

Democratization and Its Discontents

Should America Push Political Reform in the Middle East?

By Eva Bellin

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Freedom's Unsteady March: America's Role in Building Arab Democracy. . Tamara Cofman Wittes . Brookings Institution Press , 2008 , 176 26.95

Summary: Washington can promote political reform best by backing off.

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Also in this Review: *Beyond the Façade: Political Reform in the Arab World.* Edited by Marina Ottaway and Julia Choucair-vizoso. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008, 295 pp. \$22.95.

Shortly after 9/11, President George W. Bush declared that the best hope for peace and security in the Middle East lay in the expansion of democracy and freedom there. The stroke of a speechwriter's pen had collapsed the divide between U.S. ideals and U.S. interests in the region. But soon enough, democratization began to collide with core U.S. interests after all. U.S. pressure for political reform proved distracting (and potentially destabilizing) to regional allies whose assistance was crucial in the drive to stabilize Iraq and restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. And when democratic elections were held, they often delivered outcomes at odds with Washington's hopes and intentions. Hamas' victory in Palestinian elections, the onset of political paralysis in Lebanon, the deepening sectarian divide in Iraq -- all raised significant doubts about the wisdom of a U.S. strategy built around promoting democracy.

Is it time to reconsider the democratization agenda in the Arab world? For many observers, this seems a foregone conclusion. Promoting democracy from the outside is a challenging task anywhere. Democratization is a long and uncertain process, one prone to stalls and setbacks, one that is often chaotic and sometimes violent. In the Middle East, the difficulties are even more daunting: despite the Bush administration's claims, nowhere else do U.S. ideals and U.S. interests seem so starkly counterposed.

Two excellent new books -- *Freedom's Unsteady March*, by Tamara Cofman Wittes, and *Beyond the Façade*, edited by Marina Ottaway and Julia Choucair-Vizoso -- help negotiate this terrain in an informed way. Although they vary significantly in their tone and enthusiasm for democracy promotion in the Arab world, their policy recommendations are surprisingly congruent. Washington must narrow its efforts to the protection of political freedoms (in the hope of building "people power" on the ground), press reluctant regimes to include Islamists in the political process, and make aid and trade conditional on performance on these more limited goals.

INSTRUMENTAL IDEALISM

Freedom's Unsteady March is billed as a "realist's guidebook for democracy promotion." Wittes does not shrink from acknowledging the failures of the Bush administration in this area. But she attributes these failures to a halfhearted effort rather than the inherent unachievability or inadvisability of the objective. "Interest requires us to embrace democracy," she argues unabashedly. Historically, the United States has had three core interests in the Middle East: preserving the free flow of oil and gas, securing the movement of maritime traffic through the Suez Canal, and guaranteeing the safety of key allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. (More recently, a fourth objective has joined the list: gaining assistance in counterterrorism efforts.) For much of the post-World War II era, these interests spelled a devil's bargain: ally with reliable autocrats and forgo pressuring them to pursue democratic reform. Consequently, even when the United States was enthusiastically embracing the "third wave" of democratization that swept southern and eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa in the late twentieth century, its endorsement of a democratic agenda in the Middle East was halfhearted and inconsistent, marred by a "deep-seated ambivalence."

This has remained true even during the Bush administration, notwithstanding its soaring rhetoric about the importance of democracy and freedom. Wittes offers a trenchant analysis of the Bush administration's policies. Democracy promotion was too "small bore," focusing on financial support and technical assistance to civil-society associations, political parties, and legislative institutions and ignoring the fact that absent true freedom (to speak, to organize) in society, these technical improvements would do little to reapportion political power or force popular accountability. In addition, many in the Bush administration were persuaded that the first priority of the United States should be the promotion of economic development and economic reform "in the hope ... that democratization [would] follow as a natural consequence of economic freedom." An "economics first" approach was doomed to failure: economic irrationality was an essential part of the political survival strategy of many regimes in the region, and political interests in the economic status quo made economic reform as challenging as outright political reform.

The administration also made the mistake of focusing much of its democratizing energy on places where governance was severely challenged (Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine). The promotion of democracy in weak states (or nonstates) was bound to fail. Where government institutions cannot deliver basic security or welfare to society, people tend to fall back on kith and kin to secure these basic needs. In this primordially charged context, the introduction of democratic elections often serves to reinforce sectarian and ethnic cleavages and undermine social peace -- not a promising environment for democracy's success.

To do better, Wittes argues, Washington must make a more concerted effort and develop the backbone to confront recalcitrant autocrats (even those who are U.S. allies). As a prior condition to both, however, the United States must overcome its ambivalence about the entire democratization enterprise. Americans, as Wittes sees it, must recognize that whatever the flaws in his administration's approach, Bush was right when he argued that U.S. interests and U.S. ideals are not in conflict when it comes to democracy promotion in the Arab world.

Wittes' argument rests on three legs. First, she argues, the region's long-term stability can be guaranteed only by democratization. Political crisis looms on the horizon. A growing number of Arab states are on the brink of failure, facing the triple threat of population explosion, economic stagnation, and political alienation. The three pillars of regime durability in the region -- rent, repression, and (nationalist) rhetoric, "the three r's" -- are less available and less effective than they once were. The end of the Cold War has shrunk the number of sources of foreign aid, and oil prices, no matter how high, cannot keep pace with population growth. In addition, the rise of new technology (the Internet, cell phones, satellite TV) has made regime behavior far more visible to the public, both domestically and internationally, raising the costs of repression. And the old nationalist rhetoric, which used to buy autocratic regimes some legitimacy, fails to resonate with a younger generation born after the end of formal colonialism and the nationalist struggles for independence. The mismatch between the challenges and the coping strategies means "the political status quo is beginning to crumble." Political change is inevitable, and the United States has an interest, Wittes argues, in "put[ting its] thumb firmly on the scale on the side of Arab democracy" to make sure that change is "managed toward a progressive end."

Second, democratization is the only way to prevent the empowerment of radical Islamists. Authoritarianism gives Islamist movements an advantage, because when political freedom and organization are constrained, the mosque becomes one of the few viable arenas for collective activism. Opening up the political system and expanding political freedoms would "level the playing field" in the Arab world and increase "the ability of Arab societies to debate, test, and, it is hoped, reject the claims of the radical Islamist movement."

Third, Wittes disputes the notion that democracy promotion will compromise the United States' ability to secure cooperation from allies, since cooperation is "forged on mutual interest." Working together on such issues as counterterrorism, advancing the peace process, and containing instability in Iraq and in Gaza is as much in the strategic interests of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia as it is in the interest of the United States. Washington can push its autocratic allies harder on the issue of political reform without worrying that this will cause them to abandon the United States in its pursuit of other goals.

INEVITABLE INCONSISTENCY

All of this adds up to an impassioned, well-reasoned, and highly readable case for U.S. democracy promotion in the Arab world. Wittes has mustered some of the strongest evidence possible for this stand. Still, the argument does not quite square ideals and interests -- and it falls short as a result.

The case for squaring democracy promotion with strategic interests turns on the proximity of regime breakdown in the Arab world and the utility of democratic reform for guiding the region into safer terrain. Wittes is unpersuasive on these points. First, she overstates the threat of regime breakdown. She is quite right to emphasize the challenges posed by economic stagnation and population growth. Deep pockets of popular grievance have developed in the Arab world, and they ought not to be discounted. But the conclusion that mounting discontent spells regime breakdown seems profoundly apolitical. As students of revolution know well, popular grievance is a near constant in human history, whereas successful regime overthrow is rare. The latter requires an effective capacity for collective action on the part of the aggrieved and political opportunity (particularly in the form of a dysfunctional coercive apparatus) on the part of the state, neither of which exists in most Arab countries. Arab regimes have been quite successful in thwarting collective organization through repression, co-optation, and fragmentation. And the coercive apparatus remains largely intact in most places in the Middle East. So why believe regime breakdown is inevitable? Analysts have been warning about the " yawning gap " between aspiration and opportunity in the region for decades -- during the 1980s, many Middle Eastern countries were even more economically strapped than they are today -- and yet nearly every regime in the Middle East has survived.

Wittes also overstates the challenges Arab regimes face. True, greater public scrutiny (made possible by new technology) raises the costs of repression. But are the costs of repression really so high as to outweigh the desire for survival? Does anyone doubt that when push comes to shove, these regimes will repress their enemies? Did close public scrutiny prevent the Egyptian government from imprisoning the opposition presidential candidate Ayman Nour? As for rents, it is true that their availability from some sources has declined (or at least not kept pace with population growth), but those that are available are still generally sufficient to sustain the coercive apparatuses of autocratic regimes. The bottom line is that regime elites in the Arab world continue to have a deep vested interest in regime endurance, and they generally command sufficient coercive capacity to hold on to power.

The idea that democracy is the best way to manage collapsing states also seems odd. Even if states in the region were on the verge of failing, would democracy promotion be the best recourse? Wittes' own insightful observation is that failed states do not constitute propitious environments for democratic experiments. People's first priority is to secure basic safety and welfare. Embarking on democratic experiments in the context of deep social division and insecurity is a recipe for disaster.

Similarly, Wittes may be overly optimistic about how democracy promotion can advance the fight against Islamic radicalism. It is true that the exposure of the Islamist platforms and parties to open debate and political competition would be an effective way to challenge the hold of radicals. The question is whether a rapid transition to democracy is the surest route to achieve this end. Immediate democratization may actually privilege Islamists, since they are generally the only group with effective mass movements. Fear of this outcome provides the primary rationale for gradual liberalization rather than rapid democratization in the Arab world, an approach that Wittes rejects. This is why (or at least the cover story for why) the Jordanian regime has gerrymandered districts and rigged election laws to limit (but not eliminate) Islamist representation in parliament. This is why (or at least the cover story for why) Egypt has amended its party law to forbid religiously inspired parties. The logic of Wittes' argument seems a more fitting defense for limited liberalization than for immediate, full-fledged democracy promotion.

Finally, Wittes argues that the United States' strategic interests are sufficiently shared by its key allies in the region that Washington need not fear losing their cooperation. But although King Abdullah may share Washington's interest in the peace process or the Saudi royal family may share its interest in counterterrorism, this is not the same as saying that Jordan or Saudi Arabia necessarily do. These shared interests are regime-specific; should allied regimes fall, there is no guarantee that their replacements would share the same objectives. (An Islamist or a Palestinian-led regime in Jordan might, for example, be less supportive of the Israeli-Palestinian status quo.)

In short, the ideal of democracy promotion will, at times, conflict with the United States' core interests. Some inconsistency and halfheartedness is thus an inevitable part of democracy promotion. Recognition of this fact ought to recommend retreat to a more modest agenda than that suggested by the Bush administration's rhetoric. And in fact, Wittes herself evidences such pragmatic "realism" in the concrete policy recommendations she makes. Despite its impassioned defense of democracy promotion, Freedom's Unsteady March outlines

policies that largely echo those put forth by the much more skeptical analysts in the Ottaway and Choucair-Vizoso volume.

THE LIMITS OF REFORM

After Wittes' manifesto, the sober account put forth by Ottaway, Choucair-Vizoso, and their contributors in *Beyond the Façade* feels like a splash of a cold water. This superb collection traces the empirical reality of political reform in the Arab world, recounting the experience of ten countries in a coherent, concise, and consistently insightful fashion. Overall, the authors find no evidence of a genuine political paradigm shift occurring in the region. They see no substantive redistribution of power, no creation of effective checks and balances at the institutional level to limit executive power, no reforms sufficient to make political leadership truly accountable to the popular will. At most, they find cosmetic reform: some liberalization, some introduction of competitive elections. But such initiatives are hobbled in ways that are preventing a tangible shift in the balance of power. Reform in the Arab world has largely given rise to "façade democracy" rather than true democracy.

What accounts for the limited progress of political reform? The problem lies, first and foremost, in the provenance of the reform initiative. For the most part, reform in the Arab world has been launched from above, by regime incumbents, urged on by outsiders "who want to promote democratization without risking destabilization." Consequently, the reform process has prioritized incumbent survival rather than genuine political opening. The inability of domestic forces to build mass organizations has prevented them from advancing a more radical political agenda. And without substantial pressure from below, regime elites are unlikely to relinquish power voluntarily.

These elites employ many different strategies to protect their position. Recognizing the potential challenge that organized social forces might pose, they use every resource imaginable -- legal, financial, ideological, repressive -- to disorganize society and co-opt, fragment, and control collective action of any sort. Political parties are subject to onerous constraints (if they are permitted at all); associations are obliged to obtain government licenses (often denied); subsidies are spread around to duplicate NGOs and shape their agendas; and when all else fails, troublesome activists are harassed or arrested.

Regime elites also embrace the tools of institutional engineering to undermine checks on executive power. It is not uncommon in the Arab world for the chief executive to be constitutionally empowered to dismiss parliament at will, legislate by executive decree, form governments without taking into account parliamentary results, appoint and dismiss members of the judiciary, and bypass the judiciary altogether through the creation of executive-controlled "security courts."

Finally, should elites find that even their limited reforms are too threatening, they can simply reverse course. In Egypt, the unprecedentedly strong showing by the opposition in the parliamentary elections of 2005 so frightened the regime that it postponed the next scheduled elections for two years and then forced through a set of constitutional amendments that aimed to exclude the Muslim Brotherhood from future political activity altogether. In Jordan, when the initiation of free, fair, and competitive elections resulted in significant Islamist victories in 1993, the regime simply rewrote the election law, adopting a new system more likely to favor tribal (as opposed to Islamist) success.

This analysis of reversals and constraints is not meant to imply that there has been no progress in the region. The political situation in the Arab world today, at least in some countries, is quite different from what it was 20 years ago. In Kuwait, women now enjoy the right to vote and run for office; a competitive, pluralistic political scene prevails; and the opposition is sufficiently emboldened that it was able to push through the restructuring of the electoral system. In Morocco, the human rights situation has improved, a more progressive personal-status law has been enacted, and an opposition party has led the government. In Jordan, political parties are now legal, parliamentary elections have become more regular, and media freedom has increased. These are significant gains. But limited liberalization does not mean democracy. And the authors of this collection are largely pessimistic about the ability of these liberalizing initiatives to develop into democracy. None of these reforms has targeted the distribution of power in a serious way, and the constraints imposed on society and institutions forestall a true shift in political control.

Can outsiders do anything about this? In contrast to Wittes, the authors in *Beyond the Façade* are restrained. A

number of them emphasize the limitations of U.S. economic leverage with some Arab countries awash in oil and gas (Algeria, Saudi Arabia) and with others that have limited trade and aid relations with the United States (Syria). Others emphasize the United States' conflicting objectives in the region and unlikelihood to follow through on democratization consistently. The broader concern is that foreign enthusiasm may outpace local enthusiasm -- a clear recipe for failure.

Given these reservations, the volume includes four basic policy recommendations. First, foreign powers should focus on protecting political freedoms. The primary objective of this initiative should be to build "people power" on the ground. It is impossible to advance democracy without developing domestic social forces committed to this agenda and capable of mobilizing local political weight behind it. Consequently, the most important contribution an outside power can make is to foster the conditions, and especially the civil liberties, that will enable people to find their own footing, their own speech, and their own associations. Second, Islamists must be included in the political process. Outsiders must recognize that the Islamists constitute the main (and sometimes the only) mass movement in many of these countries. They are here to stay, and no project aimed at mass empowerment can legitimately exclude them. Political inclusion (albeit on certain terms) is necessary to create incentives for compromise and dialogue with more secular forces in Arab society. Third, Washington must be prepared to confront its allies on these issues and make aid, trade, and security agreements conditional on performance on these goals. And fourth, the United States must take the long view and scale down its ambitions. Democratization will not happen overnight, and overreaching will mean hypocrisy and failure.

Surprisingly, for all her differences in tone, Wittes makes many of the same recommendations. She, too, argues for freedoms first, Islamist inclusion, and building conditionality into aid and trade. She, too, cautions the United States to make sure that "external pressure never outstrips internal demand." She points to the cases of Chile, the Philippines, and South Korea as evidence that "a credible, grassroots, domestic democracy movement" has always been central to the success of U.S. interventions on behalf of democracy. And like the authors of *Beyond the Façade*, she argues against unilateralism in democracy promotion. The surest way to ensure commitment and follow-through on the part of Arab elites is to anchor these democratizing initiatives in international, rather than bilateral, relationships, linking them to multilateral agreements or international organizations.

TAMED AMBITION

The bottom line is that U.S. strategic interests do not require democracy promotion in the Arab world, at least not unambiguously and certainly not in the short run. Rapid democratization carries with it the danger of tipping deeply divided countries into sectarian civil war, fueling radicalism rather than moderation, and empowering forces that are deeply anti-American. But this is not equally true in every country; in many cases, a process of political opening, properly calibrated, would enhance stability and advance the process of moderation.

Of course, strategic interests are not the only factor informing U.S. foreign policy. Concern for human rights and basic freedoms gets a vote as well. How to reconcile all this? If nothing else, the work of these authors suggests that democratization is a messy process, that no great power can afford to pursue it with utter consistency, and that there are serious limits to the role that outsiders can play in coaxing democratization along. Since outsiders have neither the interest nor the endurance to see this protracted, nonlinear process through to its end, democratization must be the work of forces on the ground who daily make their own calculations of the costs and benefits of mobilizing collective power and challenging the status quo. The best that outsiders can do is cheer from the sidelines, pressure allied regimes to make space for these local forces, and provide material and technical assistance where possible.

Furthermore, they must do all this without the slightest hope of cashing in any political returns in the near term, certainly not within the timeframe of an election cycle. The work must be undertaken on faith. Recognizing the temporal, material, and political constraints that work against the achievement of democracy should lead to, at the very least, a deflation of ambition and rhetoric in its pursuit.