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Democracy Promotion Under Obama: Finding a Way Forward

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SUMMARY

- The Bush's administration's highly problematic legacy on democracy promotion and general pessimism about the global state of democracy create pressure on the Obama administration to pull the United States substantially back from supporting democracy abroad.
- Although dissociating U.S. democracy support from the errors of the Bush approach is crucial, a broad realist corrective of U.S. policy is not necessary.
- The way forward for Obama will be more about changing *how* the United States goes about supporting democracy abroad than about *what emphasis* to place on democracy relative to other interests.
- Cardinal values of Obama's political philosophy and style—non-confrontational, measured, persistent, bipartisan, cooperative, effective, and empowering—provide a natural basis for a new framework to help the United States regain its place as a respected, trusted, and influential ally of democracy around the world.

As President Barack Obama and his team define the contours of a new U.S. foreign policy, one of their many challenges is to reformulate U.S. policy on democracy promotion. President George W. Bush elevated the profile of U.S. democracy promotion but then badly tarnished it. By relentlessly associating it with the Iraq war and regime change, he caused many in the world to see it as a hypocritical cover for aggressive interventionism serving U.S. security needs. By casting the war on terrorism as a global "freedom agenda," yet cultivating close ties with autocratic regimes helpful on counterterrorism, he provoked justifiable charges of double standards. And by condoning U.S. abuses of the rule of law and human rights against persons caught in America's antiterrorism net, he badly damaged America's standing as a global symbol of democracy.

Some of President Obama's initial actions offer a valuable start in a necessary process of dissociating the United States from this unfortunate legacy. Just by being elected, Obama sent a ringing signal to the world of the renewal of American democracy and the power of the democratic idea. His immediate order to close the Guantánamo Bay detention facility within a year and additional subsequent actions to reverse other legally problematic parts of the war on terrorism added momentum to the rejuvenation of America's global democratic

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standing. His sober approach to Iraq—talking about it as a daunting policy challenge rather than as a shining example of U.S. democracy promotion—halts a long, painful delegitimization of the democracy promotion concept. His expressed openness to diplomatic engagement with hostile governments has put the regime-change line to rest.

Restorative though these steps have been, they are more preparatory to than constitutive of a new approach to democracy promotion. As Obama and his advisers formulate such an approach in the months ahead, they will face significant pressure to go beyond dissociating the United States from the Bush legacy and pull back on the promotion of democracy generally. This pressure has multiple sources. Many observers see Bush's push on democracy in the Middle East as having been counterproductive and believe Obama should embrace the old line of uncritical support for friendly Arab autocrats. Also gaining currency is the notion that the United States has been pushing elections too hard in politically shaky developing countries and should back away on electoral support and concentrate instead on foundational elements like building the rule of law and an effective state. Common, too, is the view that, not just in the Middle East and on elections but much more generally, Bush's enthusiasm for democracy promotion has turned U.S. policy away from core interests, necessitating a broad realist corrective. Adding still further weight to this cautionary outlook is a growing sense in many quarters that democracy is doing badly in the world for a whole variety of reasons and that, in the words of one leading democracy specialist, the world is experiencing "a democratic recession."

Although Obama and his team, their hands more than full with urgent issues like the global financial crisis and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, have not yet shown their cards, there are hints they may be inclined toward a general pullback on promoting democracy. Obama rarely spoke about the topic while a candidate and has made little mention of it since becoming president, including in his inaugural address. Hillary Clinton touched only glancingly on democracy support in her Senate confirmation hearings. The "three *D*'s" policy framework that she has articulated—defense, diplomacy, and development—noticeably leave out the potential fourth *D* of democracy. In January both Obama and Clinton expressed the concern that the United States has been overemphasizing elections in its democracy and development work.

Caution and moderation on democracy policy are very much in order, including a careful post-Bush process of repair and recovery. At the same time, however, President Obama and his foreign policy team should not, either explicitly or implicitly, embrace a broad realist corrective. The various pressures cited above that might point to a need for such a shift are a combination of misconceptions and myths. Despite all the problems of recent years, it remains both possible and advisable for the United States to be an active, influential supporter of democracy abroad. Moreover, key elements of Obama's overall political philosophy provide a natural basis for a new framework in the domain of democracy support. Realist though some of his core instincts may be, Obama has in fact all the necessary attributes to be a natural leader of a new and fruitful period of U.S. prodemocracy policies and programs.

Middle East Misconceptions

The idea that the Obama administration should stay clear of any effort to support democratic change in the Middle East arises from the reductionistic verdict that U.S. policy analysts and journalists often render on Bush's attempts at Arab democratization: Bush wanted Arab democracy, the argument goes, and look what he got—Arab states holding elections that empowered troublesome Islamists, such as Hizbollah, Hamas, Iraqi Islamists, and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The United States, it follows, would be better off not stirring that pot again anytime soon.

Two principal misconceptions underlie this view. First, although Bush spoke often about the value and possibility of Arab democracy and established some aid programs and diplomatic initiatives to support political and other reforms, he hardly made a major push for it. Underneath his lofty prodemocracy rhetoric and mild prodding of Arab counterparts, business as usual continued for the most part, that is, close U.S. security and economic ties with autocratic Arab allies like Saudi Arabia, the smaller Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. The Iraqi intervention was, of course, an enormous endeavor but one rooted in security concerns with democracy added as a goal only very secondarily. The prodemocratic diplomatic pressure on Arab allies, such as it was, lasted only briefly—after the shock of Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections, the Bush administration largely abandoned it.

Second, Islamist gains in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine should not be a showstopper for U.S. support for Arab democracy. Hizbollah and Hamas are special cases—Islamist political organizations engaged in armed struggle against Israel, including the use of terrorism. Their electoral successes should not provoke or fuel a generalized fear of wider and freer political participation in Arab states. The Islamist movements and parties taking part in elections in most of the Arab world—like Jordan's Islamic Action Front, Morocco's Party of Justice and Development, and Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement—are nonviolent. Electoral participation by such groups has not overwhelmed the political system and has tended to encourage their moderation. The alternative of completely bottling up Islamists politically only fosters tensions and radicalism that spell serious trouble down the road.

While Bush's push on Arab democracy fell far short of the hopes he had invested in it, it was not pointless. President Bush's declarations on the subject, and the associated proreform aid initiatives, did help stimulate an already existing debate within the Arab world over democracy. Due to his extremely low credibility in the Arab world, though, Bush was not an effective messenger. Nevertheless, his basic message—that Arab states should and can overcome their political stagnation and decay and that their doing so would be good both for them and for the United States—is a valuable one. If President Obama continues to build on his initial credibility in the region, he could become an effective spokesperson for this idea and build around it modest but worthwhile supporting aid and diplomatic initiatives.

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Overemphasizing Elections?

The charge that Washington errs by overemphasizing elections at the expense of other building blocks of democratic development, in effect, equating elections with democracy, is not new. In the 1980s, critics assailed the Reagan administration for presenting elections in El Salvador as the achievement of democracy in that war-torn country. In the 1990s, some scholars accused the United States of contributing to the spread of illiberal democracies and civil conflicts by pushing countries to elections prematurely. The concern surged again in the Bush years with some critics faulting Bush for overemphasizing elections, such as in Iraq, Palestine, and the Arab world generally.

It is certainly true that over the past 25 years the United States has very often supported elections in countries moving away from authoritarian rule, through diplomatic encouragement, technical assistance, and election monitoring. Yet in the overall domain of U.S. democracy support, elections are hardly dominant. Less than 20 percent of U.S. democracy assistance goes to electoral programs. Most democracy aid already goes to precisely the sorts of putatively foundational areas that electoral skeptics call for, such as developing

the rule of law, building governance, promoting civil society, enhancing civic education, and strengthening parliamentary bodies. U.S. electoral assistance in a country is almost always just one element of a more comprehensive set of political and socioeconomic development efforts. In Kenya, for example, the violence following the December 2007 elections was tragic, but the United States was not guilty of narrowly supporting elections—U.S. assistance there for years included a wide range of other political as well as socioeconomic programs. Moreover, it seems unlikely that Kenya would have been better off today if it had not held elections in this decade but instead had continued to live under the decaying, oppressive rule of earlier years.

Despite all the problems of recent years, it remains both possible and advisable for the United States to be an active, influential supporter of democracy abroad.

It is true that President Bush, like some of his recent predecessors, did greatly overstate the democratic significance of certain elections, such as his triumphalism over the 2005 Iraqi elections. These cases, however, were attempts at taking credit for apparent political progress in controversial settings, not accurate reflections of the broader makeup of U.S. efforts to promote democracy. No part of the U.S. policy bureaucracy engaged in democracy support and no U.S. democracy promotion group bases its actions around the idea that elections equal democracy.

Furthermore, countries throughout the developing and postcommunist worlds have not been holding elections because the United States has been pressuring them to do so. A norm of democratic participation has spread widely in the world. When authoritarian regimes weaken or collapse, citizens usually press for the chance to have a political say, through elections. In Iraq, for example, the United States actually discouraged local actors from moving quickly to elections after the ouster of Saddam Hussein, changing gears only when the Iraqi Shi'i leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani insisted on elections. Only in a very small number of settings—such as highly aid-dependent countries or post–civil war countries that have a major international peacekeeping presence, like Bosnia in the second half of the 1990s—do the United States or other outside actors have so much influence that they control whether elections happen.

The Obama administration should certainly avoid celebrating too loudly any particular election in a transitional country. But it should not downgrade electoral support relative to other elements of democracy building or avoid it generally. Given that countries all around the world are holding regular elections, largely at their own behest, why not offer the kinds of technical assistance and diplomatic support that can help make these elections more technically credible and politically inclusive and therefore less likely to break down or provoke conflict?

Broader Confusion

Pressure on Obama for a broad realist corrective also comes from the view that not just in the Middle East but generally around the world Bush overdid it on democracy, recklessly pursuing a global freedom agenda that diverted the United States from its core interests. Bush's soaring rhetoric about democracy confused many observers, giving the impression of a greater pursuit of democracy than actually existed. So too did his intertwining of the democracy agenda with the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions, which attracted so much attention. In fact, leaving aside the Middle East (and even there, as noted above, Bush policy was only very partially prodemocratic), the place of democracy in Bush foreign policy was no greater, and in some ways was less, than in the foreign policies of his recent predecessors.

Toward America's two principal challengers, China and Russia, as well as in the many

other areas of U.S. strategic or economic engagement with nondemocratic states, such as with Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, the Gulf states, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan, the Bush administration downplayed democracy for the sake of other interests. Furthermore, although Bush tried to cast his war on terrorism as a freedom crusade, in fact the imperatives of cooperation on counterterrorism led to a warming up, rather than a cooling off, of ties with the governments in many authoritarian or semi-authoritarian countries in South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere.

The Bush administration did take some visible stands on democracy. For the most part, however, these were toward states where the United States does not have any significant countervailing interests, such as Belarus, Burma, Cuba, and Zimbabwe. The administration also pursued quiet, low-level efforts using behind-the-scenes diplomatic cajoling and counseling, democracy assistance, and modest economic carrots and sticks to help many struggling new democracies consolidate political reforms, especially in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, Southeastern Europe, and Southeast Asia. These were valuable efforts, but they represented continuity much more than change, drawing on policies and programs largely established in the 1990s and before.

In short, Bush policy was substantially realist, leavened with some moderate Wilsonian elements, primarily around the edges. The idea, therefore, that a major post-Bush realist corrective is needed represents a serious misreading of the past eight years. Even Bush himself was confused by the disjunction between his high-octane prodemocracy rhetoric and his much more realist policies on the ground, as highlighted by his rather poignant (yet also rather odd) remark in 2007 that he felt like "a dissident" with regard to his own foreign policy.

Unnecessary Pessimism

Rising pessimism about the state of democracy in the world also contributes to the perceived need for a backing away. In this view, the United States should not sail hard into a headwind but rather trim its prodemocracy sails and wait for better times. Bad news on democracy has indeed been plentiful in recent years—coups, electoral violence, the greater assertiveness of energy-rich authoritarians, the rise of the China model, and the election of some dubious populist strongmen.

In short, democracy is not in retreat around the world. A continuation of the long-term decline of tyranny and at least modest advances in democracy are certainly imaginable for the decade ahead.

In fact, however, when looked at across the length of this decade, the global trend is not so bad. As the 2009 Freedom House report details, since 2000 authoritarianism has decreased—the number of not-free countries has declined from 48 to 42—while the number of free countries has risen from 86 to 89. Democratic setbacks have indeed occurred, but so too have democratic advances, usually attracting much less U.S. media attention, such as the quiet, but highly significant, democratic progress of Indonesia and the anchoring of ten postcommunist states as members of the European Union. The high price of oil between 2005 and 2008 did bolster many authoritarian regimes, but the sharp drop since is now unsettling them. And while Russia's and China's "authoritarian capitalism" has attracted wide interest, a significant majority of citizens in every region still view democracy as the best form of government. The diffusion of new communication technologies continues to open innovative avenues for citizen empowerment and peaceful resistance to authoritarianism. The global financial crisis is putting new pressures on many struggling democracies but is also causing many authoritarian governments to feel the heat of rising public dissatisfaction. In short, democracy is not in retreat around the world. A continuation of the long-term decline of tyranny and at least

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An Obama Approach

In reformulating U.S. democracy promotion, the new administration should continue efforts to dissociate the subject from regime change, counterterrorism excesses, and general hubris. A broad realist corrective, however, is not necessary. Given the overall configuration of U.S. interests, the Obama administration will almost inevitably pursue a mix of realist and moderate Wilsonian policies largely similar to that pursued by its recent predecessors. Such a mix recognizes a broad U.S. interest in democracy but places it alongside economic and security interests, largely subordinating it when other interests weigh heavily, bringing it to the fore when they do not. Beyond the post-Bush cleanup, the forward direction for Obama on democracy support will be more about changing *how* his administration goes about supporting democracy abroad than about *what emphasis* to place on democracy relative to other interests. This way forward is more evident than the Obama foreign policy team may yet realize—key elements of President Obama's political style and philosophy translate naturally into useful steps forward toward a better approach.

The previous Washington philosophy that government is the problem rather than the solution did not help U.S. democracy aid providers move beyond helping countries establish democratic institutions to helping those institutions deliver for citizens.

First, President Obama's basic approach to addressing conflictive issues of all types—the nonconfrontational, measured, yet determined pursuit of balanced solutions—is the right way to address the knotty problem of trying to keep democracy on the table in relationships with major nondemocratic states where other U.S. interests require a cooperative stance. In such contexts, President Bush often relied on a personalist approach (e.g., looking into Putin's eyes or forgiving Musharraf everything) or lapsed into a good cop–bad cop pattern (employing Vice President Cheney as the bad cop), with neither approach working well. Even with significant countervailing interests dominant in such contexts, Obama can nevertheless make U.S. views on democracy credible by applying a characteristically measured, but persistent, approach in which he and his top advisers clearly and consistently state U.S. concerns on democracy and human rights within the broader framework of a relationship, carefully choosing moments of opportunity to lean somewhat harder.

Second, President Obama's strong instinct toward bipartisanship is critical for revitalizing democracy's place in U.S. foreign policy. One of the most damaging consequences of the Bush years was the fracturing of the longstanding bipartisan consensus in this domain. By the end of Bush's term, a sharp divergence marked the attitude of Democratic and Republican voters and policy elites toward the importance of democracy as a foreign policy goal. Reformulating democracy policy must entail soliciting ideas and opinions on the subject from both sides of the political aisle and treating it as an inherently bipartisan endeavor, not a lone man's crusade.

Third, President Obama's inclination, which came through so strongly in his presidential campaign, toward cooperation and partnership in mobilizing common efforts among diverse actors is well suited to the arena of democracy support. It is a spirit that the United States needs to project in working in societies that have broken free of authoritarianism and are struggling to consolidate democracy. The tendency often evident in the Bush administration's approach of implicitly or explicitly telling other societies (like Nicaragua, Palestine, or others) what leaders to elect or what political ideas to believe should give way to a conception of democracy support as a genuine partnership between internal and external actors. A spirit of partnership

will also work well to open U.S. democracy policies and programs to greater cooperation with European and other international actors working on democracy's behalf.

Fourth, President Obama's emphasis on the potentially positive role of government in solving social problems—his credo that what counts is not whether government is large or small but whether it works—fits well with a crucial rising imperative: dozens of new democracies are facing serious challenges in showing their citizens that democracy can effectively solve basic socioeconomic problems. The previous Washington philosophy that government is the problem rather than the solution hindered the efforts of U.S. providers of democracy aid to help countries move beyond establishing democratic institutions to helping those institutions actually deliver for their citizens. The new attitude from the top in Washington about government's potentially positive role can thus be a boost for U.S. democracy promotion. In addition, a greater focus on making certain parts of the U.S. government work well—especially the United States Agency for International Development, the largest source of U.S. democracy aid—would also be a valuable part of an Obama democracy policy.

Fifth, Obama's rhetorical style—his unusual ability to meld inspiration with restraint—is exactly the note to strike in crafting a new line about the role of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy. U.S. presidents almost always end up presenting U.S. democracy promotion in grander terms than actual policy reflects. Some amount of inspirational license is inevitable and can be worthwhile. However, given the lingering soreness of the subject for most foreign audiences, a considerable dose of sobriety is very much in order without giving up entirely on inspiration. President Obama's core message, reinforced by his disposition, his political philosophy, and his life experience, is that all people, no matter how disempowered, can gain greater control over their lives. It is a natural message of global democratic solidarity.

Given the harsh legacy of Bush's democracy promotion efforts and the choppy waters for democracy in many regions, the search for a new framework for U.S. democracy promotion may appear daunting. Yet those engaged in the task need not look any further than to the new president's cardinal values for the necessary key operational ideas: nonconfrontational, measured, persistent, bipartisan, cooperative, effective, and empowering. If the new administration can put those principles to work in the domain of democracy support, the United States will regain its place as a respected, trusted, and influential ally of democracy around the world. ■

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RESOURCES

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