing to match its stirring democracy rhetoric with practical steps to ensure "free and fair" elections in Egypt. His benchmark for judging American policy, however, was the extent to which Washington supports a process that affords the most extreme groups an opportunity to achieve political power. "[I]f the Bush administration isn't willing to let Islamists, even radical Islamists, win votes in a fair election," he wrote, "then Bush officials should stop talking so much about democracy and go back to supporting the old dictatorships."

This is similar to the position advocated by Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former U.S. intelligence operative and Middle East expert now at the American Enterprise Institute. As he wrote in his provocative book *The Islamic Paradox*: "Americans, Shiite Muslim clerics and Sunni Muslim fundamentalists are the keys to spreading democracy throughout the Middle East. Shiite divines and Sunni fundamentalists are our salvation from future 9/11s."

None of which is too far from the analysis of a blue-ribbon Council on Foreign Relations commission, headed by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Congressman Vin Weber. "Policymakers must recognize, in any case, that armed organizations like Hamas and Lebanese Hizballah are already participants in the democratic activities of their society," the report intoned, suggesting there is little that Washington can do but acquiesce in this sad reality. (Full disclosure: I am a CFR member but had no role in this report.)

Though ranging across the political spectrum, these analysts all advocate a strategy based on an undifferentiated approach toward democracy in Arab countries. According to this view, as long as the Islamist party in question isn't caught in the act of actually blowing up its opponents, anything goes. Some of these critics even go further: For them, U.S. policy can only succeed if it extends to the most radical elements in society.

This approach to promoting democracy in Arab countries is strategically, politically, and morally wrong.

On the strategic front, it is important to remember that the United States is at war and our enemies are, as the 9/11 Commission noted, adherents to the ideology of radical Islamism. While there are many ways to confront this threat, the idea that America's commitment to democratic reform should be judged by whether we provide opportunities for our enemies to achieve political power is peculiar, to say the least.

Politically, focusing on the potential empowerment of Islamists plays directly into the hands of rulers, like Mubarak,

who look for any excuse to maintain an iron grip on power by curtailing political liberty for all. Given the dark history of radical Islamists in Egypt, including their sometimes violent opposition to the state, Mubarak's refusal to allot them political space is, at least, defensible. Indeed, Egypt's position on Islamists is not too dissimilar from the widespread banning of fascist parties in Europe, and few contend that European democracies are bankrupt for failing to provide access to power for Nazis. Given their track record and proven ability to dissimulate, it will take many years for Egypt's Islamists to prove their commitment to democratic practice; in the meantime, the most likely result of making political access for them the benchmark for political reform is that no reform for anyone is likely to take place.

That leads to the moral argument: What about the millions of Arabs, ranging from secular liberals to pious conservatives, who reject the absolutism of radical Islamists and still yearn for a better, freer, more humane society? Shouldn't the yardstick of America's commitment to democracy be openness and access for those people? Let the ayatollahs defend the radical Islamists; America should stand up for true democrats.

The real failing of America's pro-democracy policy in the Middle East is not that we lock out the radical Islamists but rather that we do not stand firmly enough on the side of local liberals and moderates. Indeed, we should not only be working toward more democracy in Egypt and other authoritarian-led Arab countries, we should also be investing in more democrats -- people of wide political views and religious practice who share our fundamental commitment to freedom of worship, speech, and assembly.

Indeed, a concerted U.S. effort to support Arab moderates and liberals is sound policy on all three levels.

Strategically, they are our natural allies in the battle against radical extremism. Unlike local rulers, who have been content to provide extremists control over educational and cultural institutions in exchange for staying out of politics, liberals will be on watch to prevent the infiltration of absolutist ideas into those key battlegrounds of the ideological war now underway.

Politically, an emphasis on moderates and liberals puts the authoritarians on the defensive. The Mubaraks of the Middle East would no longer be able to maintain their lowest-common-denominator approach to their adversaries; arguments in favor of denying political space to non-Islamist political opponents would wither away.

Morally, Arab liberals and moderates have earned our support. Many may disagree with various U.S. policies -- from Iraq to the Arab-Israeli arena -- but my experience living in the Middle East for the two years after September 11 convinced me that most share our core values. In fact, in cities and villages throughout the region, they often put their lives on the line to defend those values against the unholy alliance of corrupt rulers and radical Islamists that dominates political life in Arab countries today.

The most frequent critique of this democrat-focused democracy policy is that Arab liberals are few, wary, and cautious. This is a chicken-and-egg argument. After all, with powerful American voices speaking up for radical Islamists, it is no surprise that democrats, moderates, and liberals are confused, worried, and fearful. Let's see what happens in these countries if the United States adopts a more discriminate approach that differentiates between extremists and moderates and puts us firmly on the side of Arabs committed to those universal values that are our most effective weapons in the battle of ideas. Such a policy is our best shot at ensuring that next time there's an Egyptian election, it's a real one.

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