

Continuity or Change: Obama and Democracy Assistance

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June 12, 2009

During the transition between administrations and the first few months of the Obama presidency, there has been a lot of talk — in Washington think tanks, universities and the foreign policy blogosphere — about how democracy assistance policy will be different in the new administration. The assumption for many was that the Bush administration had, if not started democracy assistance policies, then taken them to a new level of intensity which would be scaled back by a less ideological and more multilateral Obama presidency.

This is, of course, far from reality because the story of democracy assistance since the end of the Cold War is more one of steady development and continuity than of radical change. Democracy assistance under Bush, particularly if one looks at cases other than Afghanistan and Iraq, differed from the previous administration in rhetoric far more than in substance. Although Bush talked a lot about elections, and had the annoying and naïve habit of referring to any country once it had an election as a “democracy,” the programs funded by his administrations had a similar combination of rule of law, civil society development and election support as they did during the Clinton administration. Moreover, while the middle four years of Bush’s eight year presidency gave democracy assistance a central rhetorical role in US foreign policy, even that receded during the last two years of his term. Given all of this, a more useful question to be asking would be how democracy assistance policy during the Obama years will be similar to what it was during the Bush years.

It is admittedly a little bit of an “other than that Mrs. Lincoln, how was the show?” approach to exclude Iraq and Afghanistan from this analysis. However, extrapolating from these two important but somewhat unusual cases creates a very misleading picture of democracy assistance as a policy fueled by war and military adventurism rather than by diplomacy and financial and technical assistance.

The challenge for the Obama administration is not to get rid of, or even revamp democracy assistance, but to return it to normalcy and encourage some modest changes to how we implement these policies. Democracy assistance should remain an important part of our foreign policy, but should no longer be ideologically charged or used as a post facto explanation for some of our biggest foreign policy blunders. Obama will be successful and democracy assistance will flourish if it is returned to the quiet role it had during the Clinton years when it enjoyed bipartisan support and was rarely interjected into partisan debates about foreign policy.

The mistakes of the Bush administration somewhat obscure some of the more important and confounding questions around democracy assistance. It is easy to deemphasize elections as the sine qua non of democracy, moderate rhetoric around democracy and delink it from a neoconservative political agenda. It is more difficult to make the technical adjustments necessary so that democracy assistance can once again play a constructive role in moving countries towards democracy and freedom as it did in the 1990s, particularly given the changed global political realities we now face. These are the real challenges facing those working for democracy here and abroad.