

Even Tougher Now

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Democracy and Rule of Law Director discusses the current challenges of democracy promotion and its prospects in the Middle East.



interview with Thomas Carothers

democracy at large: *Your new book, Critical Mission: Essays on Democracy Promotion, analyzes U.S. democracy promotion policies of the past 10 years. What strikes you as distinctive about the current context for these issues?*

Thomas Carothers: This is an unusually challenging time for both democratization and democracy promotion. To start with, the spread of democracy that marked the 1980s and 1990s is largely over. There were 118 electoral democracies in the world in 1996, according to Freedom House. Today, there are 117. We are seeing the dispiriting persistence, and even rejuvenation, of authoritarian habits and structures in parts of the world we hoped were moving ahead, such as the former Soviet Union. In regions that have turned a political corner away from dictatorial rule, such as Latin America, democratic political systems are under tremendous strain due to the pressure to improve daily life and thereby persuade the majority of citizens that democracy is worthwhile.

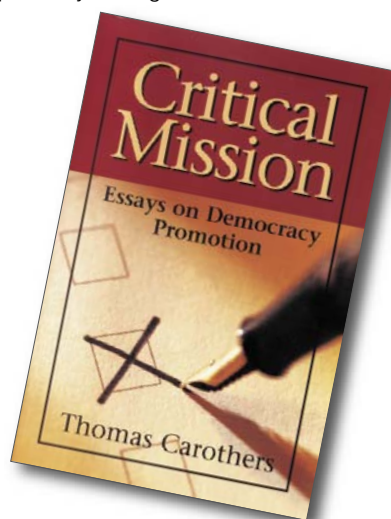
“...the demands of the war on terrorism have greatly complicated the effort to incorporate democracy promotion into U.S. foreign policy.”

On top of all this, the demands of the war on terrorism have greatly complicated the effort to incorporate democracy promotion into U.S. foreign policy. The need for global cooperation on counterterrorism has impelled the U.S. government to get closer to some nondemocratic regimes, such as in Pakistan, and go easy on the shortcomings of various semi-authoritarian ones, such as in Russia. In addition, restrictions on domestic civil rights, and the questionable treatment of detainees at Guantánamo and elsewhere, have hurt the image of the United States as a model of democracy and encouraged some opportunistic foreign governments to limit

basic political rights under the anti-terrorism banner.

dal: *Yet at the same time, President Bush has issued a forthright call for promoting democracy in the Middle East as a central element of the war on terrorism. How does that affect your assessment of democracy promotion efforts?*

TC: Yes, he has, and it signals a potentially major, welcome shift away from the long-time reflexive U.S. support for Arab “friendly tyrants.” But even leaving aside the tremendously daunting challenge of bringing the intervention in Iraq to a successful, pro-democratic close, the U.S. government, whether led by Republicans or Democrats, faces serious obstacles to making democracy promotion a real priority throughout the Middle East.




Although democracy may now seem like the best long-term solution to the threat of Islamic extremism—an oversimplified and potentially misleading assumption by the way—the fact is that we still have strong economic and security interests served by close relationships with quite a few of the authoritarian governments of the region. What political reform tendencies that do exist in the region are weak and so far

limited to partial liberalization rather than real democratization. And the major force for political change—political Islam—is one with a very uncertain attachment to democracy.

Moreover, the United States badly lacks credibility as a pro-democratic actor in the region. Unlike in the Soviet bloc in the 1980s, average citizens in the Middle East are deeply suspicious of U.S. calls for political change and resentful of many aspects of U.S. policy.

dal: *Are you saying the United States should not pursue democracy in the Middle East?*

TC: No, I'm not. In fact, I think giving in to the realist temptation and renouncing all pro-democratic ambitions for the region would be a serious mistake. But making progress on this daunting front is going to require a better-conceived, better-executed and better-funded effort than the United States has made in other regions, such as the former Soviet Union.

We will have to work harder to avoid trading off democracy for near-term countervailing interests, to exert nuanced, high-level pressure at key junctures, to make democracy aid something more than a poor cousin to economic aid, and to work cooperatively with Europe even though they have some different interests in and ideas about the region than we do. And it means we will have to take very seriously winning some credibility with average Arabs, not just through public relations campaigns but through policies that genuinely take their interests into account. I explore this subject further in a book, due out in January, that I have co-edited with my colleague Marina Ottaway, *Uncharted Journey: Democracy Promotion in the Middle East*. 

Thomas Carothers directs the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C.