

Advancing the Freedom Agenda: Time for a Recalibration?

For those committed to democracy promotion, it is now the best and the worst of times. At the end of 2005, Freedom House's annual survey reported modest increases in the state of freedom around the world, as well as the continuation of an upward trend for the entire period after the September 11 attacks and, indeed, over the last 30 years.¹ During the past four years, the Bush administration has elevated the promotion of democracy and the protection of human rights as key factors guiding U.S. relations with numerous countries. These efforts have not been in vain; governments around the world increasingly seek to portray themselves as democracies or at least as being on a path toward expanding political rights and civil liberties.

Yet, today the pendulum in Washington is swinging back. The "freedom agenda" that recently seemed on the ascendancy is now under siege, both within the United States and the broader international community.² Even longtime allies and enthusiasts of democracy promotion are having second thoughts about the Bush administration's specific methods as well as the value and premises of the enterprise overall. Hamas's recent victory in the Palestinian elections and renewed sectarian violence flaring in Iraq have left Washington awash in criticism. Voices from the right and the left now assert that the Bush administration's enthusiastic embrace of democracy and elections was a terrible mistake. Journalists are already parsing the administration's recent statements and actions in search of evidence that it is engaged in a subtle but significant distancing from President George W. Bush's inaugural rallying cry that the promotion of freedom is the defining goal of U.S. foreign policy.³

It is true that, despite a record of solid advancement, formidable challenges remain for the consolidation and expansion of democracy throughout the world, giving pause to even the most optimistic advocate. The decades-

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long effort to expand freedom has become more complicated as attention shifts from “easy” transitions, many in central and eastern Europe, toward more difficult environments in China, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Compounding these challenges are autocrats such as Russia’s Vladimir Putin, Belarus’s Alexander Lukashenko, Uzbekistan’s Islam Karimov, Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, and Iran’s Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, all of whom have taken troubling steps to thwart international efforts to expand freedom’s reach within their countries.

The embrace of a freedom agenda by an internationally unpopular U.S. president has caused some advocates for democracy outside of the United States to hesitate to join it in public stances on behalf of democracy and human rights and, in some cases, to turn against the goal itself, at least in their public utterances. Yet, although criticism of the Bush administration’s foreign policy, some of which is undoubtedly well deserved, is increasing both here and abroad, it would be a grave mistake to abandon democracy promotion as a fundamental priority in U.S. foreign policy. It has enjoyed strong bipartisan support for three decades, and for good reason. Promoting freedom and democracy in the world reflects the values that have made the United States great and advances key U.S. national security interests in the long term. Although convergence of all U.S. interests in the short term is not assured, accountable, law-abiding democratic governments are more likely than despotic regimes to promote international prosperity and stability, and prosperous and stable countries are more reliable allies for the United States.⁴

There is a need, however, to differentiate between means and ends in U.S. democracy promotion policy. Critics and supporters should constantly revisit the means by which the U.S. government and others are promoting democracy, but the goal itself should be preserved. Moreover, although interrelationships with other U.S. foreign objectives do exist, they are not coterminous, and linking them together rhetorically can be damaging to effective support of democracy movements on the ground.

A Chorus of Critics

Domestic criticism of Bush’s democracy promotion agenda has recently escalated, emanating from politicians, policy analysts, and journalists of every partisan stripe. Among the more thoughtful comments have been those raised by Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), who recently posited that it is U.S. power that promotes beneficial outcomes, not democracy itself. He urged Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice not to rely on the “golden theory” that democratization automatically brings positive results for the United States, warning instead that it is an “uncontrollable experiment with an outcome akin to that faced by the

Sorcerer's Apprentice."⁵ Frank Fukayama did not back away from democracy as a goal but recently issued an extensive critique of his former neoconservative colleagues for arrogantly assuming that they could remake societies at the barrel of a gun within a specified and short period of time.⁶ Natan Sharansky has scolded his supporters in the White House for urging "snap" elections in Palestine before "freedom" could be adequately embedded there, an echo of an eloquently crafted argument that Fareed Zakaria had put forth in an earlier book about the troubling emergence of illiberal democracies.⁷

Autocrats have exploited opposition to the Bush administration's foreign policy in an effort to tarnish the democracy promotion agenda. Of course, many criticisms are self-serving, as in the case of China, where that government reacted to the recent criticism by the Department of State of its human rights record by issuing its own report on the U.S. government's record. It urged Washington to "stop provoking international confrontation on the issue of human rights" and instead to "make a fresh start to contribute more ... to the healthy development of the international human rights cause."⁸ Middle Eastern countries such as Syria also recently rebuked the United States for not following international legal guidelines on the treatment of detainees.

Even long-standing U.S. allies and fellow democracies are concerned about Washington's zeal in promoting freedom. The United States was largely isolated when it called for a stronger Human Rights Council at the United Nations that would automatically bar membership to countries, such as Libya, with poor records on human rights. Both established and new democracies have been hesitant to publicly embrace or partner in any meaningful fashion with the U.S. government in its more high-profile democracy promotion policies and programs. European countries, for example, when dealing with Russia, China, Iran, and other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, prefer to distance themselves from being seen as a public partner of U.S. initiatives. They instead claim to be providing complementary though separate assistance.⁹

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A Record of Progress

Second thoughts on the wisdom of advancing democracy are strongly misplaced in the context of current world trends. According to the latest Freedom House survey, the most notable trend in 2005 was the promising increases

in ratings for states in the Middle East. Although historically the region has been the most resistant to freedom (and still lags behind other parts of the world), the survey noted promising developments in several countries, including Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. These advances were largely attributable to increased civic activism and a growing diversity of

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media outlets contributing to progress in press freedom. Those who continue to warn that Islam is inherently incompatible with freedom and democracy should take note of the survey's finding that a majority of the world's Muslims live in free countries and that recent progress has been made in a number of majority Muslim countries, including Afghanistan, Indonesia, Turkey, Mali, and Senegal.¹⁰

For the past three decades, the story has been one of continued democratic progress on a global scale, despite pronouncements that the "third wave" of democracy was over more than a decade ago.¹¹ In 1975, 25 percent of the countries in the world were designated as free states, but today 46 percent of countries are free. Just as important, the number of "not free" countries in 2005 dropped to 45, the lowest number of not-free states since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992. The number of electoral democracies has also increased over time. Today, 122 countries out of 192, or 64 percent, are classified as such, the greatest number in the history of the Freedom House survey.¹² It should be noted, however, that Freedom House considers the term "electoral democracy" to be a minimal standard, a determination as to whether a country has a political system in which people choose their authoritative leaders freely from among competing groups and individuals. This is a lesser standard than a full liberal democracy, which also implies the presence of a number of civil liberties that are not necessarily respected in some electoral democracies.

Although the reformers within a given society are the dominant and critical players in any political transformation, this positive global trend has also corresponded with a number of international factors, including the growing importance Washington has placed on democracy promotion. With Bush's declaration of the promotion of freedom as his own personal goal, his administration has continued and intensified a well-established trend within U.S. foreign policy.

U.S. resources for democracy promotion have increased if one counts the programs launched in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States claims that in 2005 it expended some \$1.4 billion to promote that goal.¹³ The establishment of the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), through which the

White House has linked significant amounts of foreign assistance to performance on democratic governance, is a noteworthy addition to the potential tools to leverage change. Most U.S. bilateral assistance programs are geared to support at least the subcomponents of democracy, including civic participation, good governance, rule of law, and human rights. Other bilateral donors and multilateral agencies such as the UN Human Development Program have also focused more resources on these issues, although the World Bank still hesitates to use the terms “democracy” and “human rights” in describing its programs.

U.S. diplomats regularly raise concerns about human rights and the absence of democratic practices with key countries in the Middle East, a region that was previously perceived as the last haven of *realpolitik*. Civic activists in the Middle East may publicly curse Bush’s foreign policy, but some also credit it with the increase in political space in a number of countries. Furthermore, both government officials and nongovernmental actors in the United States provided welcome assistance to the nonviolent proponents of “people power” in places such as Ukraine, and they continue to provide assistance to advocates of freedom in many countries around the world.

Challenges to Promoting Democracy

Despite these positive steps forward, the challenges remaining for the further expansion of freedom are daunting. Global freedom has increased overall, but the sad reality is that more than 2.3 billion people, almost 60 percent of whom are in China, still live under governments that widely and systematically deny their citizens civil liberties and where basic political rights are absent. Tackling the remaining repressive regimes requires more thoughtful policy attention from the U.S. government.

Yet, some of the most repressive regimes are the most impervious to outside pressure, especially from a U.S. government led by a globally unpopular president. There may be cases in which bold U.S. rhetoric on the need for regime change will have the opposite effect of what was intended, and offers of U.S. government resources to the country’s reformers will endanger and discredit them further within their own societies.¹⁴ In such places, a multilateral approach or indeed perhaps a completely nongovernmental strategy may make more sense.

The United States should also take caution not to apply outdated or irrelevant models for advancing political reform. There are very real questions, for example, about the feasibility of outsiders providing the same types of assistance that the United States and others provided in Ukraine and Serbia, where some political space for reformers to operate existed despite authori-

tarian governments.¹⁵ Regimes such as those in North Korea and Turkmenistan have been able to cut off and isolate their citizens from one another and from flows of information from the outside world, which are known to be critical elements in any successful democratic transition.

Moreover, it is getting more difficult to provide outside assistance, even to some countries that are not categorized among the world's most repressive regimes. As the international community celebrates the transfer of knowledge across borders between civic movements, it must recognize that authoritarian leaders are also learning. The Russian government and its authoritarian allies in parts of Central Asia and Belarus are making explicit decisions designed to terminate international support for their beleaguered opposition and the civic movements in their countries to prevent their own Colored Revolutions.¹⁶

One of the most vexing challenges that remain is how to respond to governments that have held reasonably representative elections but lack the other crucial elements of democracy. They are the so-called illiberal democracies, such as Venezuela, where President Hugo Chavez has remained popular while systematically dismantling democratic (albeit flawed) institutions, eliminating independent broadcasting, and cracking down on civil society and human rights groups within the country.¹⁷ Perhaps the most challenging development in this regard has been Hamas's recent electoral victory in Palestine and the impressive electoral gains made by Islamist parties in Iraq and Egypt.

The Case of Hamas: Death Knell for Democratization?

Hamas won in a set of parliamentary elections that, on procedural grounds, were considered to be some of the best in the region. The willingness of Fatah to acknowledge its loss and allow a peaceful transfer of political authority is an important characteristic of democratic actors. Nevertheless, Hamas's current platform and past actions are troubling to those who value democracy in its fullest sense: a system that not only includes an electoral process but also embodies a commitment to democratic values and an ongoing respect for human rights.

Most of the recent debate seems to be confusing what, in fact, democracy entails. As both academics and serious practitioners have known for years, democracy is about electoral processes and all that is necessary for elections to be fair and meaningful, including free association, free speech, and an independent and professional news media. Yet, democracy also involves a broader range of vital institutions, including an independent judiciary, a meaningful legislative body, and security forces that defer to the authority of elected civil-

ian leaders. It is also about laws and behavior that reflect democratic values, which means respecting internationally recognized human rights; protecting minority rights in addition to majority rule; tolerating ethnic, religious, linguistic, and political diversity; and ensuring freedom of expression.

Hamas's track record on these issues is more than disturbing. Not only has it verbally defended the right to engage in violence, but unlike many other "national liberation" organizations, it has also made attacks targeting innocent civilians a core element of its strategy. In addition, Hamas aims to install an Islamic state. The effect that this will have on the diversity of religious beliefs and practices both for Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as on rights for women who have been a leading voice for change in Palestinian society, remains unknown.¹⁸

A majority of the world's Muslims lives in free countries.

More than any other event, Hamas's electoral victory has fueled the latest round of hand-wringing among policy analysts, including some in the Bush administration's political base.¹⁹ Sharansky and others blame the U.S. government and argue that there should be a three-year waiting period after "freedom" is established and before citizens are allowed to go to the ballot box.²⁰ Such arguments, however, are fundamentally flawed. One cannot selectively promote political change, that is, protect one freedom by denying another. The right to choose one's own leaders is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and citizens around the world have come to expect elections whether external actors think they are ready or not. The problem in Palestine was not snap elections; indeed, they had already been postponed for too many years. For years, the United States, the European Union, and the Arab world have all looked past the democratic failures of the Palestinian Authority in the name of security and securing a partner in the Middle East peace process.

Holding elections did not create Hamas in Palestine or political Islam in the Middle East, as Zakaria has noted. Over the years, the lack of open political space and meaningful ways for citizens to hold their governments accountable in Palestine, Egypt, and elsewhere has fostered the growth and strength of extremist movements.²¹ Indeed, opening up political competition and allowing the emergence and strengthening of other types of political actors within societies is the only path that would allow the establishment of viable democratic options in most countries in the region.

Some have argued that the Hamas victory is a death knell for democratization in Palestine and perhaps in the broader Middle East. This is an overreaction. First, experience in other countries has shown that the pressures of governing may lead to the moderation and evolution of the more extremist

elements of the party as they grapple with the need to create coalitions, respond to citizen demands, and negotiate the political and economic future of their society. This outcome is not guaranteed, but actual governing may have other benefits. As Zakaria has written, "If politics is more open, these groups may or may not moderate themselves, but they will surely lose some

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of the mystical allure they now have. The martyrs will become mayors, which is quite a fall in status."²² Thus, it is simply too soon to tell whether Hamas, whose membership is diverse, will work to strengthen or dismantle democratic institutions and processes in Palestine.²³

In the meantime, attention must remain focused on monitoring the decisions and actions of Hamas's leaders related to issues of fundamental human rights within Palestine.

That attention should come not only from the U.S. government but also from human rights groups internationally and within the region itself. Government officials and nongovernmental actors in the United States and Europe need to support groups within Palestine and elsewhere who are committed to doing such monitoring and to actively engage their newly elected leaders.

The Hamas victory reaffirmed that not all good things go together, as Robert Packenham once wrote.²⁴ Democratization will not automatically bring about governments that are sympathetic to U.S. foreign policy interests. In the short term, as governments need to be more accountable to their own citizens, they may find it more difficult to publicly ally themselves with the U.S. government, given the level and depth of anti-Americanism that currently exists in the world.

Ways to Strengthen U.S. Policy beyond Elections

The Bush administration deserves credit for elevating freedom in its rhetoric and especially for its commitment to reform in the Middle East, an important and courageous departure from past policy. Yet, despite a record of some achievement, the administration faces the real possibility that the very policy on which the president has placed his legacy could be rolled back and discredited. To prevent what threatens to become a thoroughgoing setback, the White House needs to take corrective action with regard to the way it describes the goal of democracy promotion, clarify and diversify its strategy and tactics, and focus on implementing more consistently and coherently the president's vision for the future.

ADDRESSING AUTOCRATIC ALLIES

The United States must ensure that democracy promotion is systematically evaluated and incorporated into U.S. policies toward autocratic countries, including strategic allies such as Russia and Pakistan. This is not to say that democracy promotion should be the only priority or the overriding priority in relations with these countries. Rather, the challenge lies in integrating the promotion of freedom into the full range of national security interests that dominate U.S. ties with these important but politically flawed states.²⁵

The administration's bold rhetorical commitment to freedom may have raised the bar to an unreasonably high level, but the resulting gap between words and deeds has weakened U.S. credibility when it comes to promoting democracy in countries or regions that are less strategically significant. U.S. policies that are wildly inconsistent with the president's words will undermine efforts elsewhere to expand freedom. Although the 2006 National Security Strategy and other administration documents all include criticisms of the democratic failures of Russia, Pakistan, and others, the U.S. government needs to take bolder actions, for example, with the Putin government in the period leading up to the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg.²⁶

DISENTANGLING DEMOCRACY PROMOTION FROM THE MILITARY

The administration should try not to add to growing international perceptions that, when it says it wants to promote democracy, U.S. troops will be involved. The conflation between Iraq and military occupation with all democracy promotion activities has done enormous damage to the freedom agenda.²⁷ This is partly attributable to the tendency of some Bush administration officials to engage in rhetorical saber-rattling on certain national security concerns while others are talking about the need for peaceful democratic reform. Thus, as Rice discusses the U.S. commitment of an additional \$75 million to promote a peaceful transition to democracy in Iran, Vice President Dick Cheney continues to raise the specter of possible U.S. military action to take out nuclear capabilities within that country, leading many to fear an Iraq-style intervention to remove the dictatorial regime and resolve the security issue.²⁸

There have been instances when military action has been used to impose freedom, but postwar history demonstrates that Japan and Germany are the exceptions. In more recent times, the great gains for freedom in Latin America, eastern Europe, South Africa, and South Korea have invariably been achieved through peaceful means.²⁹

Disentangling democracy promotion from Iraq and the U.S. military will not be easy as long as U.S. troops are still on the ground in Iraq, but the president can start by giving speeches on freedom in which he does not

dwelling on Iraq but rather focuses on freedom deficits in regions such as Africa, East Asia, and Latin America. In those places, as Rice outlined in January 2006 in her new transformational diplomacy initiative, U.S. officials, including country ambassadors, should spend more time on efforts to promote the rule of law, respect for human rights, anticorruption efforts, and other nonelectoral reforms.

COORDINATING EFFORTS WITH OTHER DEMOCRACIES

Without active U.S. involvement, international efforts to promote democracy will undoubtedly be less effective. On the other hand, it is clear that democracy cannot only be a U.S. goal. It requires a strong partnership between the United States and its democratic allies, which include but should not be limited to the nations of Europe. Indeed, in some cases it would be strategically wise to allow other countries to take the lead in environments where anti-U.S. sentiment is a dominant force in internal politics.

In confronting the challenge posed by Chavez's Venezuela, for example, Latin American countries with impressive records of democratic achievement such as Mexico, Chile, and even Brazil can bring about more positive results than the continued U.S. engagement in sterile and self-defeating polemics with a military demagogue. Of course, those governments need to be convinced that standing against Chavez makes sense, despite their countries' dependence on Venezuelan oil.

RESTORING THE U.S. IMAGE AS A MODEL

Finally, the Bush administration needs to take immediate action to amend U.S. policy on interrogation and detention as well as the other aspects of counterterrorism policy that have seriously undermined its democracy promotion efforts and, indeed, the reputation of the United States around the world.

Clearly, the United States is not the worst abuser of human rights, but the sad truth is that it is guilty of some of the human rights violations for which other countries were rightly taken to task in the most recent State Department reports. Despite its many, solemn pledges against the use of torture, existing U.S. policy still allows a number of techniques that are prohibited under the Convention Against Torture, which the United States ratified in 1994. In 2005, Congress voted in favor of the 2006 defense authorization bill, which included Sen. John McCain's (R-Ariz.) amendment banning cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment of detainees. The president signed the amendment into law, but the administration has yet to announce publicly how it will ensure that current practices will be brought into compliance with the new legislation.

REENGAGING PRIVATE INTEREST IN DEMOCRACY

Although the U.S. government has been a leader in providing resources to promote democracy, the paucity of nongovernmental funding sources is itself deleterious to the long-term viability of efforts to promote change on the ground. There is a rich tradition of involvement by private foundations and individual donors in supporting dissidents, opposition movements, and alternative media in countries suffering under dictatorships. Unfortunately, this tradition appears to have waned with the end of the Cold War. With the exception of George Soros and the Open Society Institute, there is no Bill Gates of democracy promotion. In fact, given the Internet's claim to be a force for free expression and the wide dissemination of ideas, the spread of freedom would seem a natural cause for the relatively youthful billionaires in the information technology community. Private giving is enormously important to fund the people-to-people exchanges, scholarly discussions, and other opportunities for dialogue between like-minded democrats around the world that are the backbone for any U.S. government-supported efforts.

The conflation of military occupation with democracy promotion has done enormous damage.

Keep the Mission, Improve the Tactics

To push the president's inaugural pledges closer to reality, the United States needs to move beyond bold rhetoric and more systemically utilize and integrate the full range of tools and tactics at its disposal: sanctions, incentives, trade linkages, democracy-building programs, exchanges, and multilateral and bilateral diplomacy. There does not have to be one democracy "czar" in the U.S. government, but the need to ensure better interagency coordination still exists.

An example is the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which has deservedly been criticized in the past for slow dispersal of funds. Another, more fundamental failing of the organization is that it is not well integrated with the rest of the U.S. government's efforts to encourage democratic change. The potential for the MCA to serve as an incentive for change is not reinforced by adequate programs managed by the U.S. Agency for International Development to build capacity for democratic change within target countries or by consistent U.S. diplomatic efforts from the State Department. The MCC has begun to increase its funds disbursement in recent months, but the concern is that the push to get funds out the door will

lead to pacts with countries that have not met minimal standards in democratic governance.

Now is not the time for the United States to abandon its goal of ending tyranny around the world. Of course, democracy is most durable when it is homegrown, and the impact of all external influences pales in comparison to

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the efforts made by those working within their own societies for change. Yet, it is not simply a coincidence that global freedom has expanded precisely at the time that democracy promotion has come to play a larger role in U.S. foreign policy.

Advancing freedom is an expression of the United States' most sacred ideals. It unites this diverse country and has commanded strong bipartisan support for decades. It is important to bear in mind that,

even though it is Bush who most explicitly speaks of freedom as a central objective of U.S. policy, this goal has an established parentage among twentieth-century political leaders. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton all sought, in different ways, to use the power of the United States to advance the cause of freedom. The advocacy of freedom is not a naive departure from the traditional course of U.S. diplomacy. It has a long and sometimes distinguished history.

Yet, policymakers and pundits in Washington must recognize that, if the government is to undertake a serious effort to spread freedom, it is in for the long haul. The United States needs to stay engaged both diplomatically and with financial support through the complex and challenging developments that take place after free and fair elections are held, including the construction of durable institutions of government and civil society that are the prerequisite of stable liberal democracies. Clearly, expecting a quick fix in such a difficult region as the Middle East will guarantee a disappointing outcome.³⁰ The lesson of Latin America, a region with a checkered history of democratic governance, is the imposing and ongoing challenge of the need to solidify free institutions in societies that have histories of authoritarian rule, weak economies, and the continued political and economic domination by a small group of elites.

The obstacles that lie ahead are vexing, but they are not insurmountable. To meet these new challenges, those who advocate freedom from inside and outside the U.S. government need to be clear as to what they are trying to achieve and implement comprehensive, thoughtful, and flexible strategies to support those who are working to advance internationally recognized funda-

mental rights around the world. The challenges are to stay the course, understand that advancing freedom will take time, recognize that some setbacks are inevitable, and approach the challenge with the correct resources, strategic thinking, and especially patience that were devoted to the war against fascism and totalitarianism in the past.

Notes

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