

Supporting Democracy and Supporting Dictatorship in Egypt

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The massive demonstrations in Egypt against that country's authoritarian leader Hosni Mubarak have had some interesting effects on American politics as well. Some apologists for the administration of George W. Bush, notably [Elliott Abrams in the pages of the *Washington Post*](#), have argued that the events in Egypt have vindicated former President Bush. Believing this assertion clearly requires a very charitable understanding of recent history. There is, of course, very little evidence to suggest that the people struggling in Egypt today are somehow influenced by either the former president's words regarding democracy or by events in Iraq. In some abstract way, Bush was right in that the Egyptian people, like all people, want their freedom, but this is a very tenuous reason for giving the former president any credit for what is happening in Egypt.

In reality, Bush did little to push for democracy in Egypt, opting instead for funding some democracy programs there, but supporting the government considerably more generously. This combination of support for Mubarak's authoritarian regime, a relatively small budget for democracy and occasional calls for greater freedom in Egypt, sent a message to the Egyptian leadership that was, at very best, somewhat mixed, but was primarily one of support for the incumbent regime. In this regard, Bush was not all that different from his predecessors going back to President Jimmy Carter.

Bush is no longer president, so how these events reflect on him is a question for the history books with little relevance today. It is Barack Obama's administration that must manage the US response to the uprising in Egypt, but the difficulty facing President Obama is exacerbated by Bush's interest in democracy promotion. The Obama administration, like many critics of the Bush administration, has been somewhat cool towards democracy, continuing many democracy assistance projects, but reflecting a markedly different rhetorical tone than that seen in the previous administration. It seems that this position is somewhat caused by a reaction to the disastrous foreign policy of President Bush.

Outside of a few parts of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the rhetorical emphasis on democracy during the Bush years, whether or not it actually was sincere, was viewed by much of the world not as proof of U.S. commitment to freedom for all, but as a clear example of American hypocrisy. People in many countries, including Egypt, were troubled by a U.S. government that spoke so eloquently about democracy or freedom and the need to oust authoritarian leaders on one hand while doing so much with the other hand to stop this from happening. In this context, deemphasizing democracy

rhetoric was a reasonable strategy for the Obama administration as it allowed them to differentiate their administration from Bush's and to make the US less vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy.

The question of whether the U.S. can, or should, be in the business of helping democracy develop around the world is serious, but should not be wrapped up too much in domestic partisan politics. It should be remembered that for most of the last two decades, democracy promotion was viewed as a staple, if not always top, priority of American foreign policy. A bipartisan consensus existed around an essentially bipartisan policy. This all changed during the middle years of the Bush administration, when democracy assistance began to be seen as a partisan policy and was probably inevitably linked to other partisan, and unpopular, foreign policies during the Bush years. Accordingly, many opponents of Bush became less supportive of democracy assistance.

The problem with this approach is that it also gave the appearance, not entirely without reason, that President Obama had no interest in democracy and that the U.S. was casting its lot with the authoritarians. This is how U.S. policy towards Egypt looked as demonstrations began in Cairo in January. The extremely cautious statements made by the administration, the relative absence of any strong statements in support of democracy in Egypt, or globally, created an impression, which was not entirely contradicted by U.S. actions, that the U.S. was no longer interested in spreading democracy.

Additionally, by conflating criticism of democracy assistance with criticism of the Bush administration, progressives often placed themselves in the position of being opposed to democracy and freedom.

This is, at least to some extent, the corner into which the Obama administration has backed itself, and from which it must now escape.

The challenge facing the U.S. and the administration is that of how to convince a new group of Egyptian leaders, who will almost certainly come to power in the near future, that we are now on their side and genuinely want democracy and freedom in Egypt, despite our years of support for Mubarak. Although there was no way to know that this conundrum would come to the fore during this month, this year or even this administration, it was always inevitable and always a matter of when, not if.